

# ***SHOAH***

By Claude Lanzmann

Adapted for the stage by Dr. Harry J. Kantrovich

## **CAST:**

- **CHELMNO:**
  - Simon Srebnik (Survivor)
  - Mordechai Podchlebnik (Survivor)
  - Franz Schalling (Nazi Security Guard – Schutzpolizei)
  - Mrs. Michelsohn (wife of a Nazi schoolteacher)
  
- **AUSCHWITZ:**
  - Mrs. Pietyra (Resident)
  - Rudolph Vrba (Survivor)
  - Filip Müller (Survivor of 5 liquidations of the Auschwitz “special detail”)
  - Ruth Elias (Survivor)
  - Walter Stier (Ex member of the Nazi Party, former head of Reich Railways Department 33 of the Nazi Party)
  
- **SOBIBOR:**
  - Hanna Zaidel (Survivor of Vilna, daughter of Motke)
  - Motke Zaidel (Survivor of Vilna)
  - Jan Piwonski (Railway Worker)
  
- **TREBLINKA:**
  - Abraham Bomba: (Survivor)
  - Czeslaw Borowi (Lifelong Resident)
  - Henrik Gawkowski (Railway Worker)
  - Richard Glazar: (Survivor)
  - Franz Suchomel (SS Unterscharfuhrer)
  
- **BERLIN:**
  - Inge Deutschkron: (Born in Berlin and lived there throughout the war. In hiding beginning February 1943)
  
- **WARSAW:**
  - Dr. Franz Grassler (Deputy to Dr. Auerswald (Nazi Commissioner Warsaw Ghetto)
  - Itzhak Zuckermann (“Antek”, second in command of the Jewish Combat Organization)
  - Simcha Rottem (“Kojik” – Jewish Underground)
  
- Raul Hilberg: (Austrian Born, Jewish-American Political Scientist and Historian. World’s Premier Scholar on Holocaust)
  
- Interviewer (Claude Lanzmann)

## CHELMNO

### Interviewer (To set the stage)

The story begins in the present at Chelmno, on the Narew River, in Poland. Fifty miles northwest of Lodz, in the heart of the region that once had a large Jewish population. Chelmno was the place in Poland where Jews were first exterminated by gas. At Chelmno four hundred thousand Jews were murdered in two separate periods; December 1941 to Spring 1943 and June 1944 to January 1945. Of the four hundred thousand men, women and children who went there, only two came out alive; Mordechai Podchlebnik and Simon Srebnik, a survivor of the last period, was a boy of thirteen when he was sent to Chelmno. His father had been killed before his eyes in the ghetto in Lodz; his mother died in a gas van at Chelmno. The SS placed him in one of the "Jewish work details", assigned to maintaining the extermination camps and slated in turn for death.

During the night of January 18, 1945, two days before Soviet troops arrived, the Nazis killed off all remaining Jews in "work details" with a bullet in the head. Simon was among those executed. But the bullet missed his vital brain center. When he came to, he crawled into a pigsty. A Polish farmer found him there. The boy was treated and healed by a Soviet doctor.

He was found in Israel and persuaded to return to Chelmno. He was then forty-seven years old.

### Simon Srebnik

For me, Simon Srebnik, it's hard to recognize, but it was here. They burned people here. A lot of people were burned here. Yes, this is the place. No one ever left here again.

The gas vans came in here...there were two huge ovens, and afterward the bodies were thrown into these ovens, and the flames reached to the sky. It was terrible. No one can describe it. No one can recreate what happened here. Impossible? And, no one can understand it. Even I, here, now...I can't believe I'm here. No, I just can't believe it. It was always this peaceful here. Always. When they burned two thousand people – Jews – every day, it was just as peaceful. No one shouted. Everyone went about his work. It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now.

### Interviewer (*Italics*) and Mordechai Podchlebnik

*Mordechai, What died in you in Chelmno?*

Everything died. But, I'm only human, and I want to live. So, I must forget. I thank God for what remains, and that I can forget. Let's not talk about that.

*Do you think it's good to talk about it?*

For me, it's not good.

*Then why are you talking about it?*

Because you are insisting. I was sent books on Eichmann's trial. I was a witness, and I didn't read them. At times I felt as if I were dead, because I never thought I'd survive. But, I'm alive.

*Why do you smile all of the time?*

What do you want me to do, cry? Sometimes you smile, sometimes you cry. And, if you are alive, it's better to smile.

*How did you react the first time you unloaded corpses, when the gas van doors were opened?*

What could I do? I cried. The third day I saw my wife and children. I placed my wife in the grave and asked to be killed. The Germans said I was strong enough to work, that I wouldn't be killed yet.

*Was the winter very cold?*

It was in the winter of 1942, in early January. The bodies weren't burned, they were buried, and each row was covered with dirt. They weren't being burned yet. There were around four or five layers. The ditches were funnel-shaped. They dumped the bodies in these ditches, and they had to lay them out like herrings, head to foot.

### **Simon Srebnik**

There was a concrete platform some distance away, and the bones that hadn't burned, the big bones of the feet, for example, we took. There was a chest with two handles. We carried the bones there, where others had to crush them. It was very fine, that powdered bone. Then it was put into sacks, and when there were enough sacks, we went to a bridge on the Narew River, and dumped the powder. The current carried it off. It drifted downstream.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Franz Schalling**

*Mr. Schalling, you weren't in the SS, you were...*

Police

*Which police?*

Security guards. We were told to report to the Deutsches Haus, German Headquarters, the only big stone building in the village. We were taken into it. An SS man immediately told us: "This is a top-secret mission!"

*Secret?*

"A top-secret mission." "Sign this!" We each had to sign. There was a form ready for each of us, a pledge of secrecy. We never got to read it though.

*You had to take an oath?*

No, just sign, promising to shut up about whatever we'd see. Not say a word. After we'd signed, we were told: "Final solution of the Jewish question." We didn't understand what that meant. It all looked normal.

*So, someone said...*

He told us what was going to happen there.

*Someone said: "The final solution of the Jewish question?" You'd be assigned to the "final solution?"*

Yes, but what did that mean? We'd never heard that before. So, it was explained to us.

*Just when was this?*

Let's see...when was it...? In the winter of 1941-42. Then we were assigned to our stations. Our guard post was at the side of the road, a sentry box in front of the castle.

*So, you were in the "castle detail"?*

That's right.

*Can you describe what you saw?*

We could see. We were at the gatehouse. When the Jews arrived, the way they looked! Half frozen, starved, dirty, already half dead. Old people, children. Think of it! The long trip here, standing in the truck, packed in! Who knows if they knew what was in store? They didn't trust anyone, that's for sure. After months in the ghetto, you can imagine! I heard an SS man shout at them: "You're going to be deloused and have a bath. You're going to work here." The Jews consented. They said: "Yes, that's what we want to do."

*Was the castle big?*

Pretty big, with huge front steps. The SS man stood at the top of the steps.

*Then what happened?*

They were hustled into two or three big rooms on the first floor. They had to undress, give up everything: rings, gold, everything.

*How long did the Jews stay there?*

Long enough to undress. Then, stark naked, they had to run down more steps to an underground corridor that led back up to the ramp, where the gas van awaited them.

*Did the Jews enter the van willingly?*

No, they were beaten. Blows fell everywhere, and the Jews understood. They screamed. It was frightful! Frightful! I know because we went down to the cellar when they were all in the van. We opened the cells of the work detail, the Jewish workers who collected stuff thrown into the yard out of a first-floor window.

*Describe the gas vans.*

They stretched say, from here to the window. Just big trucks, like moving vans, with two rear doors.

*What system was used?*

With exhaust fumes. A Pole yelled "Gas!" Then the driver got under the van to hook up the pipe that fed the gas into the van.

*Who were the drivers?*

SS men. All those men were SS.

*Could you hear the sound of the motor?*

Yes, from the gate we could hear it turn over.

*The van was stationary while the motor ran?*

That's right. Then it started moving. We opened the gate and it headed for the woods.

*Were the people already dead?*

I don't know. It was quiet. No more screams. You couldn't hear anything as it drove by.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Mordechai Podchlebnik**

I recall it was 1941, two days before the New Year. We were routed out at night, and in the morning, we reached Chelmno. There was a castle there. When I entered the castle courtyard, I knew something awful was going on. I already understood. We saw clothes and shoes scattered in the courtyard. Yet, we were alone. I knew my parents had been through there, and there wasn't a Jew left. We were taken down into a cellar. On a wall was written "No one leaves here alive." Graffiti in Yiddish. There were lots of names. I think it was Jews from villages around Chelmno who had come here before me who had written their names. A few days after New Year's we heard people arrive in a truck one morning. The people were taken out of the truck and up to the first floor of the castle. The Germans lied, saying they were to be deloused. They were chased down the other side, where a van was waiting. The Germans pushed and beat them with their weapons to hustle them into the trucks faster. I heard people praying "*Shema Yisrael*" and heard the van's doors being shut. Their screams were heard, becoming fainter and fainter, and when there was total silence, the van left. I, along with the

other four were brought out of the cellar. We went upstairs and gathered up the clothes remaining outside the supposed baths.

*Did you understand how they all died?*

Yes, first because there had been many rumors of it. And, when I went out, I saw the sealed vans, so I knew. I understood people were gassed because I had heard the screams, and heard how they weakened, and later the vans were taken into the woods.

*What were the vans like?*

Like the ones that deliver cigarettes here. They were enclosed, with double-leaf rear doors.

*What color?*

The color the Germans used – green, ordinary.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Mrs. Michelsohn**

*Mrs. Michelsohn, how many German families lived in Chelmno, Kulmhof?*

Ten or eleven I'd say. Germans from Wohinia, and two families from the Reich – the Bauers and us, the Michelsohns.

*How did you wind up in Kulmhof?*

I was born in Laage, and I was sent to Kulmhof. They were looking for volunteer settlers, and I signed up. That's how I got there. First in Warthbrücken, then Chelmno, Kulmhof.

*Directly from Laage?*

No, I left from Münster.

*Did you opt to go to Kulmhof?*

No, I asked for Wartheland.

*Why?*

A pioneering spirit.

*You were young?*

Oh yes, I was young.

*You wanted to be useful?*

Yes

*What was your first impression of Wartheland?*

It was primitive. Worse than primitive.

*Difficult to understand, right? But why...?*

The sanitary facilities were disastrous. The only toilet was in Warthbrücken, in the town hall; you had to go there. The rest was a disaster.

*Why a disaster?*

There were no toilets at all. There were privies. I can't tell you how primitive it was.

*Astonishing! Why did you choose such a primitive place?*

Oh, when you're young, you'll try anything. You can't imagine such places exist. You don't believe it. But that's how it was.

This was the whole village. A very small village, struggling along the road. Just a few houses. There was the church, the castle, a store too, the administrative building and the school. The castle was next to the church, with a high board fence around both.

*How far was your home from the church?*

It was just opposite – 150 feet.

*Did you see the gas vans?*

No...Yes, from the outside. They shuttled back and forth. I never looked inside; I didn't see Jews in them. I only saw things from outside – the Jew's arrival, their disposition, how they were loaded aboard. Since World War I the castle had been in ruins. Only part of it could still be used. That's where the Jews were taken. The ruined castle was used for housing and delousing the Poles, and so on.

*The Jews?*

Yes, the Jews

*Why do you call them Poles and not Jews?*

Sometimes I get them mixed up.

*There's a difference between Poles and Jews?*

Oh yes!

*What's the difference?*

The Poles weren't exterminated, and the Jews were. That's the difference. An external difference.

*And the inner difference?*

I can't assess that. I don't know enough about psychology and anthropology. The difference between the Poles and the Jews? Anyway, they couldn't stand each other.

## Interviewer Reads a Letter

“My very dear friends, I waited to write to confirm what I’d heard. Alas, to our great grief, we now know all. I spoke to an eyewitness who escaped. He told me everything. They’re exterminated in Chelmno, near Dombie, and they’re all buried in Rzuszwow Forest. The Jews are killed in two ways: by shooting or gas. It’s just happened to thousands of Lodz Jews. Do not think that this is being written by a madman. Alas, it is the tragic, horrible truth.

“Horror, horror! Man, shed thy clothes, cover thy head with ashes, run in the streets and dance in thy madness.’ I am weary that my pen can no longer write. Creator of the universe, help us!”

The Creator did not help the Jews of Grabow. With their rabbi, they all died in the gas vans at Chelmno a few weeks later. Chelmno is only twelve miles from Grabow.

## Interviewer (Italics) and Mrs. Michelsohn

The Jews came in trucks, and later there was a narrow-gauge railway that they arrived on. They were packed tightly in the trucks or in the cars of the railway. Lots of women and children. Men too, but most of them were old.

The strongest were put in work details. They walked with chains on their legs. In the morning they fetched water, looked for food, and so on. These weren’t killed right away. That was done later. I don’t know what became of them. They didn’t survive anyway.

*Two of them did.*

Only two.

*They were in chains?*

On the legs.

*All of them?*

The workers, yes. The others were killed at once.

*The Jewish work squad went through the village in chains?*

Yes

*Could people speak to them?*

No, that was impossible. No one dared.

*No one dared. Why? Was it dangerous?*

Yes, there were guards. Anyway, people wanted nothing to do with all that. Do you see? Gets on your nerves, seeing that every day. You can’t force a whole village to watch such

distress! When the Jews arrived, when they were pushed into the church or the castle...And the screams! It was frightful! Depressing. Day after day, the same spectacle! It was terrible. A sad sight. They screamed. They knew what was happening. At first the Jews thought they were going to be deloused. But they soon understood. Their screams grew wilder and wilder. Horrifying screams. Screams of terror! Because they knew what was happening to them.

*Do you know how many Jews were exterminated there?*

Four something. Four hundred thousand. Forty thousand.

*Four hundred thousand.*

Four hundred thousand, yes. I knew it had a four in it. Sad, sad, sad!

### **Simon Srebnik**

This was the road the gas vans used. There were eighty people in each van. When they arrived, the SS said, "Open the doors!" We opened them. The bodies tumbled right out. An SS man said "Two men inside!" These two men worked at the ovens. They were experienced. Another SS man screams, "Hurry up! The other van's coming!" We worked until the whole shipment was burned.

I remember that once they were still alive. The ovens were full, and people lay on the ground. They were all moving, they were coming back to life, and when they were thrown into the ovens, they were all conscious. Alive. They could feel the fire burn them.

When we built the ovens, I wondered what they were there for. An SS man told me: "To make charcoal. For laundry irons." That's what he told me. I didn't know. When the ovens were completed, the logs put in, and the gasoline poured on and lighted, and when the first gas vans arrived, then we knew why the ovens were built.

When I saw all that, it didn't affect me. Neither did the second or third shipment. I was only thirteen, and all I'd ever seen until then were dead bodies. Maybe I didn't understand. Maybe if I'd been older, I'd have understood, but, the fact is I didn't. I'd never seen anything else. In the ghetto in Lodz I saw that as soon as anyone took a step, he fell dead. I thought that's the way things I to be, that it was normal. I'd walk the streets of Lodz, maybe one hundred yards, and there'd be two hundred bodies. People were hungry. They went into the street and they fell. Sons took their fathers' bread, fathers took their sons', everyone wanted to stay alive.

So, when I came here to Chelmno, I was already...I didn't care about anything. I thought: "If I survive, I just want one thing, five loaves of bread." To eat. That's all. That's what I thought. But, I dreamed too that if I survive, I'll be the only one left in the world, not another soul. Just me. One. Only me left in the world, if I get out of here.

## AUSCHWITZ/BIRKENAU

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Mrs. Pietyra**

*Mrs. Pietyra, you live in Auschwitz?*

Yes, I was born here.

*And you've never left Auschwitz?*

No, Never.

*Were there Jews in Auschwitz before the war?*

They made up eighty percent of the population. They even had a synagogue here.

*Just one?*

Just one, I think.

*Does it still exist?*

No, it was wrecked. There's something else there now.

*Was there a Jewish cemetery in Auschwitz?*

It still exists. It's closed now.

*Closed? What does that mean?*

They don't bury there now.

*What happened to the Jews of Aushwitz?*

They were expelled and resettled.

*What year was that?*

It began in 1940, which was when I moved here. This apartment also belonged to Jews

*According to our information, the Auschwitz Jews were "resettled" as they say, nearby, in Benzin and Sosnowiec, in Upper Silesia.*

Yes, because those were Jewish towns.

*Do you know what happened to the Jews of Auschwitz?*

I think they all ended up in the camp.

*That is, they returned to Auschwitz?*

Yes. All kinds of people from everywhere were sent here. All the Jews came here...to die.

## Rudolph Vrba

There was a place called the ramp where the trains with Jews were coming in. They were coming day and night, and sometimes one per day and sometimes five per day, from all sorts of places in the world. I, Rudolph Vrba, worked there from August 18, 1942 to June 7, 1943. I saw those transports rolling in one after another. I have seen it so many times that it became routine. Constantly, people from the heart Europe were disappearing and they were arriving to the same place with the same ignorance of the fate of the previous transport. And the people in this mass...I knew of course within a couple of hours after they arrived there, ninety percent would be gassed or something like that.

### Interviewer (*Italics*) and Filip Müller

*Filip, on that Sunday in May 1942 when you first entered the Auschwitz 1 crematorium, how old were you?*

Twenty. It was a Sunday in May. We were locked in an underground cell in Block 11. We were held in secret. Then some SS men appeared and marched us along a street in the camp. We went through a gate, and around three hundred feet from the gate. I suddenly saw a building. It had a flat roof and smokestack. I saw a door in the rear. I thought they were taking us to be shot. Suddenly, under a lamp in the middle of this building a young SS man told us, "Inside filthy swine!" We entered a corridor. They drove us along it. Right away the stench, the smoke, choked me. They kept on chasing us, and I made out the shape of the first two ovens. Between the ovens, some Jewish prisoners were working. We were in the incineration chamber of the crematorium in Camp 1 at Auschwitz.

From there they herded us to another big room and told us to undress the corpses. There were hundreds of bodies, all dressed. Piled with the corpses were suitcases, bundles and, scattered everywhere bluish-purple crystals. I couldn't understand any of it. It was like a blow on the head, as if I'd been stunned. I couldn't understand how they managed to kill so many people at once.

When we undressed them, the order was given to feed the ovens. An SS man rushed up and told me: "Get out of here! Go stir the bodies!" What did he mean? I entered the cremation center. There was a Jewish prisoner, Fischel. He looked at me, and I watched him poke the fire with a long rod. He told me, "Do as I'm doing, or the SS will kill you". So, the ovens were fed. We were so inexperienced we left the fans on too long. The firebrick suddenly exploded, blocking the pipes linking the crematorium with the smokestack. Cremation was interrupted. The ovens were out of action.

That evening some trucks came and we had to load the rest, some three hundred bodies, into the trucks. Then we were taken...I still don't know where, but probably a field at Birkenau. We were ordered to unload the bodies and put them in a pit. Suddenly, water gushed up from underground and swept the bodies down.

The next day we were taken to the same place, but the water had risen. Some SS men came with a fire truck and pumped out the water. We had to go down and stack the bodies. They were slippery. Two of my companions couldn't take any more. One was a French student. They were exhausted. They just lay in the mud. One of the SS men was ordered to finish off the swine. They were shot in the pit.

*There were no crematoriums at Birkenau then?*

No, there weren't any there yet. Birkenau still wasn't completely set-up. Only Camp B1, which was later where the women's camp existed. It wasn't until 1943 all Jews must have gone to work there and built the four crematoriums. Each crematorium had fifteen ovens, a big undressing room of around three thousand square feet, and a big gas chamber where up to three thousand people at once could be gassed.

Cell 13, Block 11 at Auschwitz 1 is where the "special work detail" was held. The cell was underground, isolated. For we were "bearers of secrets", we were relieved dead men. We weren't allowed to talk to anyone, or contact any prisoner, or even the SS. Only those in charge of the Aktion.

There was a window. We heard what happened in the courtyard. The executions, the victim's cries, the screams, but we couldn't see anything. This went on for several days.

One night an SS man came in from the political section. It was around 4 A.M. We were again taken out of our cell and led to the crematorium. There for the first time I saw the procedure used with those who came in alive. We were lined up against a wall and told, "No one may talk to these people." Suddenly, the wooden door to the crematorium courtyard opened, and two hundred and fifty to three hundred people filed in – old people and women. They carried bundles, wore the Star of David. Even from a distance I could tell they were Polish Jews. I caught some of the things they said. I heard *fachowitz*, meaning "skilled worker." And *Malach-ha-Mawis*, which means "Angel of Death" in Yiddish. Also, *Harginnen*: "They're going to kill us." Then a sudden silence fell over those gathered. All eyes converged on the flat roof of the crematorium. Who was standing there? Aumeyer, the SS man, Grabner, the head of the political section and Hössler, the SS officer. Aumeyer addressed the crowd: "You're here to work for our soldiers fighting at the front. Those who can work will be all right."

It was obvious that flared hope in those people. The executioners saw it was succeeding. The Grabner spoke up, "We need masons, electricians, and all trades." Next, Hössler took over. He pointed to a short man in the crowd. I can still see him. "What's your trade?" The man said "Mr. Officer I'm a tailor." "A tailor? What kind of tailor?" "A man's...no for both men and women." "Wonderful: We need people like you in our workshops." Then, he questioned a woman: "What's your trade?" "Nurse," she replied. "Splendid! We need nurses in our hospitals for our soldiers. We need all of you. But, first, undress. You must be disinfected. We want you healthy." I could see people were calmer, reassured by what they heard, and they began to undress. Their clothing remained in the courtyard, scattered everywhere. Aumeyer was beaming. He told some of the SS men "You see? That's the way to do it!"

## **Interviewer (Italics) and Raul Hilberg**

In all of my work I have never begun by asking the big questions, because I was always afraid that I would come up with the small answers, and I have preferred to address these things which are minutiae or details in order that I might then be able to put together in gestalt a picture, which, if not an explanation, is at least a description, a more full description, of what transpired. And in that sense, I also look at the bureaucratic destruction process – for this is what it was – a series of minute steps taken in logical order and relying above all, as much as possible on experience. And this goes not only, incidentally, for the administrative steps that were taken, but also the psychological arguments, even the propaganda. Amazingly little was newly invented till of course the moment came when one had to go beyond that which had already been established by precedent, that one had to gas these people or in some sense annihilate them on a large scale. Then these bureaucrats became inventors. But like all inventors of institutions they did not copyright or patent their achievements, and they prefer obscurity.

*Mr. Hilberg, What did they get from the past, the Nazis?*

They got the actual content of measures which they took. For example, the barring of Jews from office, the prohibition of intermarriages and of the employment in Jewish homes of female persons under the age of forty-five, the various marking decrees – especially the Jewish star – the complimentary ghetto, the voidance of any will executed by a Jew that might work in such a way as to prevent inheritance of his property by someone who was a Christian. Many such measures had been worked out over the course of more than a thousand years by authorities of the church and by secular governments that followed in those footsteps. And the experience gathered over that time became a reservoir that could be used, and which indeed was used to an amazing extent. One can compare a rather large number of German laws with their counterparts in the past and find complete parallels, even in detail, as if there were a memory, which automatically extended to the period of 1933, 1935, 1939 and beyond.

They invented very little, and they did not invent the portrait of the Jew, which was also taken over lock, stock, and barrel from writings going back to the sixteenth century. So even the propaganda, the realm of imagination and invention – even there they were remarkably in the footsteps of those who preceded them, from Martin Luther to the nineteenth century. And here again they were not inventive.

They had to become inventive with the “final solution.” That was their great invention, and that is what made this entire process different from all the others that had preceded that event. In this respect, what transpired when the “final solution” was adopted – or to be more precise, bureaucracy moved into it – was a turning point in history. Even here I would suggest a logical progression, one that came to fruition in what might be called closure, because from the earliest days, from the fourth century, the sixth century, the missionaries of Christianity had said in effect to the Jews: “You may not live among us as Jews.” The secular rulers who followed them from the late Middle Ages then decided: “You may not live among us,” and the

Nazis decreed: "You may not live." Conversion was followed by expulsion, and the third was the territorial solution, which was of course the solution carried out in the territories under German command, excluding emigration: death. The "final solution." And the "final solution", you see, is really final, because people who are converted can yet be Jews in secret, people who are expelled can yet return. But people who are dead will not reappear.

*In such a respect – the last stage – they were really pioneers and inventors?*

This was something unprecedented, and this was something new.

*How can one give some idea about this complete newness, because it was new for them too?*

Yes, it was new, and I think for this reason one cannot find a specific document, a specified planned outline or blueprint which stated: "Now the Jews will be killed." Everything is left to inference from general words. General words – the very wording "final solution" or "total solution" or "territorial solution" leaves something to the bureaucrat that he must infer. He cannot read that document. One cannot even read Göring's famous letter to Heydrich at the end of July 1941 charging him in two paragraphs to proceed with the "final solution," and examining that document, consider that everything is clarified. Far from it. It was an authorization to invent. It was an authorization to begin something that was not yet capable of being put into word. I think of it that way.

*It was a case for every agency as a matter of fact?*

Absolutely for every agency. In every aspect of this operation, invention was necessary. Certainly, at this point, because every problem was unprecedented. Not just how to kill the Jews, but what to do with their property thereafter. And not only that, but how to deal with the problem of not letting the world know what had happened. All this multitude of problems was new.

## **Rudolph Vrba**

The whole murder machinery could work on one principle: that the people came to Auschwitz and didn't know where they were going or for what purpose. The new arrivals were supposed to be kept orderly and without panic marching into the gas chambers. Especially, the panic was dangerous from women and small children. So, it was important for the Nazis that none of us give some sort of message that could cause panic, even in the last moment. And anybody who tried to get in touch with newcomers was either clubbed to death or taken behind the wagon and shot.

## Filip Müller

Before each gassing operation, the SS took stern precautions. The crematorium was ringed with SS men. Many patrolled the court with dogs and machine guns. To the right were the steps that led underground to the “undressing room.” In Birkenau there were four crematoriums.

As people reached the crematorium, they saw everything. They knew something was seriously amiss, but none had the faintest notion that in three or four hours they’d be reduced to ashes.

When they reached the “undressing room” they saw that it looked like an International Information Center! On the walls were hooks, and each hook had a number. Beneath the hooks were wooden benches. So, people could undress more comfortably. On numerous pillars there were slogans in several languages: “Clean is good”, “Lice can kill”, “Wash yourself!” All those signs were only there to lure people into the gas chambers already undressed. And to the left at a right angle, was the gas chamber with its massive door.

In the crematoriums Zyklon gas crystals were poured in by the so-called SS disinfection squad. With five or six canisters of gas they could kill around two thousand people. The gas took about ten to fifteen minutes to kill. The most horrible thing was when the doors were opened – the unbearable sight: people were packed together like basalt, like blocks of stone. How they tumbled out of the gas chamber! You could never get used to that. It was impossible.

You see, once the gas was poured in, it worked like this: it rose from the ground upwards. The lights were switched off. It was dark, no one could see, so the strongest people tried to climb higher. That caused the struggle. Secondly, most people tried to push their way to the door. It was instinctive, a death struggle. Which is why children and weaker people and the aged always wound up on the bottom. In the death struggle, a father didn’t realize his son lay beneath him.

## Ruth Elias

My name is Ruth Elias. In Theresienstadt, this time in which passed transport to the east, we were loaded into these wagons for cattle, and it went for two days and one night. The second day, it was December, but it was warm inside, because we made the heat, we heated it up with our temperature, body temperature. One evening the train came to a stop. The next day in the evening the doors were opened and there was terrible screaming: “Out, out, out, out!” We were all shocked, we didn’t know what was going on, where we are, we saw only SS with dogs, and we saw in the distance symmetric lights, but we didn’t know where we are, what the lights, the thousands of lights, are meaning. We only heard the shouting: “Out, out, out, out!” Out! Yes, exactly. And “Schnell, schnell, schnell.” Out we came from these wagons, and we had to line up. And there were some people in striped uniforms. We didn’t know what the stripes are and I asked one in Czech: “Where are we?” and it was a Polish one who understands my Czech, and he told me Auschwitz. But it didn’t mean anything to me. What is Auschwitz? I didn’t

know about Auschwitz anything. We were led to a so-called family camp, Familienglage B2B. Children, men and women together without any selection beforehand. Men from the Männelager came in and told us that Auschwitz is a Vernichtungslager, an extermination camp, where they are gassing people, and we didn't believe. In this camp there was already a transport who left Theresienstadt in September, three months before us. They didn't believe too, because we were all together and nobody was taken away, nobody was burnt. We didn't believe it.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Rudolph Vrba**

By approximately the end of February, a rumor was spread by the Nazis that the family transport will be moved to a place called Heidebreck. The first move was to separate the first family transport from the second family transport by transferring them overnight into the quarantine camp B2A, where I was the registrar.

So, I could now speak to those people directly. I talked to Freddy Hirsch specifically, and I told him about the possibility that the transport that had been his transport, the family transport of the Czechs, has been transferred to the quarantine camp because of the possibility of them being predestined to be gassed on the seventh of March. Freddy Hirsch objected. He was very reasonable and he said it doesn't make sense that the Germans would keep them for six months, feeding the children with milk and white bread, in order to gas them after six months.

On the next day I got a message from the Resistance that it is sure that they are going to be gassed, that the Sonderkommando knew exactly how many people are going to be gassed, what sort of people, because there are certain rules. So, I called up again to Freddy and explained to him that as far as this transport is concerned, including him they are going to be gassed in the next forty-eight hours. He asked: what happens to the children if we start an uprising. He had a very close relationship with the children.

*How many children were there?*

There could have been a hundred, alive.

*And how many people able to fight?*

Well, the nucleus was about thirty, and now it was not necessary to keep any precautions. If it comes to fighting, even an old woman can pick up a stone.

And, so he said to me: "If we make an uprising, what is going to happen to the children? Who is going to take care of them?" I said I cannot say anything exact; there is no way out for them. They will die whatsoever. This he cannot prevent. What does depend on us: who is going to die with them, and how many of the SS will die with them, and how it will impede the whole machinery. And I explained to him that there is absolutely no chance for him or for anybody from that transport – to the best of my knowledge, and everybody else's knowledge whom I trust – to survive the next forty-eight hours.

*This took place inside the block?*

Inside the block, in my room. He explains to me that he understands the situation, that it is extremely difficult for him to make a decision because of the children. He was sort of their father. He was only thirty at the time. Because I had at that time a room of my own as registrar, I left him in my room, which was equipped with a table, a chair, and a bed, and some writing instrumentation.

I came back in an hour and I could see that he is laying on the bed dying. He took poison. But he was not dead. I again had a connection to a man called Dr. Kleinmann. Dr. Kleinmann was of Polish origin and a French Jew and medically qualified. Kleinmann inspected Freddy and he says he thinks he poisoned himself with a big dose of barbiturates and that it might be possible to save his life. But he won't be on his feet for a long time and he is going to be gassed in the next forty-eight hours, and said he thinks it would be better to leave things as they are.

I moved to camp 2D to establish contact with the Resistance movement. They gave me bread for the people, and said no decision had been made. The moment I distributed the bread, something happened, namely, a special curfew was made within the camp, all administrative activities were stopped, all guards were doubled, machine guns, etcetera, were spread around the quarantine camp, and I was out of contact. The Czech family transport was gassed in the evening. They were put on trucks. All of them knew. They behaved very well. They were being assured once more they were being taken to Heidebreck and not to be gassed, and we knew that if they are going out from the camp, the trucks will turn right when they leave the camp. And we knew that if they turned left there was only one way. Five hundred yards. That's where the crematorium was.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Filip Müller**

That night I was at Crematorium 2. As soon as the people got out of the vans, they were blinded by floodlights and forced through a corridor to the stairs leading to the "undressing room". They were blinded, made to run. Blows were rained on them. Those who didn't run fast enough were beaten to death by the SS. The violence used against them was extraordinary. And sudden.

*Without explanation?*

Not a word. As soon as they left the vans the beatings began. I was standing near the rear door, and what I witnessed was frightful scene. The people were bloodied. They knew where they were. They were in despair. Children clung to each other. Their mothers, their parents, the old people all cried, overcome with misery. Suddenly, some SS officers appeared, including the camp commandant Schwarzhuber. There was a movement in the crowd. They probably wanted to rush to the SS men and tell them how they had been lied to, but then some guards surged forward, wielding clubs, and more people were injured.

*In the undressing room?*

Yes. The violence climaxed when they tried to force people to undress. Most refused to follow the order. Suddenly, like a chorus, they all began to sing. The whole “undressing room” rang with the Czech national anthem and Hatikvah. That moved me terribly, that...

That was happening to my countrymen and I realized my life had become meaningless. Why go on living? For what? So, I went to the gas chamber with them, resolved to die. With them. Suddenly, some who recognized me came up to me. For my locksmith friends and I had sometimes gone into the family camp. A small group of women approached. They looked at me and said, right there in the gas chamber...

*You were in the gas chamber?*

Yes. One of them said: “So you want to die. But that’s senseless. Your death won’t give us back our lives. That’s no way. You must get out of here alive, you must bear witness to our suffering, and to the injustice done to us.”

**Interviewer (Italics) and Rudolph Vrba**

That’s how it ended with the first Czech family transport. It was quite clear to me then that the Resistance in the camp is not geared for an uprising but for survival of the members of the Resistance. I then decided to act on escape and leaving the community. The decision to escape was formed immediately, and I started to press on with preparations for the escape with my friend Wetzler. I think that if I successfully manage to break out from the camp and bring the information to the right place, at the right time, that this might be a help, that I might manage, if I succeed to bring help from the outside. And thus, the escape plans are finally formulated and the escape took place on April 7.

*And this is the main and deep reason why you decided to escape?*

Suddenly, at that moment, to press on with it? In other words, not to delay anything but to escape as soon as possible. To inform the world.

*About what was going on?*

Right.

*In Auschwitz?*

Right.

**Interviewer (Italics) and Walter Stier**

*Mr. Stier, You never saw a train?*

No, never. We had so much work, I never left my desk. We worked day and night.

*"G.E.D.O.B."*

"Gedob" means..." Head Office of Eastbound Traffic." In January 1940 I was assigned to Gedob Krakow. In mid-1943 I was moved to Warsaw. I was made Chief traffic planner. Chief of the Traffic Planning Office.

*But your duties were the same before and after 1943?*

The only change was that I was promoted to head of the department.

*What were your specific duties at Gedob in Poland during the war?*

The work was barely different from the work in Germany: preparing timetables, coordinating the movement of special trains with regular trains.

*There were several departments?*

Yes. Department 33 was in charge of special trains ... and regular trains. The special trains were handled by Department 33.

*You were always in Department of special trains?*

Yes.

*What's the difference between a special and regular train?*

A regular train may be used by anyone who purchases a ticket. Say from Krakow to Warsaw. Or from Krakow to Lemberg. A special train has to be ordered. The train is specially put together and pay group fares.

*Are there still special trains now?*

Of course. Just as there were then.

*For group vacations you can organize a special train?*

Yes, for instance, for immigrant workers returning home for the holidays special trains are scheduled. Or else one couldn't handle the traffic.

*You said after the war you handled trains for visiting dignitaries.*

After the war, yes.

*If a king visits Germany by train that's a special train?*

That's a special train. But the procedure isn't the same as for special trains for group tours and so on. State visits are handled by the Foreign Services.

*Right, but why were there more special trains during the war than before or after?*

I see what you're getting at. You're referring to the so-called resettlement train.

*“Resettlement.” That’s it.*

That’s what they were called. Those trains were ordered by the Ministry of Transport of the Reich. You needed an order from the Ministry.

*In Berlin?*

Correct. And as for the implementation of these orders, the Head of Office of Eastbound Traffic in Berlin dealt with it.

*Yes, I understand.*

Is that clear?

*Perfectly. But mostly, at that time, who was being “resettled?”*

No! We didn’t know that. Only when we were fleeing from Warsaw ourselves, did we learn that they could have been Jews, or criminals, or similar people.

*Jews, criminals?*

Criminals. All kinds.

*Special train for criminals?*

No, that was just an expression. You couldn’t talk about that. Unless you were tired of life, it was best not to mention that.

*But you knew that the trains to Treblinka or Auschwitz were –*

Of course, we knew. I was the last district; without me these trains couldn’t reach their destination. For instance, a train that started in Essen had to go through the districts of Wuppertal, Hannover, Magdeburg, Berlin, Franklin/Oder, Posen, Warsaw, etc. So, I had to –

*Did you know Treblinka meant extermination?*

Of course not!

*You didn’t know?*

Good God No! How could we know? I never went to Treblinka. I stayed in Krakow, in Warsaw, glued to my desk.

*You were a ...*

I was strictly a bureaucrat

*I see. But it’s astonishing that people in the department of special trains never knew about the “final solution.”*

We were at war.

*Because there were others who worked for the railroads who knew. Like the train conductors.*

Yes, they saw it. They did. But, as to what happened, I didn't ...

*What was Treblinka for you? Treblinka or Auschwitz?*

Yes, for us Treblinka, Belzec, and all that were concentration camps.

*A destination?*

Yes, that's all.

*But, not death.*

No, no. People were put up there. For instance, for a train coming from Essen, or Cologne, or elsewhere, room had to be made for them there. With the war, and the allies advancing everywhere, those people had to be concentrated in camps.

*When exactly did you find out?*

Well, when the word got around, when it was whispered. It was never said outright! Good God, no! They'd had hauled you off at once! We heard things.

*Rumors?*

That's it, rumors.

*During the war?*

Toward the end of the war.

*Not in 1941?*

No! Good God, no! Not a word! Toward the end of 1944, maybe.

*What did you ...?*

It was said that people were being sent to concentration camps and that those in poor health probably wouldn't survive.

*Extermination came to you as a complete surprise?*

Completely. Yes.

*You had no idea?*

Not the slightest. Like that camp – what's its name? It was in the Oppeln district. ... I've got it: Auschwitz.

*Yes, Auschwitz was in the Oppeln district.*

Right. Auschwitz wasn't far from Krakow.

*That's true.*

We never heard a word about that.

*Auschwitz to Krakow is forty miles.*

That's not very far. And we knew nothing. Not a clue.

*But you knew that the Nazis – that Hitler didn't like Jews.*

That we did. It was well known; it appeared in print. It was no secret. But as to their extermination, that was news to us. I mean, even today people deny it. They say there couldn't have been so many Jews. Is it true? I don't know. That's what they say. Anyway, what was done was an outrage, to put it bluntly.

*What?*

The extermination. Everybody condemns it. Every decent person. But as far as knowing about it, we didn't.

*But the Polish people, for instance knew everything.*

That's not surprising. They lived nearby, they heard, they talked. And they didn't have to keep quiet.

## SOBIBOR

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Hannah Zaidel**

*Why are you so interested in this story?*

It's a long story. As a child, I had little contact with my father. He went out to work and I didn't see much of him. Besides, he was a silent man, he didn't talk to me. And when I grew up and was strong enough to face him, I questioned him. I never stopped questioning him until I got at the scraps of truth he couldn't tell me. It came out haltingly. I had to tear the details out of him, and finally with you being here, I heard the whole story for the second time.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Motke Zaidel**

*But the Lithuanian forests are denser than the Israeli forests, no?*

The place resembles Ponari: the forest, the ditches. It's as if the bodies had been burned here. Except there were no stones in Ponari.

Of course, the trees are similar, but taller and fuller in Lithuania.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Jan Piwonski**

*Is there still hunting here in the Sobibor forest?*

Yes, there are lots of animals of all kinds.

*Was there hunting then?*

Only manhunts. Some victims tried to escape. But they didn't know the area. At times people heard explosions in the minefield, sometimes they'd find a deer, and sometimes a poor Jew who tried to escape.

That's the charm of our forests: silence and beauty. But it wasn't always so silent here. There was a time when it was full of screams and gunshots, of dogs barking, and that period especially is engraved on the minds of the people who lived here then. After the revolt the Germans decided to liquidate the camp, and early in the winter of 1943 they planted pines that were three or four years old, to camouflage all the traces.

*That screen of trees? That's where the mass graves were?*

Yes. In 1944, you couldn't guess what had happened here, those trees hid the secret of a death camp.

## **Interviewer (Italics) and Motke Zaidel**

*So it was they who dug up and burned all the Jews of Vilna?*

Yes. In early January 1944 we began digging up the bodies.

When the last mass grave was opened, I recognized my whole family. Mom and my sisters. Three sisters with their kids. They were all in there. They'd been in the earth four months, and it was winter. They were very well preserved. I recognized their faces and their clothes too.

*They'd been killed relatively recently?*

Yes.

*And it was the last grave?*

Yes.

*The Nazi plan was for them to open the graves, starting with the oldest?*

Yes. The last graves were the newest, and we started with the oldest, those of the first ghetto. In the first grave there were twenty-four thousand bodies.

The deeper you dug, the flatter the bodies were. Each was almost a flat slab. When you tried to grasp a body, it crumbled, it was impossible to pick up. We had to open the graves, but without tools. They said: "Get used to working with your hands."

*With just their hands?*

When we first opened the graves, we couldn't help it, we all burst out sobbing. But the Germans almost beat us to death. We had to work at a killing pace for two days, beaten all the time, and with no tools. The Germans even forbade us to use the words "corpse" or "victim". The dead were blocks of wood, shit, with absolutely no importance. Anyone who said "corpse" or "victim" was beaten. The Germans made us refer to the bodies as "Figuren", that is, as puppets, dolls, or as "Schmattes", which means rags.

*Were they told at the start how many "Figuren" there were in all of the graves?*

The head of the Vilna Gestapo told us: "There are ninety thousand people lying there, and absolutely no trace must be left of them."

When things were ready, they poured on fuel, and touched off the fire. They waited for a high wind. The pyres usually burned for seven or eight days.

**Interviewer (Italics) and Jan Piwonski**

In February 1942 I began working here at Sobibor Station as an assistant switchman.

*The station building, the rails, the platforms are just as they were in 1942? Nothing's changed?*  
Nothing

*Exactly where did the camp begin?*

If we go there, I'll show you exactly. Here there was a fence that ran to those trees you see there. And another fence that ran to those trees over there.

*So I'm standing inside the camp perimeter, right?*

That's right.

*Where I am now is fifty feet from the station, and I'm already outside the camp. This is the Polish part, and over there was death.*

Yes, on German orders, Polish railmen split up the trains. So the locomotive took twenty cars, and headed toward Chelmno. When it reached a switch, it pushed the cars into the camp on the other track we see there. Unlike Treblinka, the station here is part of the camp.

*Where we are now is what was called the ramp, right?*

Yes, those to be exterminated were unloaded here.

*So where we're standing is where 250,000 Jews were unloaded before being gassed?*

Yes.

*Did foreign Jews arrive here in passenger cars too?*

Not always. Often the richest Jews, from Belgium, Holland, France, arrived in passenger cars, sometimes even in first class. They were usually better treated by the guards. Especially the convoys of Western European Jews waiting their turn here. Polish railmen saw the women making up, combing their hair, wholly unaware of what waited them minutes later. They dolled up. And the Poles couldn't tell them anything: the guards forbade contact with the future victims.

*I suppose there were fine days like today.*

Unfortunately, some were even finer.

Near the end of March 1942, sizeable groups of Jews were herded here, groups of fifty to one hundred people. Several trains arrived with sections of barracks, with posts, barbed wire, bricks and construction of the camp as such began. The Jews unloaded these cars and carted

the sections of barracks to the camp. The Germans made them work extremely fast. Seeing the pace they worked at – it was extremely brutal – and seeing the complex being built, and the fence, which after all, enclosed a vast space, we realized that what the Germans were building wasn't meant to aid mankind.

Early in June the first convoy arrived. I'd say there were over forty cars. With the convoy were SS men in black uniforms. It happened one afternoon. I had just finished work. But I got on my bicycle and went home.

*Why?*

I merely thought these people had come to build the camp, as the others had before them. That convoy \_ there was no way of knowing that it was the first earmarked for extermination. Besides, one couldn't have known that Sobibor would be used for the mass extermination of the Jewish people. The next morning when I came here to work, the station was absolutely silent, and we realized, after talking with the other railway men who worked the station here, that something utterly incomprehensible had happened. First of all, when the camp was being built, there were orders being shouted in German, there were screams, Jews were working at a run, there were shots, and here there was that silence, no work crews, a really total silence. Forty cars had arrived, and the ...nothing. It was all very strange.

*Can you describe that silence?*

It was a silence ... a standstill in the camp. You heard and saw nothing; nothing moved. So then we began to wonder, "Where have they put those Jews?"

## INTERMISSION

## TREBLINKA

### Richard Glazar

My name is Richard Glazar. It was the end of November 1942. They chased us away from our work and back to our barracks. Suddenly, from the part of the camp called the death camp, flames shot up. Very high. In a flash, the whole countryside, the whole camp, seemed ablaze. It was already dark. We went into our barracks and ate. And from the window, we kept on watching the fantastic backdrop of flames of every imaginable color: red, yellow, green, purple. And suddenly one of us stood up. We knew...he'd been an opera singer in Warsaw. His name was Salve, and facing that curtain of fire, he began chanting a song I didn't know:

"My God, my God  
Why hast thou forsaken us?"

We have been thrust into the fire before,  
But we have never denied Thy Holy Law."

He sang in Yiddish, while behind him blazed the pyres on which they had begun then, in November 1942, to burn the bodies in Treblinka. That was the first time it happened. We knew that night that the dead would no longer be buried, they'd be burned.

### Abraham Bomba

I am Abraham Bomba. There was a sign, a small sign, on the station of Treblinka. I don't know if we were at the station or if we didn't go up to the station. On the line, over there where we stayed there was a sign, a very small sign, which said "Treblinka." The first time in my life I heard the name "Treblinka." Nobody knew. It was not a place. It was not a city. There is not even a small village. Jewish people always dreamed, and that was part of their life, part of their messianic hope, that someday they are going to be free. That dream was mostly true in the ghetto. Every day, every single night, I dreamed about that. I think that's going to be good. Not only the dream but the hope conserved in as dream.

The first transport from Czestochowa was sent away on the day after Yom Kippur. The day before Succoth, there was a second transport...I was together with them. I know in my heart that something is not good, because if they take children, if they take old people, they send them away, that means it is not good. What they said is they take them away to a place where they will be working. But, on the other hand, an old woman, a little child of four weeks or five years, what is work? It was a foolish thing, but still we had no choice – we believed them.

## **Interviewer (Italics) and Czeslaw Borowi**

*Did you live in this very spot Mr. Borowi?*

Right here. My entire life.

*Then you had a front row seat for what happened?*

Naturally. You could go up close or watch from a distance. I had land on the far side of the station. To work it, I had to cross the track, so I could see everything.

*Do you remember the first convoy of Jews from Warsaw on July 22, 1942?*

I recall the convoy very well, and when all of those Jews were brought here, people wondered, "What's to be done with them?" Clearly, they'd be killed, but no one yet knew how. When people began to understand what was happening, they were appalled, and they commented privately that since the world began, no one had ever murdered so many people that way.

*While all this was happening before their eyes, normal life went on? They worked their fields?*

Certainly, they worked, but not as willingly as usual. They had to work, but when they saw all this, they thought: "Our house may be surrounded. We may be arrested too."

*Were they afraid for the Jews too?*

Well, it's this way: if I cut my finger, it doesn't hurt. They knew about the Jews: the convoys came in here, and then went to the camp, and people vanished.

There were sixty to eighty cars in each convoy, and there were two locomotives that took the convoys into the camp, taking twenty cars at a time.

*And the cars came back empty?*

Yes. Here's how it happened: the locomotive picked up twenty cars and took them to the camp. That took maybe an hour, and the empty cars came back here. The next twenty cars were taken, and meanwhile, the people in the first twenty were already dead.

Lots of people opened the doors or escaped through windows. Sometimes the Ukrainians fired through the car walls. It happened chiefly at night. When the Jews talked to each other, the Ukrainians wanted things quiet, and they asked...yes, asked them to shut-up. So, the Jews shut-up and the guard moved off. Then the Jews started talking again, in their language, ra-ra-ra, and so on.

*What do you mean la-la-la? What are you trying to imitate?*

Their language.

*Was the Jews noise something special?*

They spoke Jew.

Do you understand "Jew"?

No

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Abraham Bomba**

We were in the wagon; the wagon was rolling in the direction east. A funny thing happened, like maybe it's not nice to say, but I will say it. Most of the people, not only the majority, but ninety-nine percent of the Polish people when they saw the train going through – we looked like animals in that wagon, just our eyes looked outside – they were laughing, they had joy, because they took the Jewish people away. What was going on in the wagon, the pushing and the screaming: "Where is my child?" and "where is this?" The people were not only starving, they were choking – it was hot. We had nothing inside. For a child like mine, about the age of three weeks, there was not a little drop of water.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Henrik Gawkowski**

*Mr. Gawkowski, did you hear screams behind your locomotive?*

Obviously, since the locomotive was next to the cars. They screamed, asked for water. The screams from the cars closest to the locomotive could be heard very well.

*Can one get used to that?*

No. It was extremely distressing. I knew the people behind me were human, like me. The Germans gave me and the others vodka to drink. Without drinking, we could not have done it. There was a bonus – that were paid, not in money, but in liquor. Those who worked on other trains did not get this bonus. I drank every drop I got because without liquor I couldn't stand the stench when I got here. We even bought more liquor on our own, to get drunk on.

*From the station to the unloading ramp in the camp is how many miles?*

Four

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Abraham Bomba**

We arrived in the morning about, I would say six, six-thirty. On the other side of the tracks, more trains standing there. And I was watching through about eighteen, twenty, maybe more, wagons going away. And after about an hour or so the wagons coming back without the people. My train stayed there until about twelve o'clock.

We stayed there at the station waiting to go into Treblinka. Some of the German SS came around and were asking us what we have. So, we said some of the people have gold, they have diamonds, but we want water. So, they said: "Good, give us the diamonds, we bring you water." They took the diamonds away; they didn't bring any water at all.

*How long did the trip last?*

The trip lasted from Czestochowa to Treblinka about twenty-four hours with interruption, waiting at Warsaw and also waiting at Treblinka to go into Treblinka camp. At the last train we went in over there, but like I mentioned before, I saw many trains coming back, but the trains were without people. So, I said to myself: "What happened to those people? We don't see any people, just trains coming back."

**Interviewer (Italics) and Richard Glazar**

We traveled for two days. On the morning of the second day we saw that we had left Czechoslovakia and were heading east. It wasn't the SS guarding us, but the Schutzpolizei, the police, in green uniforms. We were in ordinary passenger cars. All the seats were filled. You couldn't choose. They were all numbered and assigned. In my compartment there was an elderly couple. The old man was always hungry.

On the second day, I saw a sign for Malkinia. We went on a little farther. Then, very slowly, the train turned off of the main track and rolled at a walking pace through a wood. While he looked out - we'd been able to open a window - the old man in our compartment saw a boy...cows were grazing...and he asked the boy in signs, "Where are we?" And the kid made a funny gesture. This: (he draws a finger across his throat).

*A Pole?*

A Pole. It was where the train stopped. On one side was the wood and on the other fields. We saw cows watched over by a young man, a farmhand.

*And one of you questioned him?*

Not in words, but in signs, we asked: "What's going on here?" And he made that gesture. Like this (gesture). We didn't really pay much attention to him. We couldn't figure out what he meant.

**Interviewer (Italics) and Czeslaw Borowi**

The people who had a chance to get near the Jews did that to warn them that they'd be hanged, killed, slain. Even foreign Jews from Belgium, Czechoslovakia, from France too, surely from Holland and elsewhere. In the small cities in the area, it was, it was talked about. So, the Polish Jews knew, but the others didn't.

*Who'd they warn, Polish Jews or others?*

All the Jews. Foreign Jews came in passenger cars, they were well dressed, in white shirts, there were flowers in the cars, and they played cards.

## **Interviewer (Italics) and Henrik Gawkowski**

*Why do you look so sad?*

Because I saw men marching to their death. Not far – a mile and a half from here. That's where the rail line into the camp was.

*Aside from the trains of deportees – did you drive from Warsaw or Bialystok to the Treblinka station? Did you ever drive the deportee cars into the camp from the Treblinka station?*

Two or three times a week for around a year and a half.

*That is, throughout the camp's existence?*

Yes.

*You go to the end with your locomotive, and have twenty cars behind you?*

No, they're in front of me. I pushed them.

## **Abraham Bomba**

When we came into Treblinka, we didn't know who the people were. Some of them had red armbands, some of them blue: Jewish commandos. Falling out from the train, pushing out each other, over there losing each other, and the crying and the hollering. And coming out, we started one to the right, one to the left, the women to the left and men on the right. And we had no time to even look at each other because they started hitting us over the head with all kinds of things. You didn't know what happened, you had no time to think. All you heard was crying and all you heard all the time was the hollering of people.

## **Richard Glazar**

And suddenly it started: the yelling and screaming. "All out, everybody out! "All those shouts, the uproar, the tumult! "Out! Get out! Leave the baggage!" We got out stepping on each other. We saw men wearing blue armbands. Some carried whips. We saw some SS men. Green uniforms. Black uniforms...

We were a mass and the mass swept us along. It was irresistible. It had to move to another place. I saw others undressing. I heard: "Get undressed! You're to be disinfected!" As I waited, already naked, I noticed the SS men separating out some people. These were told to get dressed. A passing SS man suddenly stopped in front of me, looked me over, and said: "Yes, you too, quick, join the others, get dressed. You're going to work here, and if you're good, you can be a kapo – a squad leader."

## **Abraham Bomba**

At my transport I was already naked. A man came over and said: "You, you, you, step out." And we stepped out and they took us to the side. Some of the people from the transport had an idea what was going on, and they know already that they will not stay alive. The crying and the hollering and the shouting! It was impossible. All at once everything stopped by a command. It was all quiet. The place where the people went in and just like a command, like everything was dead. Then they told us to make clean the whole place. There were about two thousand people who had undressed on the outside. Some of the Germans, some of the other people that were there, the Ukrainians and other ones, they start shouting and hitting us that we should go faster, carry the bundles to the main place where there were piles of clothes, shoes, and other things. In no time the place was clean. There was no trace, everything disappeared.

## **Richard Glazar**

We were taken to the barracks. The whole place stank. Piled about five feet high in a jumbled mass, were all the things people could have conceivably brought. Clothes, suitcases, everything stacked in a solid mass. On top of it, jumping around like demons, people were making bundles and carrying them outside. It was turned over to one of these men. His armband said "Squad Leader." He shouted, and I understood that I was also to pick up clothing, bundle it, and take it somewhere. As I worked, I asked him: "What's going on? Where are the ones who stripped?" And he replied: "Dead! All dead!"

But it still hadn't sunk in, I didn't believe it. He'd used the Yiddish word. It was the first time I'd heard Yiddish spoken. He didn't say it very loud, and I saw he had tears in his eyes.

## **Abraham Bomba**

At that time, we started working in that place they called Treblinka. Still I couldn't believe what happened over there, on the other side, of the gate where people went in, everything disappeared, and everything got quiet. When we start to ask the people who worked here before us what happened to the others, they said: "What do you mean, what happened? Don't you know that? They're all gassed, all killed." We were just like stones. We couldn't ask what happened to the wife, to the kid. "What do you mean – wife, kid? Nobody is anymore!" How could they kill, could they gas so many people at once? But they had a way to do it.

## **Interviewer (Italics) and Richard Glazar**

All I could think of then was my friend Carel Unger. He'd been at the rear of the train, in a section that had been uncoupled and left outside. I needed someone. Near me. With me. Then I saw him. He was in the second group. He'd been spared too. On the way, somehow, he

had learned, he already knew. He looked at me. All he said was “Richard, my father, mother, brother...” He had learned on the way there.

*Your meeting with Carel – how long after your arrival did it happen?*

It was ...around twenty minutes after we reached Treblinka. Then I left the barracks and had my first look at the vast space that I soon learned was called “the sorting place.” It was buried under mountains of objects of all kinds. Mountains thirty feet high. I thought about it and said to Carel: “It’s a hurricane, a raging sea. We’re shipwrecked. And we’re still alive. We must do nothing...but watch for every new wave, float on it, get ready for the next wave, and ride the wave at all costs. And nothing else.”

### **Abraham Bomba**

That’s how the day went through, without anything. Not drinking – we went twenty-four hours without water, without anything. We couldn’t drink – we couldn’t take anything into our mouths, because it was impossible to believe that just a minute, just an hour before, you were part of a family, you were part of a wife or a husband, and now all of a sudden everything is dead.

We went into a special barrack, where I was sleeping right next to the hallway. And over there, that night was the most horrible night for all the people, because of the memory of all those things that people went through with each other – all the joys and the happiness and the births and the weddings and other things – and all of the sudden, in one second, to cut through without anything, and without any guilt at all. The only guilt they had was that they were Jewish.

Most of us were up all night, trying to talk to each other, which was not allowed. The kapo that was sleeping in the same barrack...we were not allowed to talk to each other or to express our views or minds to each other. And till the morning at five o’clock we start going out from the barrack. In the morning when they had the appeal to go out from the barracks, from our group I would say at least four or five were dead. I don’t know how – they must have had with them some kind of poison and poisoned themselves. At least two of them were my close friends. They didn’t say anything. We didn’t even know they had poison with them.

### **Richard Glazar**

Greenery – sand everywhere else. At night we were put into our barracks. It just had a sand floor. Nothing else. Each of us simply dropped where he stood. Half asleep, I heard some men hang themselves. We didn’t react then. It was almost normal. Just as it was normal that for everyone behind whom the gate of Treblinka closed, there was death, had to be death, for no one was supposed to bear witness. I already knew that, three hours after arriving at Treblinka.

**Interviewer (Italics) and Franz Suchomel**

*Are you ready Mr. Suchomel?*

Yes, we can begin.

*How's your heart? Is everything in order?*

Oh, my heart – for the moment, it's all right. If I have any pain, I'll tell you. We'll have to break it off.

*Of course. But your health in general is ...*

The weather today suits me fine. The barometric pressure is high; that's good for me.

*You look to be in good shape, anyway. Let's begin with Treblinka. I believe you got there in August? Was it August 20 or 24?*

The eighteenth

*The eighteenth?*

I don't know exactly. Around August 20. I arrived there with seven other men.

*From Berlin?*

From Berlin.

*From Lublin?*

From Berlin to Warsaw to Lublin, from Lublin back to Warsaw and from Warsaw to Treblinka.

*What was Treblinka like then?*

Treblinka then was operating at full capacity.

*Full capacity?*

Full capacity! The Warsaw ghetto was being emptied then. Three trains arrived in two days, each with three, four, five thousand people aboard, all from Warsaw. But, at the same time, other trains came in from Kielce and other places. So, three trains arrived, and since the offensive against Stalingrad was in full swing, the trainloads of Jews were left on a station siding. What's more, the cars were French, made of steel. So that while five thousand Jews arrived in Treblinka, three thousand were dead in the cars. They had slashed their wrists, or just died. The ones we unloaded were half-dead and half-mad. In the other trains from Kielce and elsewhere, at least half were dead. We stacked them here, here, here and here. Thousands of people piled one on top of another on the ramp. Stacked like wood. In addition, other Jews, still alive, waited there for two days: the small gas chambers could no longer handle the load. They functioned day and night in that period.

*Can you describe, very precisely, your first impression of Treblinka? Very precisely. It is important!*

My first impression of Treblinka and that of some of the other men, was catastrophic. For we had not been told of how and what...that people were being killed there. They hadn't told us.

*You didn't know?*

No!

*Incredible!*

But true. I didn't want to go. That was proved at my trial. I was told: "Mr. Suchomel, there are big workshops there for tailors and shoemakers, and you'll be guarding them.

*But you knew it was a camp?*

Yes. We were told: "The Führer ordered a *resettlement program*. It's an order from the Führer" Understand?

*Resettlement program?*

Resettlement program. No one ever spoke of killing.

*I understand. Mr. Suchomel, we're not discussing you, only Treblinka. You are a very important eye witness, and you can explain what Treblinka was.*

*But don't use my name.*

*No, I promised. All right, you've arrived at Treblinka.*

So Stradie, the sarge, showed us the camp from end to end. Just as we went by, they were opening the gas chamber doors, and people fell out like potatoes. Naturally, that horrified and appalled us. We went back and sat down on our suitcases and cried like old women.

Each day one hundred Jews were chosen to drag the corpses to the mass graves. In the evening the Ukrainians drove those Jews into the gas chambers or shot them. Every day!

It was the hottest day of August. The ground undulated like waves because of the gas.

*From the bodies?*

Bear in mind, the graves were maybe eighteen, twenty feet deep, all crammed with bodies. A thin layer of sand, and the heat. You see? It was hell up there.

*You saw that?*

Yes, just once, the first day. We puked and wept.

*You wept?*

We wept too, yes. The smell was infernal because gas was constantly escaping. It stank horribly for miles around. You could smell it everywhere. It depended on the wind. Understand?

More people kept coming, always more, whom we hadn't the facilities to kill. The brass was in a rush to clean out the Warsaw ghetto. The gas chambers could not handle the load. The small gas chambers. The Jews had to wait their turn for a day, two, three days. They foresaw what was coming. They foresaw it. They may not have been certain, but many knew. There were Jewish women who slashed their daughters' wrists at night, then cut their own. Others poisoned themselves.

They heard the engine feeding the gas chamber. A tank engine was used in that gas chamber. At Treblinka the only gas used was engine exhaust. Zyklon gas – that was Auschwitz.

Because of the delay, Eberl, the camp commandant, phoned Lublin and said: "We can't go on this way, I can't do it any longer. We have to break it off." Overnight, Wirth arrived. He inspected everything, then left. He returned with people from Belzec, experts. Wirth arranged to suspend the trains. The corpses lying there were cleared away. That was the period of the old gas chambers. Because there were so many dead that couldn't be gotten rid of, the bodies piled up around the gas chambers and stayed there for days. Under this pile of bodies was a cesspool three inches deep, full of blood, worms and shit. No one wanted to clean it out. The Jews preferred to be shot rather than work there.

*Preferred to be shot?*

It was awful. Burying their own people, seeing it all. The dead flesh came off in their hands. So, Wirth went there himself with a few Germans and had long belts rigged up that were wrapped around the dead torsos to pull them.

*Who did that?*

SS men and Jews.

*Jews too?*

Jews too!

*What did the Germans do?*

They forced the Jews to...

*They beat them?*

Or they themselves helped with the cleanup.

*Which Germans did that?*

Some of our guards who were assigned up there.

*The Germans themselves?*

They had to.

*They were in command!*

They were in command, but they were also commanded.

*I think the Jews did it.*

In this case, the Germans had to lend a hand.

The new gas chambers were built in September 1942.

*Who built them?*

Hackenhold and Lambert supervised the Jews who did the work, the bricklaying at least. Ukrainian carpenters made the doors. The gas-chamber doors themselves were armored bunker doors. I think they were brought in from Bialystok, from some Russian bunkers.

*What was the capacity of the new gas chambers? There were two of them, right?*

Yes. But the old ones hadn't been demolished. When there were a lot of trains, a lot of people, the old ones were put back into service. And here...the Jews say there were five on each side. I say there were four, but I'm not sure. In any case, only the upper row on this side was in action.

*Why not the other side?*

Disposing of the bodies would have been too complicated.

*Too far?*

Yes. Up there. Wirth had built the death camp, assigning a detail of Jewish workers. The detail had a fixed number in it, around two hundred people, who worked only in the death camp.

*But what was the capacity of the new gas chambers?*

The new gas chambers...let's see...They could finish off three thousand people in two hours.

*How many people at once in a single gas chamber?*

I can't say exactly. The Jews say two hundred. Imagine a room this size.

*They put more in at Auschwitz.*

Auschwitz was a factory!

*And Treblinka?*

I'll give you my definition. Keep this in mind! Treblinka was a primitive but efficient production line of death. Understood?

*Yes. But primitive?*

Primitive, yes. But it worked well, that production line of death.

*How was it possible in Treblinka peak days to "process" eighteen thousand people?*

Eighteen thousand is too high

*But I read that figure in court reports.*

That's an exaggeration. Believe me.

*How many?*

Twelve thousand to fifteen thousand. But we had to spend half the night at it.

*So, a train arrived. I'd like you to describe in detail the whole process during the peak period.*

The trains left Malkinia station for Treblinka station. It was about six miles. Thirty to fifty cars would arrive. They were divided into sections of ten, twelve or fifteen cars and shunted into Treblinka camp and brought to the ramp. The other cars waited, loaded with people, in the Treblinka station. The windows were closed off with barbed wire so no one could get out. On the roofs were "hellhounds," the Ukrainians or Latvians. On the ramp for each car stood two Jews from the Blue Squad to speed things up. They were also Ukrainians or Latvians.

*How many Germans?*

From three to five.

*How many Ukrainians?*

Ten

*Ten Ukrainians, five Germans, Two, that is, twenty people from the Blue Squad.*

Men from the Blue Squad were here, and they sent the people inside. The Red Squad was here.

*What was the Red Squad's job?*

The clothes.

*How long was it between unloading at the ramp and the undressing, how many minutes?*

For the women, let's say an hour in all. A whole train took two hours.

*Between time of arrival... and death...it was all over in two hours?*

Two, two and a half, three hours.

*Winter in Treblinka can be very cold.*

In winter, in December, anyway after Christmas. But, even before Christmas it was cold as hell.

*But it was colder for those poor people...in the "funnel."*

In the "funnel" it was very cold.

*Can you describe this funnel precisely? What was it like? How wide? How was it for the people in this "funnel"?*

It was about thirteen feet wide. On each side were palisades this high...or this high.

*Walls?*

No barbed wire. Woven into the barbed wire were branches of pine trees. It was known as "camouflage." There was a Camouflage Squad of twenty Jews. They brought in new branches every day from the woods. You couldn't see through it.

*The funnel was called the "Road to Heaven" wasn't it?*

The Jews called it the "Ascension", also the "Last Road." I only heard those two names for it. *The people go into the "funnel." Then what happens? They are totally naked?*

Totally naked. Here stood two Ukrainian guards. Mainly for the men. If the men wouldn't go in, they were beaten with whips. The men were driven along. Not the women. They weren't beaten.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Abraham Bomba**

*How did it happen? How were you chosen?*

There came an order from the Germans to take out the barbers they could get – they need them for a certain job. The job they were needed for we didn't know at the time, but we got together as many barbers as we could.

*How long did it happen after your arrival in Treblinka?*

This was about four weeks after I was in Treblinka. It was in the morning, around ten o'clock, when a transport came to Treblinka and the women went into the gas chambers. They chose some people from the working people over there, and they asked who was a barber, who was not a barber. I was a barber for quite a number of years. So, naturally they chose me, and I selected some more barbers I knew, and we got together.

*Professional barbers?*

Yes. We got together and were waiting for the order. And the order came to go with the Germans. They took us into the gas chamber, to the second part of the camp in Treblinka.

*How long did the barbers cut the hair inside the gas chamber, as that was not always the case?*

We worked inside the gas chamber for about a week or ten days. After that they decided that we will cut their hair in the undressing barrack.

*How did it look, the gas chamber?*

It was not a big room, around twelve feet by twelve feet. One of the kapos came in and said: "Barbers, you have to do a job to make all of those women believe they are just taking a haircut

and going in to take a shower, from there they go out from this place.” We know already that there is no way of going out from this room, because this room was the last place they went in alive, and they will never go out alive again.

*Can you describe precisely?*

We were waiting there until the transport came in. Women and children pushed into that place. We the barbers started to cut their hair, and some of them – I would say all of them – some already knew already what was going to happen to them. We tried to do the best we could – to be the most human we could.

*How were the women when they came in?*

They were undressed, naked, without clothes. All the women and children, because they came from the undressing barrack.

*What did you feel the first time you saw all of these naked women?*

I felt that accordingly I got to do what they told me, to cut their hair in a way that it looked like the barber was doing his job for a woman, and I set out to give them both, to take off as much hair as I could, because they needed women’s hair to be transported to Germany.

*Did you shave them?*

No, we didn’t. We just cut their hair and made them believe they were getting a nice haircut.

*You cut the hair of how many women in one batch?*

In one day, there was about between sixty and seventy women in the same room at one time. After we were finished with this party, another party came in, and there were about 140, 150 women. They were already taken care of, and they told us to leave the gas chamber for a few minutes, about five minutes, when they put in the gas and choked them.

*Where did you wait?*

We waited outside the gas chamber on the other side. On this side the women went in and on the other side was a group of working people who took out the dead bodies – some of them were not exactly dead. They took them out in two minutes – in one minute – everything was clear. It was clean to take in the other party of women. Most of them had long hair – some had short hair. What we had to do was chop off the hair.

*But I asked you and you didn’t answer. What was your impression the first time you saw these naked women arriving with children? What did you feel?*

To have a feeling about that...it was very hard to feel anything, because working there day and night between dead people, between bodies, your feeling disappeared, you were dead. You had no feeling at all. At the gas chamber when I was chosen to work there, some of the women that came in on a transport from my town, I knew a lot of them...I knew them; I lived

with them in my town. I lived with them on my street, and some were my close friends. And when they saw me, they started asking me, Abe this and Abe that. "What's going to happen to us?" What could you tell them? What could you tell?

A friend of mine was a barber – he was a good barber in my hometown – when his wife and his sister came into the gas chamber... I can't. It's too horrible. Please.

*You have to do it. I know it's very hard. I know and I apologize.*

Don't make me go on please.

*Please, we must go on.*

I told you today it's going to be very hard.

*Okay, go ahead. What was his answer when his wife and sister came?*

They tried to talk to him and the husband of his sister. They could not tell them this was the last time they stay alive, because behind them was the German Nazis, SS men, and they knew that if they said a word, not only the wife and the woman, who were dead already, but also, they would share the same thing with them. In a way, they tried to do the best for them, with a second longer, a minute longer, just to hug them and kiss them, because they knew they would never see them again.

## **Richard Glazar**

The "infirmary" was a narrow site very close to the ramp, to which the aged were led. I had to do this too. This execution site wasn't covered, just an open place with no roof, but screened by a fence so no one could see in. The way in was a narrow passage, very short, but somewhat similar to the "funnel." A sort of tiny labyrinth. In the middle of it was a pit, and to the left as one came in, there was a little booth with a kind of wooden plank in it, like a springboard. If people were too weak to stand on it, they'd have to sit on it, and then, as the saying went in Treblinka jargon, SS man Mite would "cure each one with a single pill": a shot in the neck. In the peak periods that happened daily. In those days the pit – and it was at least ten to twelve feet deep – was full of corpses.

There were also cases of children who for some reason arrived alone, or got separated from their parents. These children were led to the "infirmary" and shot there. The "infirmary" was also for us, the Treblinka slaves, the last stop. Not the gas chamber. We always ended up in the "infirmary."

## BERLIN

### Inge Deutschkron

This is no longer home, you see. And especially it's no longer home when they start telling me, Inge Deutschkron, that they didn't know, they didn't know. They say they didn't see. "Yes, there were Jews living in our house, and one day they were no longer there. We didn't know what happened." They couldn't help seeing it. It wasn't a matter of one action. These were actions that were taking place over almost two years. Every fortnight people were thrown out of their houses. How could they escape it? How could they not see it?

I remember the day when they made Berlin Judenrein. The people hastened in the streets, no one wanted to be in the streets; you could see the streets were absolutely empty. They didn't want to look, you know. They hastened to buy what they had to buy – they had to buy something for the Sunday, you see. So, they went shopping and hastened back into their houses. And I remember this day very vividly because we saw police cars rushing through the streets of Berlin taking people out of the houses. They had herded the Jews together, from factories, from houses, wherever they could find them, and had put them into something that was called "Klu." Klu was a dance restaurant, a very big one. From there they were deported in various transports. They were going off not very far from here on one of the tracks at the Grönewald station, and this was the day when I suddenly felt so utterly alone, left alone, because now I knew we would be one of the very few people left. I didn't know how many more would be underground. This also was the day when I felt very guilty that I didn't go myself and I tried to escape fate that the others could not escape. There was no more warmth around, no more soul akin to us, you understand. And, we talked about this. What happened to Elsa? To Hans? And where is he, where is she? My God, what happened to the child? These were our thoughts on this horrible day. And this feeling of being terribly alone and terribly guilty that we did not go with them. Why did we try? What made us do this? To escape fate – that was really our destiny or the destiny of our people.

## WARSAW

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Dr. Franz Grassler**

*You don't remember those days Dr. Grassler?*

Not much. I recall more clearly my prewar mountaineering trips than the entire war period and those days in Warsaw. All in all, those were bad times.

*I'll help you remember. In Warsaw you were Dr. Auerswald's deputy.*

Yes

*Dr. Auerswald was...*

Commissioner of the "Jewish district" of Warsaw.

*Dr. Grassler, this is Czerniakow's diary. You're mentioned in it.*

It's been printed, it exists?

*He kept a diary that was recently published. He wrote on July 7, 1941...*

July 7, 1941? That's the first time I've relearned a date. May I take notes. After all, it interests me too. So, in July I was already there.

*He wrote on July 7, 1941..." ...morning at the Community, "that is, at the Jewish Council headquarters, "...and later with Auerswald, Schlosser..."*

Schlosser was...

*And Grassler, on routine matters. That's the first time...*

That my name is mentioned? Yes, but there were three of us. Schlosser was in...the "economic department." I think he had to do with economics.

*And the second time was on July 22.*

He wrote every day?

*Yes, every day. It's quite amazing...*

That the diary was saved. It's amazing that it was saved.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Raul Hilberg**

Adam Czerniakow began keeping a diary the very first week of the war, before the Germans entered Warsaw, and before he took over the responsibility of leading the Jewish community, and he kept his diary in daily entries until the afternoon of the day that he ended his life. He left us a window through which we can observe a Jewish community, the terminal hours of its life, a dying community, which began dying from the beginning. And in that sense Adam

Czerniakow did something very important. He didn't save the Jews – but he left us a record of what had happened to them in a day-by-day fashion. And yet, every day, almost every day, he had an entry. That was something that moved him, pushed him, compelled him throughout the years – almost three years – of his life under the Germans, and in the sense perhaps because he wrote in such prosaic style, we now know what went on in his mind, how things were perceived, recognized, reacted to.

We even know from what he didn't say just what it is that went through this community. There are constant references in the diary to the end. He has a feeling of doom for the Jews of Warsaw, and there are remarkable passages in the diary that illustrate what he meant. He is sarcastic enough, if that is the word, to remark in December of 1941 that now the intelligentsia were dying also. Up to this point poor people were dying, but by December 1941 members of the intelligentsia were starving to death.

*Why does he mention specifically the intelligentsia?*

Because there is a difference owing to the class structure within the ghetto, in vulnerability to starvation. The lower class died first. The middle class a little later. The intelligentsia were of course at the top of the middle class, and once they started dying the situation was really very, very bad.

He mentions with approval, that one petitioner came to him for money and said: "I want money not in order to eat, I want money for the rent, to pay the rent on my apartment. I don't want to die in the street.

*You mean he spoke of a petition from somebody? He said "Give me money?"*

Yes, but not for food. "Give me money so that I can pay the rent, because I don't want to die in the streets." There were people dropping dead in the street. They were covered with newspaper.

**Interviewer (Italics) and Dr. Franz Grassler**

*Did you go into the ghetto?*

Seldom. When I had to visit Czerniakow.

*What were conditions like?*

Awful. Yes, appalling. I never went back when I saw what it was like. Unless I had to. In the whole period I think I only went once or twice. We at the Commission tried to maintain the ghetto for its labor force and especially to prevent epidemics, like typhus.

*Yes. Can you tell us about typhus?*

I'm not a doctor. I only know it wipes people out like the plague, and that it can't be confined to the ghetto.

*Czerniakow also wrote that one of the reasons the ghetto was walled in was because of the German fear.*

Yes, absolutely. Fear of typhus.

*He says Germans always associated Jews with typhus.*

Maybe. I'm not sure if there were grounds for it. But, imagine that mass of people packed into the ghetto. There weren't only the Warsaw Jews, but others who came later. The danger kept on growing.

*The Germans had a policy on the Warsaw ghetto. What was that policy?*

You're asking more than I know. The policy wound up with extermination, the "final solution" – we knew nothing about it, of course.

*Do you know how many people died in the ghetto each month in 1941?*

I don't know now, if I ever knew.

*But you did know. There are exact figures.*

I probably knew.

*Yes. Five thousand a month.*

Five thousand a month? Yes, well...

*That's a lot.*

That's a lot. But there were far too many people in the ghetto. That was it.

*My question is philosophical. What does a ghetto mean, in your opinion?*

History is full of ghettos, going back centuries, for all I know. Persecution of the Jews wasn't a German invention, and it didn't start with World War II. The Poles persecuted them too.

*You say you wanted to maintain the ghetto.*

Our mission wasn't to annihilate the ghetto, but to keep it alive, to maintain it.

*What does "alive" mean in such conditions?*

That was the problem. That was the whole problem.

*But people were dying in the streets. There were bodies everywhere.*

Exactly. That was the paradox.

*Can you explain?*

No

*Why not?*

Explain what? But the fact is...

*That wasn't "maintaining"! Jews were being exterminated daily in the ghetto. Czerniakow wrote... To maintain it properly, we'd have needed more substantial rations and less crowding.*

*Why weren't the rations more humane? That was a German decision wasn't it?*

There was no real decision to starve the ghetto. The big decision to exterminate came much later.

*That's right later. In 1942.*

Our mission, as I recall it, was to manage the ghetto, and naturally with those inadequate rations and the overcrowding, a high, even excessive death rate was inevitable.

*Yes. What does "maintain" the ghetto mean in such conditions: the food, sanitation, etcetera? What could the Jews do against such measures?*

They couldn't do anything.

*Why did Czerniakow commit suicide?*

Because he realized there was no future in the ghetto. He probably saw before I did that the Jews would be killed. I suppose the Jews already had their excellent secret services. They were too well informed, better than we were.

*When was the first deportation to Treblinka?*

Before Czerniakow's suicide, I think.

*July 22*

Those are dates...So the deportation began July 22, 1942.

*Yes.*

To Treblinka

*And Czerniakow killed himself July 23.*

Yes, that is the next day. So that was it: he'd realized that his idea – it was his idea, I think – of working in good faith with the Germans, in the Jew's best interests – he'd realized this idea, this dream, was destroyed.

*That the idea was a dream.*

Yes. And when the dream faded, he took the logical way out.

## **Interviewer (Italics) and Raul Hilberg**

*The last entry takes place how long before his suicide?*

The last entry precedes his death by a few hours.

*What does he write?*

“It is three o’clock. So far four thousand are ready to go. The orders are that there must be nine thousand by four o’clock.” This is the last entry of a man on the afternoon of the day he commits suicide.

*The first transport of the Jews of Warsaw for Treblinka was the twenty-second of July, 1942 and he committed suicide the day after.*

That’s right. In other words, on the twenty-second, he is called in by the Sturmbahnführer Höfle, who is in charge of the resettlement staff, who has come in there for the express purpose of taking Jews out of Warsaw. Höfle calls him in at ten o’clock, disconnects the telephones, children are removed from the playground opposite the community building and then he is told that all Jews irrespective of sex and age, with certain exceptions, will be deported to the east. And that by 4 P.M. today a contingent of six thousand people must be provided. And this at the minimum will be the daily quota. He keeps appealing. He wants certain exemptions. He wants the council staff to be exempt. He wants the staff of the welfare organizations to be exempt, and he is terribly worried that the orphans will be deported, and repeatedly brings up orphans. And, on the next day still doesn’t have assurance that the orphans are going to be saved. Now if he cannot be the caretaker of the orphans, then he has lost his war, he has lost his struggle.

*Why the orphans?*

They are the most helpless element in the community. They are the little children, its future, who have lost their parents. They cannot possibly do anything on their own. If he cannot take care of the children, what else can he do?

Some people report that he wrote a note after he closed the book on the diary in which he said: “They want me to kill the children with my own hands.”

## **Interviewer (Italics) and Dr. Franz Grassler**

*Did you think the idea of a ghetto was a good one? A sort of self-management?*

That’s right.

*A mini-state?*

It worked well.

*But it was self-management for death, wasn't it?*

We know that now. But at the time...

*Even then!*

No!

*Czerniakow wrote: "We're puppets, we have no power."*

Yes

*"No power"*

Sure...that was...

*You Germans are the overlords.*

Yes

*Czerniakow was only a tool.*

Yes, but a good tool. Jewish self-management worked well; I can tell you.

*It worked well for three years: 1941, 1942, 1943...two and a half years. And in the end...*

In the end.

*"Worked well" for what? To what end?*

For self-preservation.

*No! For death!*

Yes, but...

*Self-management, self-preservation...for death!*

That's easy to say now

*You admitted the conditions were inhuman. Atrocious...horrible!*

Yes

*So, it was clear even then...*

No! Extermination wasn't clear. Now we see the result.

*Extermination isn't so simple. One step was taken, then another, then another, and another and another...*

Yes

*But to understand the process, one must...*

I repeat, exterminations did not take place in the ghetto, not at first. Only with evacuations.

*Evacuations?*

The evacuations to Treblinka. The ghetto could have been wiped out with weapons, as finally was done after the rebellion. After I'd left. But at the start...this is getting us nowhere. We're reaching no new conclusions.

*I don't think we can.*

I didn't know then what I know now.

*You weren't a nonentity.*

But I was!

*You were important.*

You overestimate my role.

*No, you were second to the commissioner of the Warsaw "Jewish district."*

But I had no power.

*You were part of the vast German power structure.*

Correct. But a small part. You overestimate the authority of a deputy of twenty-eight then.

*You were thirty.*

Twenty-eight

*At thirty you were mature.*

Yes, but for a lawyer who got his degree at twenty-seven, it's just a beginning.

*You had a doctorate.*

The title proves nothing.

*Doctor of Law...What did you do after the war?*

I was with a mountaineering publishing house. I wrote and published mountain guide books. I published a mountain climbers' magazine.

*Is climbing your main interest?*

Yes.

*The mountains, the air...*

Yes

*The sun, the pure air...*

Not like the ghetto air.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Itzhak Zuckermann (Antek)**

I began drinking after the war. It was very difficult. You asked for my impression. If you could lick my heart, it would poison you.

*Antek, at the request of Mordechai Anielwicz, commander-in-chief of the Jewish Combat Organization, you left the ghetto six days before the German attack. Your mission: to ask Polish Resistance*

*Leaders to arm the Jews. They refused.*

In fact, I left the ghetto six days before the uprising. I wanted to return on the nineteenth, the eve of Passover. I wrote to Mordechai Anielwicz and to Zivia. Zivia was my wife. I got back a very polite letter, very formal, from Anielwicz, and a very aggressive letter from Zivia that said: "You haven't done a thing so far. Nothing." I decided to go back anyway. I had no idea what was going on in the ghetto. I couldn't imagine it. But Simcha's companions knew of the German encirclement before I did.

### **Interviewer (Italics) and Simha Rottem (Kajik)**

At Passover time we felt something was going to happen in the ghetto. I, Kajik, we, could feel the pressure. On Passover eve the Germans attacked. Not just the Germans, but the Ukrainians too, along with the Lithuanians, the Polish police, and the Latvians, and this massive force entered the ghetto. We felt this was the end. On the morning the Germans went into the ghetto, the attack was concentrated on the central ghetto. We were a little away from it; we heard blasts, shots, the echo of the gunfire, and we knew the fighting was fierce in the central ghetto.

During the first three days of fighting, the Jews had the upper hand. The Germans retreated at once to the ghetto entrance, carrying dozens of wounded with them. From then on, their onslaught came entirely from the outside, through air attack and artillery. We couldn't resist the bombing, especially their method of setting fire to the ghetto. The whole ghetto was ablaze. All life vanished from the streets and houses. We hid in the cellars and bunkers. From there we made our sorties. We went out at night. The Germans were in the ghetto mostly by day, leaving at night. They were afraid to enter the ghetto at night.

The bunkers were prepared by the residents, not by the fighters. When we could no longer stay in the streets, we fell back on the bunkers. All the bunkers were alike inside. The most striking thing was the crowding, for there were a lot of us, and the heat. It was so hot you couldn't breathe. Not even a candle could burn in those bunkers. To breathe in that intense

heat, you sometimes had to lie with your face to the ground. The fact that we fighters hadn't prepared bunkers proves we didn't expect to survive our fight against the Germans.

I don't think the human tongue can describe the horror we went through in the ghetto. In the streets, if you can call them that, for nothing was left of the streets, we had to step over heaps of corpses. There was no room to get around them. Besides fighting the Germans, we were fighting hunger and thirst. We had no contact with the outside world, we were isolated. We thought of attempting a breakout to the Aryan part of Warsaw, outside the ghetto.

Just before May 1 Sigmund and I were sent to try to contact Antek in Aryan Warsaw. We found a tunnel that led out into Aryan Warsaw. Imagine us on that sunny May 1, stunned to find ourselves in the street, among normal people. We had come from another planet. In Aryan Warsaw life went on as naturally and normally as before.

Our job was to contact Itzhak Zuckermann to try to mount a rescue operation, to try and save the few fighters who might still be alive in the ghetto. We managed to contact Zuckermann. We found two sewer workers. On the night of May 8-9, we decided to return to the ghetto with another buddy, Rijek, and the two sewer men. After the curfew we were entirely at the mercy of the two workmen, since only they knew the ghetto's underground layout. Half way there they decided to turn back, they tried to drop us and we had to threaten them with our guns. We went on until one of the workmen told us we were under the ghetto. Rijek guarded them so they couldn't escape. I raised the manhole cover to go up into the ghetto.

At bunker Mila 18, headquarters of the Jewish Combat Organization I missed them by a day. I had returned the night of May 8-9. The Germans found the bunker on the morning of the eighth. Most of its survivors committed suicide, or succumbed to gas in the bunker. I went to bunker Francziskanska 22. There was no answer when I yelled the password, so I had to go through the ghetto. I suddenly heard a woman calling from the ruins. It was darkest night, no lights, you saw nothing. All the houses were in ruins, and I heard only one voice. I thought some evil spell had been cast on me, a woman's voice talking from the rubble. I circled the ruins. I didn't look at my watch, but I must have spent a half hour exploring, trying to find the woman whose voice guided me, but unfortunately, I didn't find her.

#### *Were there fires?*

Strictly speaking, no, for the flames had died down, but there was still smoke, and that awful smell of charred flesh of people who had surely been burned alive. I continued on my way, going to other bunkers in search of fighting units, but it was the same everywhere. I'd give the password: "Jan." (Yan).

*That's a Polish first name, Jan?*

Right. And I got no answer. I went from bunker to bunker, and after walking for hours in the ghetto, I went back toward the sewers.

*Were you alone then?*

Yes, I was alone all the time. Except for that woman's voice, and a man I met as I came out of the sewers, I was alone throughout my tour of the ghetto. I didn't meet a living soul. At one point I recall feeling a kind of peace, of serenity. I said to myself: "I'm the last Jew. I'll wait for morning, and for the Germans."