

Holocaust Studies and Materials
Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały

VOL. 10 (2014)

ISSN: 1895-247X
eISSN: 2657-3571
DOI: 10.32927
WWW: www.zagladazydow.pl

Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów IFiS PAN
Polish Center for Holocaust Research

"Once a Young Boy Attacked Us and Shot, But We Didn't Flee." Murders committed by AK and BCh members on Jews from the village of Strzegom

„Raz napadł na nas młody chłopak i strzelał, myśmy już nie uciekali". Morderstwa popełniane przez członków AK i BCh na Żydach ze wsi Strzegom

Anna Bikont

redakcja@holocaustresearch.pl

DOI: https://doi.org/10.32927/ZZSiM.531
Strony/Pages: 428-442

CC BY

OPEN ACCESS

From research workshops

Anna Bikont

"A young boy attacked us once and started shooting; we didn't even run any more." Murders committed on Jews from the village of Strzegom by AK and BCh members

1

When I was reading testimonies collected after the war by the Jewish Historical Committee in Kraków,[1] one of them made a particularly strong impression on me. Dora Zoberman, who was then an eleven-year-old girl from a children's home in Kraków and a third-grade primary school student, talks calmly and accurately, without showing any emotions, about the nightmare she barely survived. While reading her short testimony (five typewritten pages), one can imagine what kind of girl she was: alert, intelligent and exceptionally brave, like a cartoon hero in a lonely fight against the great forces of evil. What is actually unimaginable, however, is how a child could survive something like that.

This is how Dora described her first winter, of 1942–1943, spent in hiding in a forest bunker; she was seven years old at that time, "It started snowing early that winter. We had nothing to eat, and I and a boy who was a bit older than me and whose name was Zelek set out to the village to some peasants we knew. They were afraid to let us in but gave us two bags of food. The evening had already begun, and heavy snow fell. We walked several metres, and Zelek couldn't go any further. He sat down in the snow and said that, come what may, he wouldn't go. I humped the other bag on my back, took Zelek by the arm and dragged him across the forest. We reached its edge, it had already gone completely dark, and Zelek announced that he wouldn't go any further. We sat at the bags and fell asleep. We woke up in the morning, ankle-deep snow around us, what should we do? Zelek was barely dragging his feet. I had to carry the two bags and hold him by the hand. I couldn't hold a twig in the other hand so that I could cover up

[1] I wish to thank Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, who gave me the testimonies related to the Sandomierz region that she had managed to gather. This is where I found Dora Zoberman's testimony. The original documents are kept in the Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute (*Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, AŻIH).

our tracks, so I was zigzagging and coming back to the same spot several times. I walked a long way away from our dugout to cover up the tracks. We finally arrived at the place. Mum was in despair because she was sure she would never see me again."[2]

Dora described the first assault of the locals – it took place in the summer of 1943.[3] "They suddenly rushed into the dugout. They ordered everyone to leave and stand in a line and after that told the children to enter the shelter and the adults to stay. We went to the shelter and burst into tears because we didn't know what we would do without the adults. The bandits demanded valuables, and Mummy gave them earrings and gold. Since then on, we had no peace – they used to come every few days. In the end, we had run out of money and had nothing to buy food with. It continued like that for a longer time. I remember that once we did not eat for four days. Children were hungry, but no one said a word, and children bore their hunger just as the adults did. But I had already had enough of starving and decided to go to the village, to my friends. I was asking my sister to go with me, she was afraid, but I had a strong will and decided to go alone. I went to a girl whom I knew and with whom I used to play sometimes when I was still free. She was happy to see me, gave me a kind welcome and something to eat, and in the meantime her mother prepared a small bag with food for me. Suddenly, a peasant who was hunting down Jews entered, and I paled with fear. My friend reassured me, I quickly controlled myself, she took out her toys and a doll, and we were playing as if nothing had happened, and I didn't show my emotions at all. But God only knew how afraid I was. The man finally left, and I quickly set off. I was crossing the fields, the rye was growing tall, I was thinking that the world was so beautiful and I was trapped like an animal. I reached the dugout safely."

Following little Dora's account, I tried to learn as much as possible about what happened to her family and the Jews that were hiding with her. I found a complaint filed by her father Fischel Zoberman with the authorities in 1949.[4] I read the records of a case heard in court in 1950 during which the murderers

[2] AŻIH, 301/3743, Dora Soberman, testimony collected by Róża Bauminger. No date, most probably 1947. In the article, I standardised the spelling of surnames, and – as regards the Zobermans, whose name was spelt once with S and at other times with Z – I consistently use Z, which is how Dora is called today.

[3] Her father Fischel (his name is spelt this way in the documents on the investigation, but he signs himself "Fisiel") Zoberman talked about the first attack on the bunker in detail and provided a date: summer 1943. The robbers were wearing masks and false moustache and beards, so no one could recognise them. One person died and two were injured (Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej Delegatura w Radomiu [Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance, Office in Radom, later: AIPN Ra], 29/115, Records of the criminal case of Edward Brzyszcz, vol. 1, Report from interrogation of Fischel Zoberman of 9 May 1950, p. 20).

[4] AIPN, 0418/1036, Investigation case, Complaint by Fischel Zoberman of 13 June 1949, p. 22.

were tried on the basis of the August Decree of 1944, as well as documents from the next searches.[5] Most of the Jews died at the hands of local members of the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK) and the Peasants' Battalions (*Bataliony Chłopskie,* BCh), and five were killed when a gamekeeper informed on them to the Germans. Only eight out of more than thirty survived. One adult and seven children. I talked to three of them. Dora Zoberman lives in Paris and Pola Milstein near Tel Aviv, and the late Joe (formerly Jerzyk) Betel lived in Toronto. I went to Strzegom to check what remained in the memory of its inhabitants.

Before the war, Dora's family lived and had a field and an orchard in this small village in the Sandomierz region. Except for them, there were three families of Jewish farmers and a tailor's family in the village. The Germans ordered the local Jews to move to the closest town, Połaniec. They were deported from the ghetto in Połaniec further to the ghetto in Staszów in October 1942 and then to Treblinka. Just before the first deportation, Fischel Zoberman, Dora's father, hid his whole family – mother, wife and four children – in a bunker he had prepared himself in a forest that adjoined his field. Dora remembers that when they were already in the ghetto in Połaniec, her father would slip out to Strzegom to build the shelter.

Stretching along the forest edge, Strzegom is a village situated far away from the world and people. I thought about my visits to Jedwabne and Radziłów. The flat Mazovian landscape of an open space with a few clumps of trees scattered here and there made me realise how faint the hope that one could hide somewhere there must have been. Surrounded by kilometres of forests, Strzegom – on the other hand – could be an ideal shelter. The Germans rarely ventured into the region. Most of those in hiding came from the place and attended the same school as the Poles.[6] They managed to prepare themselves and sell a part of their assets. When in hiding, they made baskets using young roots and sold them to trusted people.[7] They would probably have enough of them to pay for the food and emergency aid until the end of the war.

Fischel Zoberman ensured himself the best protection. He gave his field and farm to Jan Pisula, whom he had known well from before the war, in exchange for a part of the crop from the field. Pisula adhered to the agreement. He built a double partition wall in his barn and left the food there. One could enter the

[5] Ibidem; AIPN Ra, 29/115, 29/116, part 1 and 2, 29/117, Records of the criminal case of Edward Brzyszcz charged under Art. 1(1) of the Decree of 31 August 1944.

[6] "Before the war, it was very good with the Poles, far away from them but without problems. I went to school with them. It was from time to time only that we heard 'You lousy Jewess', 'You dirty Jewess'," I heard from Pola Milstein, Dora's cousin, who was in hiding with them. Pola remembers that her family could count on the help of Aniela Kwiecień, her mother's school friend from Strzegom (interview in Ra'anana, Israel, November 2013).

[7] "We were all occupied with weaving them; we gave them to the peasants, and they would give us food in return," said Joe Betel (interview by Felice Carmelly for the USC Shoah Foundation, Toronto, 9 June 1995).

barn from the side of the forest, and it sometimes happened that one of the children slept upstairs on the straw in winter.

When the Zobermans escaped the Połaniec ghetto, there were already several families they knew living in the bunker. Dora wrote, "Daddy made us a very comfortable shelter. He prepared plank beds and put a stove inside. My youngest brother died the day after we had come to the forest. He went to bed as always, there was nothing wrong with him, and when we woke up in the morning, the child was already dead. Mummy was crying a lot, but she later said that it was better for him to die like that than be killed by the Germans. All peasants in the area knew there were Jews in the forest. Daddy used to bribe the peasants every possible way. He gave the gamekeeper a silver cigarette case and many things."

It is unknown how many people the dugout was planned to house but certainly not five families with children, that is more than thirty people. Joe Betel remembered that the bunker was around five metres long and six metres wide, and when his family reached it, they were accepted with reluctance and only after they had paid some sum of money to Zoberman.[8]

2

Dora describes the second winter spent in hiding, the one of 1943–1944, "We were still being attacked by bandits, and Daddy was worried that we shouldn't stay in the dugout because if we were surrounded, they would shoot everyone. No one would survive. We were sleeping under an open sky the whole winter. Daddy used to make a huge bonfire, and when the wood was slowly burning away, he would take the still hot ashes and we would use them as a bed, covering ourselves with daddy's jacket. Everyone was lousy, but no parents kept their children as clean as our daddy did. There was a never-ending number of lice on some children who were sitting by the fire all day long. Our daddy didn't let us sit idly, we were on the move all the time, helping to cut branches and working; we really toughened up so much that I'm still very resilient today."

"One day, bandits surrounded the forest. All of us dispersed, everyone running in the opposite direction. Several Jews died then," she continues. "Because of hunger and exhaustion almost everyone went night-blind, except for me. I was in the best condition; I have no idea where I got all that strength from. They used to send me for provisions, and everyone in the village knew me. Poles used to give me food, but they were afraid to keep me at their place. We would sleep in a different place every night. I was the only one who didn't suffer from night blindness and every night led our people to a safe place."

"There is not that much to talk about," Dora, a lovely, petite and elegant lady, explained impatiently, when – in the end – she reluctantly agreed to our conversation. "It was the same all the time: fear, hunger, fear, someone died,

[8] Ibidem, and my telephone interview with Joe Betel, November 2013.

someone did not return. Nothing changed, there were only fewer and fewer people and less and less hope."[9]

She was extremely surprised that her post-war testimony existed; she did not remember presenting it. After reading it, she said, "What I told them then looks as if our hiding was some kind of fun. I was completely unable to convey my suffering."

I tried to convince Dora that her testimony was moving, but it only made her angry. Perhaps it is she that was right and each testimony from the Holocaust is only a shadow, a sign of that, which happened but cannot be described.

I asked her about her everyday life in hiding and about her relationships with other children.

From the testimony of eleven-year-old Dora: "A mother with an eight-year-old girl was hiding with us. The girl fell ill, suffered for a week and died. We buried her in the forest. I often visited her grave." I asked what the girl's name was and if they were friends. "There was nothing like friendship, no playing with other children," she said. "But I guess there was such a girl. Her name was Hania. She was ill. When someone was ill, we would make a bonfire and lay them as close to the fire as possible. And she was lying like that, and her mother was sitting next to her. Someone said that she died, and she stood up, looked at us all and only then lay down and really died."

Everything I managed to learn from Dora was only snatches of events.

"I loved my grandmother, she was my support. She once left the hideout, they caught her and beat her so brutally that she died soon afterwards."

"I cannot specify how many assaults there were, but there were many. Fewer in summer, perhaps because it was harvest time. I remember one such an assault. It was after the rain, the rags we used as clothes were drying hung on branches. They were shooting at the rags from the distance, and that saved us."

"Before each assault, when they were approaching, birds would fly away, so we already knew we must run. To this day my sister cannot stand the caws of crows flying away."

"We were not allowed to talk. There was supposed to be complete silence. I had a toothache and got a spanking from my father because I was crying."

"I did not realise that it could end one day, that there could be some other life. No one had ever told me that."

3

"We had no shoes anymore and walked in the snow barefoot," described Dora in her post-war testimony. "Blood was flowing from our feet and marked traces on the snow, so we dragged branches along to cover up the tracks. There was almost no day without an assault, and only a handful of us remained. We

[9] Interview with Dora Zoberman, Paris, January 2014.

didn't want to live any more. A young boy attacked us once and started shooting, and we didn't even run any more, we didn't care, wishing that our agony would finally end, but he missed."

It was becoming increasingly dramatic with food.

"The best time for stealing was Christmas," Pola Milstein told me. "I once went with my mum to a barn and drank milk straight from a cow's udder. We stole potatoes from the field and hid them in a hole we'd prepared earlier. When snow fell, Poles came following our barefoot traces and poured carbolic acid to the hole. We had nothing left to feed on during the winter. After the war, the military were leading German captives, and I was buying bread rolls for them. I was full of remorse for doing that, but I could see myself in them."[10]

The Zobermans could count on the Pisulas, but visiting them was becoming more and more dangerous: the partisans knew that he was ploughing the Jewish fields, so they suspected him of being in touch with those in hiding. They did not do anything to him (as a matter of fact, Jan Pisula was an AK member too) but showed him several times that they were keeping an eye on him: they brought the Jews they had captured to his property and killed them there or planted their dead bodies somewhere else for him to find.[11]

"Several strong men wanted to go with Daddy to the merchants in the village for potatoes," wrote Dora after the war. "Mum had misgivings about it and begged them not to go. She didn't manage to stop those men but strictly forbade Daddy to go. The following day, we learnt that they were shot by Polish bandits."

The "Polish bandits" mentioned by Dora are Edward Brzyszcz, Wacław Brzyszcz, Daniel Stawiarz and Władysław Janowski, and their pseudonyms are: 'Czajka', 'Świerk', 'Sęk', and 'Rączka'.[12] The murdered ones were fathers of three

[10] Interview with Pola Milstein, Ra'anana, November 2013.

[11] "In 1943 – it was before Christmas – Ms Siajna, the daughter of Eschel Kochman [Kaufman], was killed in my field [...]. In the spring of 1944, children were killed in my field, the children of Mr Moszek" (AIPN Ra, 29/115, Interrogation of Jan Pisula, 21 October 1949, p. 149); interview with Klara Pisula, Jan Pisula's daughter, August 2013.

[12] Some of the murderers mentioned here and further in the text belonged to AK and some first to AK and then to BCh. Their names do not appear in numerous publications about the activities of AK and BCh undertaken in the region. Before the trial, the following statement signed by several dozen inhabitants was filed with the court: "We, the soldiers of the Underground Army of the Peasants' Battalions, outpost in Strzegom, Osiek municipality, Sandomierz district, speak in defence of our innocent brothers in arms." And they mention: "Janowski Władysław, deputy commandant of the BCh Outpost, Brzyszcz Edward, Brzyszcz Wacław, Tałaj Stefan, Konat Władysław, Bąk Stefan" (AIPN RA, 29/116, part 2, Statement addressed to the court, 25 June 1950, pp. 44–46). However, on the basis of the defendants' statements, the bill of indictment states that Edward Brzyszcz, Wacław Brzyszcz, Władysław Janowski, Daniel Stawiarz and Antoni Wrona were members of the Armed Combat Union (*Związek Walki Zbrojnej*, ZWZ) since 1942 and then members of AK. When BCh were established, only Władysław Janowski and Antoni Wrona joined the organisation (see AIPN, 0418/1036, Statement of reasons for indictment, 10 July 1950, p. 27). A split is known to have

families that were in hiding together with the Zobermans: Mosze Kaufman, Wolf Kaufman and Pinchas Betel. They died when they went to their acquaintance from Strzegom, Jan Pawełek, to buy food. He ran a shop and lived with his wife in a room at its back.

In 1950, Jan Pawełek testified that four inhabitants of Strzegom came to him at night and announced that they would wait for the Jews. "Then they turned off the light and waited at my place for the Jews to come. Around 1 am, three Jews came to my flat. Edward Brzyszcz immediately blocked the door, they turned on the light, tied the Jews' hands with string, tied all of them to themselves and got out."[13] They took them outside of the village and shot them. Later Władysław Janowski boasted that they took "three kikes" from Pawełek at night and that each "bumped off their own one".[14]

The murder was committed in January–February 1944.

When I read testimonies, journals and memoirs from the Holocaust, I always encounter emptiness, black holes: someone was there and then disappeared but where, when and how? But there is something different that strikes me in Dora's stories. Each of them is confirmed and complemented by documents from the post-war trial of the murderers.[15] As if the writing of each one of her stories was finished by a different person. And no random events. The same pattern is repeated every time: local peasants, partisans from the Home Army or Peasants' Battalions, hunting for the Jews.

I found it most difficult to determine the chronology of events: their sequence varies in the stories of Dora and her father, and each post-war testifier said something different. Josek Kaufman's children died, most probably earlier, in the autumn of 1943. Zoberman testified that they went to get some sleep in a haystack, which is where they were found by Franciszek Brzyszcz, Wiesław Brzyszcz, Stefan Sikora and Franciszek Kazimierski, who took them with themselves and shot them.[16] Icek Zekler, Zoberman's nephew from Kraków, was

---

occurred during one of the meetings of the AK outpost in Strzegom in 1943, and those who moved to BCh kept their pseudonyms. The Germans rarely visited Strzegom, located a long way from the world and people, which is best proven by the meeting attended by several dozen men and held in the school building (AIPN Ra, 29/115, Interrogation of Władysław Janowski, 11 April 1950, p. 117).

[13] AIPN Ra, 29/115, Report from confrontation between Jan Pawełek and Władysław Janowski of 13 April 1950, p. 123.

[14] Ibidem, Report from interrogation of Stefan Bąk of 13 April 1950, p. 135.

[15] Fischel Zoberman filed his complaint on 15 May 1949 (ibidem, p. 16). Following the complaint, an investigation and criminal proceedings were initiated against Edward Brzyszcz, Wacław Brzyszcz, Władysław Janowski, Daniel Stawiarz, and Antoni Wrona on 7 September 1949 (ibidem, p. 15). The first-instance hearing took place on 23 and 24 November as well as 20 December 1950 before the Court of Appeals in Kielce during an off-site session in Sandomierz (AIPN Ra, 29/116, part 1, pp. 117–212).

[16] AIPN Ra, 29/115, Report from interrogation of Fischel Zoberman of 9 May 1950, p. 21. During the interrogation and the trial, Zoberman talked about the next murders. He said he

probably killed by the locals at that time too. When all of them were forced to leave the dugout, he found shelter in the countryside, at the place of Agnieszka Macias, a single farmer living with her daughter. She testified as follows, "Four men came to me and asked me who the man was. I said he was a friend. When they checked and saw he was of Jewish nationality, they started beating me with rubber and then started beating my daughter. They took him out, barefoot and in drawers, and soon afterwards the second individual took his belongings."[17] She

had seen them, hidden at the edge of the forest. It is far more likely that he had heard about them from his Polish acquaintances. Similarly, Szmul Wasersztajn, whose testimony started the trial of the murderers from Jedwabne, said that he had seen everything with his own eyes, when in fact he learnt the details of the crime from Polish eyewitnesses.

[17] Ibidem, Report from interrogation of Agnieszka Macias of 4 August 1950, p. 16.

In my text, I focused only on murders committed on a group of Jews who were in hiding with Dora Zoberman. They were not the only murders of Jews carried out in that place and time by those people. According to Zoberman, the same gang who persecuted them "brought nine Jews (men and women), their hands tied up with wire, and, having tortured them, shot them" (ibidem, Complaint of 15 May 1949, p. 20). They murdered the Kolektors, a family of four: "Before they were murdered, those people had their hands tied up with telephone cord because bones in their arms were tied" (ibidem, Report from inspection of the scene of crime, Strzegom, 5 July 1959, p. 94). A seventeen-year-old Rywka Fajnkuhen was also killed. She was hidden – and raped – by her neighbour Daniel Stawiarz, one of the accused in the trial. "In the spring of 1943, brothers Stawiarz Witalis, and Stawiarz Daniel, sons of Michał, both residing in Bukowa at that time, killed a young woman aged around 17, who was pregnant with Stawiarz Daniel. At that time, Obarzanek Antoni, residing in Wiązownica-Kolonia, was going to Bukowa and met Helena, daughter of Bryła Stanisław, who was crying on her way back from the house of the Stawiarz family. He asked her why she was crying and she said that it was about that killed Jewess. When Obarzanek was returning from Bukowa, he went into Stawiarz's backyard and saw the woman killed and covered with sticks. Her name was Rywka Fajnkuhen, daughter of Dawid […]. After they had taken the murdered Jewess to the forest, the Stawiarz brothers dug a small pit only because the soil was frozen, and when the body could not fit, they broke her arms and legs and only then buried her" (AIPN, 0418/1036, Report to the head of the investigation department in Kielce from the commandant of the Security Office (*Urząd Bezpieczeństwa*, UB) in Staszów of 3 November 1961, pp. 31–32). According to one of the witnesses, the murderer's sister Marianna Stawiarz told him, "I heard myself how the Jewess complained that Daniel tortured her terribly during intercourse (AIPN Ra, 29/115, Report from witness interview of Stanisław Bryła of 13 May 1950, p. 187); "That's what people were saying: that Stawiarz made her his lover, with whom he lived, and that she was supposed to be pregnant" (ibidem, Report from witness interview of Antoni Obaszczek of 13 May 1950, p. 109). The Stawiarz brothers' second sister, Sabina, testified, "Rywka Fajnkuhen was our neighbour since childhood; she lived next to us" (ibidem, Interrogation of Sabina Stawiarz of 2 July 1950, p. 202). When I talked to the inhabitants of Strzegom, I heard about one more crime, "They kept clothes at our place and came every time they wanted to change. It was almost liberation, and Siaja had such a nice jacket, which he took from Mum. And Mum said, 'Siaja, don't take it, you'll get yourself killed for that jacket.' because there was such poverty here. And they killed him." (Interview held in August 2013).

did not want to specify who those people were and said she had not recognised them. Fischel Zoberman claimed that after the war he had recognised Icek's sweater worn by Stefan Sikora.[18]

In 1944, when it became apparent that the Germans would soon lose the war and that survival was drawing nearer, hunting for the Jews by the locals intensified.

"Aunt Bajla, Daddy's sister, went to the village and never came back," said Dora. Due to testimonies of witnesses and the accused, one can reconstruct the exact course of events. When in February 1944 Bajla Milsztajn and Sara Kaufman were entering a cellar from which they were supposed to take potatoes, they were noticed by Wacław Brzyszcz, who was patrolling the village in search of the Jews. He went for help to the local shop, "from which he took Stefan Kwiatkowski and Stefan Wojtycha by force"[19] ordering them to go with him for a Jewess (despite the fact that Brzyszcz threatened to beat him, the latter quickly escaped). Even though it must have been dark and freezing, the hard core of local murderers – Stefan Bąk, Edward Brzyszcz, Władysław Stawiarz, and Stefan Tałaj – gathered at the place immediately (all of them from AK or BCh).

Thus, a group of six men formed. They entered one of the houses and took out Balja Milsztajn. Sara Kaufman managed to hide in a barrel. The murderers later claimed that they received an organisational order from Wacław Brzyszcz to "take the captured Polish citizen of Jewish nationality, Balja Milsztajn, behind an alder grove near the village of Strzegom and shoot her there."[20] Another partisan, Władysław Konat, joined them along the way.

Bajla Milsztajn tried to escape ("Heading towards the forest on their way to the village, when they were already around 500 metres away from the village, the Jewess started struggling with Stefan Bąk. He let go of her, and she fell on the snow"[21]) and then begged to spare her life ("The Jewess did not want to walk and called Stefan Kwiatkowski by his first name to let her go"[22]). After the first shot, already hurt, she tried to escape once again, but they fired a second and a third time.

"Afterwards we drank a bit of vodka and went home," added Wacław Brzyszcz.[23]

Witness Jan Sojka testified, "We found that Jewess lying in the snow, and we could see that the bullet entered her head on the one side and left on the other.

[18] AIPN Ra, 29/116, part 1, Report from the first-instance hearing of 23 November 1950 before the Court of Appeals in Kielce during an off-site session in Sandomierz, p. 120.

[19] AIPN Ra, 29/115, Bill of indictment against Edward Brzyszcz, Wacław Brzyszcz, Władysław Janowski, Daniel Stawiarz, Antoni Wrona of 10 July 1950, p. 263.

[20] Ibidem.

[21] Ibidem.

[22] AIPN Ra, 29/115, Report from interrogation of Wacław Brzyszcz of 1 July 1950, p. 80.

[23] Ibidem, Confrontation between Stefan Tałaj and Wacław Brzyszcz of 5 May 1950, p. 60.

Apart from that, she held two slices of bread and a bit of barley, and she was dressed."[24]

"They were aiming at her face because a half of the right side of her face was torn out, and I noticed that she was poorly dressed and terribly emaciated," said witness Leon Adamczyk, who – together with Sojka – buried the murdered woman.[25]

They must have buried her near the surface – it was February and the ground was frozen – because her body was found by her family. Pola Milstein, the daughter of the killed woman, told me, "Mum used to tell us, 'You can eat snow, and God is old and deaf and can't hear you.' Mum's brother set off to look for her and found her. We were digging the soil with our hands, my brother put branches on top, but when we came back two days later, there was nothing. My mum was eaten by foxes."[26]

Soon afterwards two children died: Zelek, the boy carried piggyback by Dora the winter before, and his older sister Pela. "Zelek went to the village with his twelve-year-old sister. We were waiting an hour, two, and there was still no sign of them. They didn't come back the following day either. We later learnt that some bandit shot them at the edge of the forest," described Dora in her testimony.

We know exactly what happened to Zelek and Pela.

Witness Leon Reczko testified, "Two children of Jewish nationality came to my house. I felt sorry for them. I told them to play with my children and wanted to put them up for the night because they were poor; there was a girl of around seven and a boy of around six.[27] Władysław Janowski came to my house after a while, asked what those kikes were doing at my place and shouted at them to go outside, so the two children left, and Władysław Janowski followed them, and the following morning I learnt that the children were shot in Jan Pisula's field. I could not oppose Władysław Janowski as I was afraid of him because he was a member of AK."[28]

---

[24] Ibidem, Report from interrogation of Jan Sojka of 5 July 1950, p. 98. What is interesting about the testimony is that the witness mentions that she was dressed. He must have heard that Jews were often ordered to undress before their death so that one could take their clothes undamaged. This was the case with another Jewish family, the Kolektors, who were murdered in Strzegom. Waleria Jonca, who helped to bury them, remembered that "those people were lying facing the ground; they were completely undressed" (ibidem, Testimony of Waleria Jonca of 5 July 1950, p. 92).

[25] Ibidem, Report from interrogation of Leon Adamczyk of 5 May 1950, p. 100.

[26] Interview with Pola Milstein, Ra'anana, November 2013.

[27] Dora claims that Zelek was a bit older than she was, which means that he was more than eight years old, and his sister was twelve. According to Leon Reczko, he was visited by a six-year-old boy and a seven-year-old girl. This is how they must have looked. As described by Dora, they were starving.

[28] AIPN Ra, 29/115, Report from interrogation of Leon Reczko of 8 February 1950, p. 149.

"He [Władysław Janowski] came to me, called me and asked me to give him the rifle without specifying the reason. I gave him the rifle I had from AK, and he told me to go with him. I followed him," testified Stefan Bąk. "When we walked around 200 metres away from the village, he told the children to stand opposite each other, but they were wriggling about, so he laid one of them on the ground and the second one on the first child and shot at the heads of both of them and as a result both were killed."[29]

Witness Czesław Gawłowicz said, "I was driving to the forest and noticed two children of Jewish nationality. They were shot in their heads, with their brains outside, it was a boy and a girl."[30]

Soon afterwards their mother, Sara Kaufman, died too. She was the woman whose husband Mosze was one of those killed at Pawełek's place and who hid in the barrel and thus saved her life. "We were waiting an hour, two, and there was still no sign of them. They didn't come back the following day either," described Dora. "We later learnt that some bandit shot them."

Dora continued, "The forester once set the Germans on a different group of Jews who hid on that side of the river. Almost everyone from the group was shot, except for a thirteen-year-old boy, Jerzyk. There was a small boy running away with him who would have saved himself but shouted 'Mummy' and this betrayed him."

That different group of Jews must have been the Betel family, who separated from the rest after they left the bunker. Joe Betel said, "It was raining for two weeks, we had no shelter, and finally a pleasant and sunny day began. We hung out our clothes to dry. The gamekeeper whose name I cannot remember came. He knew everyone. He said that we were safe there, spent 10–15 minutes in a friendly atmosphere with us and left. Why did he come? He had already had German gendarmes at his place and wanted to make sure where we were; we heard shots and people crying from one direction, I was running and running to the opposite direction; when the shots faded, I sat down and kept sitting like that for around an hour, and my father came, we were waiting until it grew dark so that we could return, but why return?" his crying can be heard on the recording. "I saw my mum and sister, they were dead, and I saw other dead people. I still think about the fact that we didn't bury them, we were afraid."[31]

Only Jerzyk survived out of the Betel family: father, mother and three children. "If it had not been for the Poles, many would have survived. We did not need

[29] Ibidem, Report from interrogation of Stefan Bąk of 13 April 1950, p. 135.

[30] Ibidem, Report from interrogation of Czesław Gawłowicz of 14 February 1950, p. 147. A site inspection was conducted, and one can see two skulls in the photograph, one of them split, some small bones next to them and the following caption: "After digging out the bodies of two young children of Jewish nationality in the forest near the village of Strzegom, Osiek municipality, Sandomierz district" (ibidem, Report from inspection of the scene of crime of 28 May 1950, p. 160).

[31] Interview with Joe Betel for the USC Shoah Foundation, Toronto, 9 June 1995.

them to help us, only to not kill us," he said.[32] Pola Milstein remembered the name of the young gamekeeper who turned them in: Marian Durmo. Joe Betel confirmed to me that this was the name he could not recall.

4

There were only two weeks left to the end of the war when Dora's mother and her younger sister died.

"It was Sunday, 25 April 1944. A large group of peasants appeared in the morning in the forest. We were surprised to see them there so early, after all they wouldn't come to the forest for wood on Sunday," said Dora in her testimony. "We darted away; Mummy didn't notice that my sister was asleep and was running away with us. The peasants were shooting at us, and when they shot for the fourth time, my sister woke up and called my mum, and Mummy went back for her, and they were both shot. On the next day, Daddy found Mummy's body, looked into her mouth and saw that they had pulled her gold teeth out and broken her two fingers from which they had taken the rings off."

"Our group was attacked by several armed men in the morning," testified Fischel Zoberman. "Leon Cieniek and Eugeniusz Dzieciuch were running behind me, so I recognised them well. Then my wife was shot, whose teeth with gold crowns were pulled out, and two children were shot too. I cannot specify, which one of the mentioned men shot them because I ran away and did not see it with my own eyes."[33]

"Mr Leon Cieniek pulled out the gold teeth of Fischel Soberman's wife after her death, which is stated by not only me but may be confirmed by the whole village of Strzegom because Leon Cieniek officially sold those teeth to Franciszek Kamós," testified Stefan Bąk.[34]

Leon Cieniek also 'belonged' to the Strzegom AK outpost.

"My sister and I were in deep despair, but we couldn't cry, even though we felt that tears would relieve us," described Dora.

"I don't remember my mother's face, only her silhouette and a skirt similar to the folk ones worn in Mazovia," she told me.

5

Dora wrote, "There were six children including Jerzyk remaining of our whole group and only our daddy out of the adults. On 9 May 1944, the Soviets came. We followed the army 10 kilometres to Staszów. There was heavy bombardment here, the Germans were bombing the town from the air, and everything around

[32] Ibidem.

[33] AIPN Ra, 29/115, Report from interrogation of Fischel Zoberman of 9 May 1950, p. 23.

[34] Ibidem, Report from interrogation of Stefan Bąk of 12 November 1949, p. 130.

was in fire. All of us were running to the forest. This is where we lost sight of our daddy. When it all quietened down, my sister and I agreed to work for a rich peasant called Rogala and told everyone that we would be baptised because that's what our daddy had told us before our parting: to remain Jewesses at heart but – for our own safety – keep saying we would be baptised because even though the Russians were already there, Daddy didn't believe our peasants. And so a year passed. They were just about to baptise us when our aunt who came back from the camp in Mauthausen came to the village, learnt that we were alive and took us to Kraków."

Pola Milstein told me that the Russians arrived and told the rest of the survivors, "'If you have someone to inform on, do it.' But who thought about informing on others then? I didn't trust anyone any more to complain."

Dora was ten years old when she came to Kraków. She could neither read nor write. She and her sister found themselves in a Jewish children's home. Their father married for the second time and lived in Kraków too, in one room with his wife and new daughter. In her conversations with her father, she never returned to those times.[35] I talked to several people who lived in the children's home with Dora: children never talked about the things they had been through and adults did not ask any questions.[36]

Dora once described something, it was at school. All the children were told to write an essay entitled "An event I will never forget". Dora told me, "I described the last attack, when my father grabbed my sister's hand, I was running next to them, and they were shooting all around us. Older children were ahead of us. At some point my father probably had enough and stopped. There was a clearing in front of us, they were shooting from all directions, perhaps he thought that we would not make it across the clearing, perhaps he did not want to live any more. I looked around to see where they were shooting from and saw one of them standing nearby and another, younger one, who leaned his rifle against the branches. It seemed to me I could see his blue eyes. We burst into tears, and then father started running again, and I followed him."

The teacher gave them back their essays and told everyone to read them out loud one after the other, except for Dora.

"I was waiting, the bell rang, everyone left, 'Professor, I didn't get my notebook back,' and she hugged me to her breast, her tears flowing, 'Dear child, what have you been through?' she said. She called me after the school-leaving examinations,

[35] As a matter of fact, her father was completely unaware of how much she knew. During the interrogation, he said, "Only I and two of my children were left out of our group. They were 7–8 years old then, so they do not remember those events." (Ibidem, Report from interrogation of Fischel Zoberman of 9 May 1950, p. 24).

[36] Interviews with Dora Zoberman, Paris, Adam Daniel Rotfeld, Warsaw, Leon Esterman, Rehovot, Israel, 2014. The children's home was described in Noemi Bażanowska's book *To był mój dom. Żydowski Dom Dziecka w Krakowie w latach 1945–1957* (Cracow: Księgarnia Akademicka & Warsaw: ŻIH, 2011).

I had a very good certificate, 'Child, you should change your surname.' I replied that my mother died because she was called Zoberman'."

The trial of the murderers, one of the numerous trials started under the August Decree, took place in 1950. The defendants said that they were beaten and thus forced to give such a testimony, but the court did not believe them.[37] Seven of them (Stefan Bąk, Edward Brzyszcz, Wacław Brzyszcz, Władysław Janowski, Daniel Stawiarz, Stefan Tałaj, and Władysław Konat) received the death penalty.[38] The audience was probably brought to the courtroom in Sandomierz. At least that is what appears from the appeal of one of the defendants: "When they looked at this, the listeners, who came from the city and its surroundings and included secondary school students, expressed great astonishment and displeasure."[39]

In February 1952, President Bolesław Bierut used his prerogative of mercy and changed the death penalties of the seven defendants into penalties ranging from ten years of imprisonment to life imprisonment.[40]

All of the survivors left Poland. Dora was the last one to do so. After 1956, she still managed to go to the court in Radom, where a special review of the trial of the AK members was to take place as part of the rehabilitation trials. But the hearing was cancelled that day.[41] Adam Daniel Rotfeld, her friend from the children's home and boyfriend at that time, remembered what Dora told him after she came back: she was waiting in the corridor. When he was passing her, one of the murderers threatened that it might end badly for her if she testified.[42]

Dora told me, "Brzyszcz, the main defendant, approached me and said, 'You are Zoberman's daughter. Because of your father, my daughter wasn't admitted

[37] Fischel Zoberman testified, on the other hand, that "Antoni Brzyszcz with his wife and Bąk's cousin came to me then and suggested that they would pay as much as I wanted if I just defended the accused." (AIPN Ra, 29/116, part 1, Report from the first-instance hearing of 20 December 1950, p. 208).

[38] Two of them, Andrzej Wrona and Stefan Sikora, were acquitted. The verdict was passed on 20 December 1950. (ibidem, pp. 213–216). The revision hearing took place on 9 November 1951, and the Supreme Court upheld the appealed decision (ibidem, Report from the first-instance hearing, pp. 312–321).

[39] AIPN Ra, 29/116 part 2, Letter by Wacław Brzyszcz from the prison in Barczewo to the Provincial Court in Kielce, 16 August 1956, p. 302.

[40] Pardon granted by President Bierut on 4 February 1952 and change of the death penalty into: Tałaj – 10 years; Stawiarz – 10 years; Konat – 15 years, Bąk – 15 years; Janowski – life imprisonment; Wacław Brzyszcz – 15 years; Edward Brzyszcz – life imprisonment Ibidem Letter to the Province Court in Kielce of 4 February 1952, pp. 77–78).

[41] Dora Zoberman most probably came to Radom for the hearing of the court in Kielce, centre in Radom of 22 October 1959. (AIPN Ra, 29/117, Report from the first-instance hearing, pp. 351–353). Ultimately, the Supreme Court in Warsaw discharged the convicts on 26 October 1962 (ibidem, Decision of the Supreme Court, 26 October 1962, pp. 733–758).

[42] Interview with Adam Daniel Rotfeld, January 2014.

to university, and you are certainly studying.' I told him, 'But your daughter had a father and a mother, and you killed my mother, and I was alone'."

In 1957, all of the convicts were already at liberty.

6

In Strzegom, I learn that none of the murderers is still alive today. But older people remember what happened, list the names of the Jews they knew – Fischel, Josek, Pela, Nuta – and mention how they used to come for food at night.

"I remember the Jews because they were my neighbours from the field. When they came, father would give them food, he gave them shoes too. They slept over there, in the pasture where birches grow. When we later saw those scattered bones with our mother, we cried."

"The children were hungry, and there were potatoes for pigs and chickens, and they would grasp them with their little hands. My mum said that they would boil our potatoes for them because ours were without the peels. So nice and so hungry, they were afraid to wait for our potatoes. When Mum told me for the first time that they were killed, I was of the same age as those children and cried then and cried many times later that they had no one to help them, that their parents had already been killed and that someone was out there to take their lives away."

"There was such a legend that seven shots were aimed at the two murdered children because they could not finish them off."

"There were people who had nothing else to do than to think about killing. I won't give any names."

Nobody wanted to talk about the murderers using their names. But something sometimes slipped out, "When I saw that Tałaj is one of the heroes of the Underground Day organised by our municipality head, I thought I won't stand it." A woman living alone on the edge of the village who talked to me in front of her house on a bench sheltered from the street by trees, whispered to my ear when I was about to leave, "Those were Brzeszczaks, Stefan Bąk, Władysław Janowski. But don't say it was me – someone would wring my neck."[43]

7

Władysław Janowski, the one who killed Zelek and his sister Pela with one shot and took part in other campaigns against the Jews, joined the Party after the war and worked in the Kielce Security Office. In free Poland, he appealed for 40,000 zlotys as compensation for the harm suffered, referring to the Act on the Annulment of Rulings Issued against People Victimised for Acting for the Independence of the Polish State of 1991.

[43] I held all those interviews in August 2013.

The court acceded to his request and granted him the monetary compensation that he requested.

"Evidence indicates that the Judgment of the Court of Appeals in Kielce of 20 December 1950 was rendered because of the independence activities of Władysław Janowski," wrote the court of the Republic of Poland in 1997.[44]

The judges had in their records the same documents I quoted here.

Translated by *Paulina Chojnowska*

Abstract
A group of more than 30 Jews was hiding in a dugout in a forest near Strzegom, a small village on the edge of a forest in the Świętokrzyskie Province. Attacked and robbed by the villagers who were members of the Home Army and Peasants' Battalions, the Jews continued to hide in the forest in smaller groups. The same group of partisans that had attacked the Jews in the dugout continued to capture and murder them, including women and children. There were eight survivors: children and adolescents plus one adult. The article reconstructs the six-month period of hiding basing on a touching testimony of one of the surviving girls, Dora Zoberman, who gave it at the age of eleven, materials from the post war August Decree trials, and recent conversations with the survivors and Strzegom inhabitants. It also reconstructs the actions of the judiciary with regard to the crimes committed against the Jews. Sentenced to death, the murderers were pardoned and released after 1956. One of them received compensation in the 1990s for having been repressed because of his pro-independence activity.

Key words
Jews, murders, Home Army, Peasants' Battalions, testimonies of survivors, August Decree trials, rehabilitation trials

[44] AIPN Ra, 29/116, part 2, Decision of the Supreme Court on compensation of 21 February 1997, p. 315.