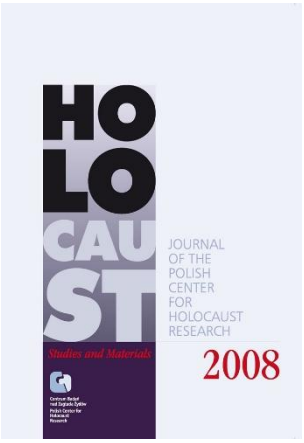


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Texts Buried in Oblivion. Testimonies of Two Refugees from the Mass Grave at Poniatowa

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I have been approached by the editor of a new journal to take a position on, for example, the following issue: "What is the relationship between the newly discovered sources and the development of the historiography of the Holocaust of European Jews?" Frankly speaking, I am unable to answer a question thus formulated, although for a long time I have witnessed entirely new groups of sources introduced into the Holocaust narration by historians. I do not think this has significantly changed the main currents of historiography. The most important new synthetic presentations) concern the mechanisms of the Holocaust and the actions of the perpetrators: the German Nazis as well as the so-called "ordinary Germans": officials, military personnel, business people. When I read these and many other books I was not under the impression that a better understanding of these issues is related to any significant discoveries of sources. What is important, on the other hand, is a different problematisation of the entire mega-problem, i.e. the recognition of a far broader relationship between the unprecedented crime on the Jewish population and the issues of everyday life under the German occupation. In this approach, defined as a gradual radicalisation of anti-Jewish actions, emphasis is laid upon the independence between actions taken on the peripheries of power, initiated at the local level, often motivated by the need to solve concrete, everyday problems, sometimes as a result of the ideological ardour of Nazi activists or their rivalry in search of career advancement, as well as the increasingly radical decisions of the centre. When one analyses this "feedback", one can better understand how this murder could have happened, why other "ordinary" Germans were unable to oppose the Nazis, why this manslaughter was carried out until the very end, without any regard for the future responsibility of all Germans for this crime. In such analyses, long-known German documents are often interpreted in an innovative manner, but this hardly amounts to any breakthrough discoveries with respect to sources.

We deal with a different situation in the case of the so-called "witness perspective", i.e. the attitude of the Christian communities of Europe towards the Holocaust, which took place before their eyes. There have been many discoveries in this fairly new area of Holocaust literature, although, as of now, they have not yet changed the post-war paradigm. This literature strongly emphasizes the absolutely

prevailing inertia of the victims' neighbours, turning their heads away in fear when Jews were deported to death camps, as well as the marginal significance of help offered to the victims and the equally insignificant collaboration of the "neighbours" with the occupier in its acts of destruction. It seems to me not so much a simplified, but simply a false picture. I am convinced that in the next few years many new findings will be revealed in this field. Thus, as it turns out, despite the intentions of most witnesses of those times, nowhere in Europe were the post-war years conducive to frank statements on this subject. The archives are full of traces not only of active hostility towards the Jewish victims, but also, primarily, of hostile heartlessness towards their suffering and of virtually universal greedy interest in the property they had left behind. To what extent this was a product of many years of hostile anti-Semitism, or to what extent this was a result of the inhuman conditions of the occupation and the product of the ubiquitous attitude of the Germans towards the Jews, who had been deprived of all rights, we are not in a position to answer. Both perspectives are certainly very important.

When we discover new sources on Christian-Jewish relations under the occupation and during the Holocaust, we also raise the victims themselves from oblivion. For those who study the mechanisms of the Holocaust without reaching beyond the "executioner's perspective", the Jewish victims are usually anonymous – there are hundreds, thousands, millions of them. For a scholar of neighbourly relations, a given group of denounced or robbed victims is hardly ever larger than a handful of people. Quite often they knew these people at least by name, their origin was known, and so were their pre-war occupations. Their names were also recorded in court or police registers. It is those people we are trying to save from oblivion.

There is also another problem, i.e. the fact that we more and more often tend to base our new conclusions on retrospective material, or narrative sources, which deal with wartime events from a certain perspective. There are hardly any sources left in the archives that are contemporary to the events described and are free of the complex post-war context that accompanies their origins. One such source historians did not consider previously at all are, for example, denunciations written in the General Government to the German authorities, published in part and excellently analysed by Barbara Engelking-Boni, or court and police materials related to cases against blackmailers ("*szmalcownicy*"), analysed by Jan Grabowski. These two valuable probes herald a permanent place of this type of source testimony in historical studies. Obviously, this immediately leads to another problem: it turned out that in the case of Polish-Jewish relations, there is a far wealthier source basis related to the negative aspects of these relations than to their positive aspects. This is natural as no one expected those who took enormous risks saving Jews to keep meticulous diaries or make notes. This, however, has significant consequences. On the one hand, we have a large "archive of repression" (Jan Grabowski's term) to prove the negative aspects of these relations, while on the other, a scant heritage of the Council for Aid to Jews and the few references to these issues in the preserved documentation of the structures of the Polish Underground State (including materials sent from Poland to various instances of the government-in-exile in France and London), or in underground press.

I believe that due to this disproportion between the main groups of sources contemporary to wartime events, the picture of Polish-Jewish relations was burdened by the wartime and immediately post-war testimonies of Jewish survivors. So far historians have used them rather uncritically, and I would venture the opinion that they have been "used" to justify *a priori* judgements on that wartime, absolutely extraordinary, state of affairs. In this sense, source "discoveries", as a rule, only supplemented justifications of someone's more general opinion, for example, that during the war, the Poles did everything they could to help the Jews, or, that they did nothing like that. Hardly ever did any historian make an effort to find demarcations in these relations, associate the attitudes of the Polish neighbours with their concrete everyday situation, their current experiences in their contacts with the occupier, or, on the other hand, with the anti-Semitic propaganda flooding the country. Polish historical literature regarding the German occupation, embedded in the heroic myth, did not even utter a word about the so natural phenomenon of unavoidable co-cooperation of Polish society with the German authorities. Virtually untouched are such historical and sociological issues as: the growth of all kinds of social pathologies, anomie, elite exchange, changes in religiousness, etc. Such omissions, however, are the case not only on the Polish side. For several decades Jewish researchers have been unable to paint a realistic picture of the Jewish community confined within the ghetto walls. They still tend to perceive it as a monolith, failing to identify the clearly marked survival strategies. Studies of the *Judenräte*, the Jewish Police, mutual denunciations and other forms of collaboration are still in their infancy.

All these complaints about the shortcomings and defects in research do not undermine my conviction that Holocaust historians have no other option but to introduce new sources into scholarly circulation and carry out constant discussion in the light of their possible interpretations. The shorter the temporal distance to the events described, the greater the hope that a given text will be understood.

Nowadays, we sometimes discover testimonies known to have been read by dozens of eminent people, but none of them has put their knowledge to the right use. After all, it now appears obvious that if certain texts had been published at the right moment, it would have proved extremely helpful to the Jewish survivors hunted by the entire machinery of the Third Reich. I found one such text in the archives of the Polish Institute and General Wladislaw Sikorski Museum in London. In the files containing correspondence [sent] from Poland to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Polish government-in-exile, one can find, among other things, a collection of "Żegota" reports entitled 'G[overnment] Del]egation] [in Poland] Dep[artment] of Int[ernal] Aff[airs]. Jewish Department. Special Report. Attachment to reports of the Jew[ish] Nat[ional] Com[mittee] and the Bund, for Prime Minister's eyes only' (D[elegatura] R[rządu] Dep.[artament] Spr.[aw] Wewn.[etrznych] Referat Żydowski. Raport specjalny. Jako załącznik do sprawozdań Ż[ydowskiego] K[omitetu] N[arodowego] I Bundu, tylko dla Pana Premiera)[1]. There were several

[1] IPMS, A.9.III.2a – MSW Dział Społeczny, dated 25 May 1944, signed "Kalski" (Witold Bieńkowski). I am indebted to Artur Podgórski for informing me that Ludwika Fiszer's testimony was

attachments to this report, including one I find most important: "The Liquidation [at] Poniatowa, Ludwika Fiszer's testimony, a refugee from the grave, unedited" (Likwidacja Poniatowa – relacja Ludwiki Fiszerowej uciekinierki z grobu, podajemy bez żadnych zmian w redakcji).

Fiszer miraculously escaped death in an execution on 4 November 1943, carried out by SS-men and Ukrainian auxiliary policemen during the liquidation of a slave labour camp at Poniatowa near Nałęczów. This was one in a series of mass executions within the framework of the so-called "Harvest" [operation] (*Erntefest*), when, due to fear of further rebellions in death camps (e.g. on 2 August a rebellion broke out in Treblinka, and on 15 October in Sobibór) over 30,000 Jews – men, women and children – were murdered in the Lublin region.

In her testimony, the author describes only the final weeks of her stay in the camp itself, characterises the nervous atmosphere in that place and the growing lawlessness of the German and Ukrainian executioners. She mainly deals with two aspects of her inconceivable experience – the preparation for the execution itself and the series of miraculous coincidences during her escape from the grave. In order to preserve her story's expressiveness, given below in two separate parts, I will not describe the Poniatowa camp at length. Fortunately, there is ample literature on the subject.[2] Nevertheless, I do need to discuss a few issues.

The labour camp for Jews at Poniatowa was established in October 1942. Before the war this site was an incomplete Polish investment project carried out as part of Central Industrial Area development (a communications equipment plant and a housing project for the employees). Later, 24,000 Soviet prisoners of war were detained in this compound – all died of hunger and epidemic disease. The construction of the Jewish camp began in January 1943, and by July 16,000–18,000 people were detained there, mainly Warsaw Jews previously working for Walter Caspar Többens' and Schultz's clothing "shops" (around 10,000). They were guarded by around 600 men, including 40 SS-men. The camp was further isolated from its surroundings in September 1943, after weapons had been found on the premises. Probably, the Germans were also aware that there was an underground organisation in the camp. On 4 November, an execution of around 15,000 prisoners was carried out. 200 were spared to cover the traces of this murder, but because they refused to burn the bodies, they too were murdered a few days later. Earlier on, several thousand people had been transferred to other camps, while some individual prisoners, helped by Poles working in the camp, had been able to escape before 4 November.

"Aktion Erntefest" and the liquidation of the Poniatowa camp was not unknown to Polish [public] opinion, but for a long time many details were not known. The

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published in 1964 in Hebrew at Tel Aviv in a volume edited by Meilech Neustadt, *Destruction and Rising, the Epic of the Jews in Warsaw, a Collection of Reports and Biographical Sketches of the Fallen* (64–77). This version of her testimony was included (with the erroneous comment that it was published in Yiddish) by Sam Hoffenberg in: *Le camp de Poniatowa. La liquidation der derniers Juifs de Varsovie* (Paris: 1988), 150–169.

[2] See primarily: R. Gicewicz, "Obóz pracy w Poniatowej (1941–1943)", *Zeszyty Majdanka* No. 10 (1980), 88–104.

most extensive coverage of the events at Poniatowa, Trawniki and Majdanek (Lublin) was made public by *Biuletyn Informacyjny*. In the issue of 11 November 1943 (No. 45) the section "Zagłada Żydów trwa" (Extermination of the Jews continues) contains the following passage: "Recently 500 Jews were shot in Przemyśl, the remaining Jews were finished off in Rzeszów, in early October Jewish labour camps were liquidated in Lvov, and lately the Trawniki and Poniatowa camps were liquidated [as well]". Two weeks later (No. 47 of 25 November 1943) the "massacre of the Jews in the Lublin area" was covered extensively. According to this note, on 5 November around 13,000 Jewish prisoners of Majdanek and 10,000 of Trawniki were shot ("including prisoners of war – soldiers of the Polish army"). This note contained erroneous information: "on 8 Nov[ember] a three-day massacre started at Poniatowa, with 15,000 dead. Here, the Jewish fighters put up active resistance, e.g. they set on fire all the workshops and warehouses. The Germans, however, acted pre-emptively, having amassed a force of several thousand gendarmerie, SS and SD. Several hundred people were burned alive in barracks previously set on fire."

These discrepancies and the generally delayed reaction of the editors of the Home Army's most important bulletin stemmed from a lack of their own sources of information. After all, Jewish underground circles also erred as to the details. The most recent detailed information on the work and living conditions at Poniatowa available to "Żegota" in Warsaw came in the summer of 1943. Its *Informacja Tygodniowa* (Weekly Information)[3] of 15 July contained an entire sizeable paragraph devoted to this camp, which said that there were around 14,000 people in the camp, with 11,000 in the camp proper and 3,000 in the so-called "settlement", where the living conditions were fairly bearable, and food supplies were facilitated by large-scale smuggling, and the children's soup kitchen reportedly gave out as many as 700 meals a day. Többens, who lived nearby, "often predicted that those living in the 'settlement' would survive the war, while elsewhere the Jews would not live on." This opinion was to be confirmed by the fact that only 3,000–4,000 Jews worked, while the rest did not have any job. The mood was generally quite pessimistic; people were worried after the visit of the SS and Police Leader in the Lublin district, SS-Brigadeführer Odilo Globocnick. The conclusion: "The generally distrustful attitude is expressed by the fact that a significant number of the prisoners are prepared for any eventuality."

The November massacre surprised "Żegota" activists. After all, for the first few days they knew nothing about it. On 8 October, at the weekly meeting of the Council for Aid to Jews, this matter was not even mentioned.[4] First, imprecise information was presented at a meeting on 16 November 1943 by Adolf Berman "Borowski".

[3] AŻIH, Varia okupacyjne, 230/151. On 10 July 1943, at a Council for Aid to Jews meeting it was mentioned that, according to a Jewish National Committee resolution, funds received from abroad would be transferred both to aid action in the provinces and for "purchase of weapons and combat operations in Jewish centres which display determination to resist." Reportedly, in agreement with the Bund, 130,000 zlotys was sent to the Poniatowa camp, with 100,000 planned for transfer to Trawniki and to purchase weapons for the Jewish Fighting Organisation in Zagłębie Dąbrowskie (Będzin) and Częstochowa for the sum of 130,000 zloty.

[4] *Ibid.*, 149, k 24 ff.

He said: "In Trawniki, on 3 Nov[ember], within 8–10 hours, the entire camp was liquidated, i.e. around 10,000 people. In order to burn the corpses, 150 Jews were brought from Lublin to be killed after their job was completed. In Lublin, on 5 Nov[ember] Jews from all the camps were hoarded in and shot, all of them. There were no less than 7,000–8,000 Jews. At Poniatowa, on the night of 7/8 Nov[ember] an enormous fleet of vehicles with gendarmerie, SS-men and soldiers arrived to surround both the "settlement" and the camp itself. Ukrainian posts were relieved and then murder commenced at the so-called "settlement", where professionals and intelligentsia were living. The next step was the liquidation of the camp, where the remaining Jews were housed. The operation lasted three days. Around 15,000 people were killed. Only one barrack put up some resistance; it was set on fire and those inside were burned alive. The Jews managed to burn clothing barracks, i.e. those that contained clothes prepared for the Germans as well as those stolen from the victims." Then Berman went on to inform his colleagues about the fate of the Radom Jews.

During the discussion, the Bund representative Leon Fejner, "Mikołaj", referred directly to Berman's word and said: "the time of camp liquidation has begun, the final act of extermination of all Jews. The Council is faced with the issue of rescuing the survivors. Unfortunately, in view of the negative attitude of the army towards partisan organisations and armed resistance in the camps, either to organise large-scale armed resistance in order to allow the Jews to die with honour or to save a greater number of Jews is impossible. But, despite that, armed groups should be sent out and, at least, valuable individuals should be rescued. Summing up, he says that we should approach such organisations as WRN and SL to provide technical apparatus, i.e. people and rooms." Further discussion concerned the actual operational possibilities. One should note the voice of an SL representative, Tadeusz Rek, "Różycki". According to the minutes of the meeting: "He is sceptical about the propaganda of 'feeling'. It would be an illusion to rely on the masses. . . . He believes that in small towns and villages, in the light of the 'snoop' system, it is virtually impossible to find permanent rooms. Permanent and mass-scale help in the provinces cannot be continued. But, as regards temporary shelter, it is possible." Nevertheless, it seems that the manslaughter at Poniatowa was not discussed again at RPŻ meetings. They are not mentioned in the minutes of the 27 November or 14 December meetings.

The most comprehensive information on "The bloody liquidation of Jewish labour camps in the Lublin region" can be found in the "Żegota Council Press Communiqué"[5] of 18 November 1943 (No. 3), to the effect that the slaughter at Trawniki took place on 3 November, and by 4 p.m. 10,000 people had been murdered. Information on Poniatowa was still incorrect. "At Poniatowa, it was still relatively quiet as late as Sunday, 7 November." The Germans surrounded the camp in two rings. The prisoners "were driven, naked, to recently dug ditches, purportedly for sewage purposes." In one barrack, the prisoners barricaded themselves and were burned alive. Most "were machine-gunned in front of the ditches." It was emphasised with visible pride: "The Jewish fighters, aware of the coming annihilation, set all the workshops

[5] *Ibid.*, 151.

and warehouses on fire, with a great deal of German military clothing inside; losses are calculated at a few million. Money and belongings were thrown into the fire. The massacre went on for three days." The bodies of the victims were burned.

For political and propagandistic reasons the following comment, inaccurate to say the least, was added: "In both camps, the Germans applied new tactics. Aware that there were underground Jewish fighting organisations in those camps, they were planning to nip whatever resistance existed in the bud, so they brought in great numbers of SS, SD and gendarmerie functionaries, and thus quickly flooded the entire area. The massacre was carried out by several thousand Germans in a small area. No greater-scale resistance was possible. Characteristically, no Ukrainians took part in either massacre. Apparently, the Germans did not trust them to carry out this murderous task with sufficient precision and ruthlessness. The Ukrainian training camp at Trawniki was surrounded and isolated by the SS for the duration of the operation."[6]

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Polish government-in-exile had at its disposal a testimony from Poniatowa from the turn of 1943 and 1944, but did nothing about it. Why? We can only rely on our imagination, but there were not that many reasons to remain silent. First, Polish media in Allied countries very rarely covered the extermination of Polish Jews, apart from the period between the autumn of 1942 (the end of mass deportations of Warsaw Jews to Treblinka) and the spring of 1943 (the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising). Thus, even such a shocking text could have been considered unfit for publication by, e.g. *Dziennik Polski*. But, it could have been made available to Western press. After all, that is why several reports from Poland concerning deportations of Warsaw Jews and mass murders had been translated into English.[7] Someone would have to take such a decision, and several details would have to be clarified: Poniatowa's location, who was detained there and why the camp was liquidated. Finally, why the Christian population, particularly the Polish underground, did not attempt to help the doomed prisoners. Fiszer's testimony was unfit for publication, although each of its parts for slightly different reasons. The first part indicated that in occupied Poland, it was primarily and perhaps exclusively the Jews that were doomed to certain death. The second part proved that their Polish neighbours were very rarely prepared to risk their lives in order to save them, as most Poles were merciless, greedy, and expected goods in return for help-

[6] The first guards trained at Trawniki arrived at Poniatowa in the autumn of 1942, i.e. soon before the first prisoner transports came. The guards were further reinforced in February, March and mid-June 1943. In this training subcamp, some new recruits were also garrisoned, recruited among Ukrainians from the Lublin District. The guards were commanded and trained by the SS-man Johann Schwarzenbacher. See P. Black "Prosty żołnierz 'akcji Reinhardt'. Oddziały z Trawnik i eksterminacja polskich Żydów", in: D. Libionka, ed., *Akcja Reinhardt. Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie* (Warsaw: 2004), 116.

[7] For example, IMPS, PRM, 761/42, doc. 13 of 28 May 1943: *Polska pod okupacją niemiecką na podstawie wiadomości nadeszłych do dnia 31.X.1942*, with the attachment: "Report on the execution of Jews at Bełżec dated 10.08.1942", ibid, P/33/5, Reports on the situation in occupied Poland No. 6/42. The situation in Poland from 1st July to 1st December 1942. With special attention to the period 16th July – 16th August [in English].

ing Jews, who had always been accused of possessing property. Due to the obvious danger involved, help could only be bought, and at a very high price. How does one convey such a picture to foreign countries? This would be contrary to obvious Polish interests. After all, we expected the free world to show its sympathy and offer help to the persecuted Polish nation, which with incredible determination and fortitude defended itself against the occupier's oppression and persecution. This picture of a "nation-victim" could not allow any chiaroscuro.

For people of integrity, who, in London, read Fiszer's testimony, as well as many "Żegota" reports, those texts proved to be a veritable trap. Presumably, the more astute of them were already aware that on Polish territory an unprecedented tragedy was taking place, a tragedy of an entire nation, stigmatised only because of their origin, a nation defenceless and completely alone in its suffering. Perhaps those presumed readers even foresaw that many years later, such would be precisely the recollection of that crime and the resultant reflection, even though there were many others, would have a powerful impact on the opinion as to which way modernity has gone. Perhaps they were even ashamed to keep quiet, feeling that in the future they would be accused of not having appealed for help for refugees from the ghettos and camps and thus so few Jews were saved.

Liquidation of Poniatowa
Testimony of Ludwika Fiszer, a refugee from the grave. Unedited.

Every day a gong at 5 o'clock, 5 min. 8 o'clock another gong. We got up at the sound of the gong, I was dressed within 20 minutes, my husband, my child and I washed in the evening, also in the evening I prepared the first and second breakfast, because one is usually heavy with sleep and cannot do everything on time. In the morning I only washed my face and hands, checked if we all had our packed lunches in our haversacks [or] if I had forgotten something. Before I left the flat I woke my daughter so she would lock the door and blow out the candle. Quickly, in semi-darkness we walked to the causeway to form groups of five. There were some arguments, various typical quarrels. People from the *Arbeitseinsatz*[8] came after second gong, a bit late, but still they wanted to be in the front rows. The Többens people,[9] on the other hand, wanted to reach the kitchen earlier to get their morning soup. There again all hell broke loose. I worked at the concrete mixer and Untersturmführer Walerang[10] really liked our unit, so he allowed 2 people with a firkin to go and fetch breakfast and lunch. This is how I avoided waiting in a queue. After bigger quarrels, "accompanied" by a *Lagerpolizei* leader and guarded by a Ukrainian, we marched like soldiers to the camp. In order to pass through the guardpost ("*wacha*")

[8] Workers at the "SS work detail".

[9] Többens Factory workers.

[10] Gicewicz (*op. cit.*, 92) considers Walerang (no first name given) to have been the immediate successor of the Poniatowa camp commandant SS-Obersturmführer Gotlieb Hering, transferred from Bełżec (were he was the second camp commandant, and had previously been involved in the euthanasia programme of the mentally ill at the Hadamar centre).

one needed a pass. We had to hold our passes high up so a gendarme or a Ukrainian could see that [we] all had them. Recently people had been shot for that. Men had to take off their caps and we all passed by the guardpost with trembling hearts. The *Arbeitseinsatz* workers quickly passed by the guardpost onto the square. The roll-call usually began at 6.15 after the people from the "settlement" had arrived. But the Többens people went to the shop. The square had recently been surrounded by machine guns. With people shot recently on the square, it was impossible to be late. There were also tanks on the square. Sometimes we joked, naturally oblivious of future events saying that to finish us off tanks weren't necessary. For us, one machine gun would be enough, and none of us would even breathe a word. The month of October, for us, brought a bad omen. At the beginning of the month, for example, curfew was moved from 5 to 6 o'clock. And that month, however, some days indicated that perhaps we wouldn't be spending the winter at Poniatowa. For example, in the settlement, plenty of people were living in the lofts, and an SS-man put them in people's flats. October was already quite cold. They distributed blankets and more underwear [and] made more clogs. The SS workers were very shabby. There were lots of people who had been in the camp for 2 or 3 years. They also put stoves in the barracks. And then, like a bolt from the blue, the Többens people heard that the following day, 9 October, there was to be a roll call at 2 o'clock in the shops. In the camp [itself], there had been no daytime roll-call. In Többens' shops, apart from various inspections, which were interested only in the work [done] (not the people), it was all quiet. They practically worked uncontrolled. They were visited once a day by dir[ector] Bauch or Norman.[11] Their visits were fairly brief. Dir[ector] Bauch assured us that day: "Es wird nur eine Zahlung sein."[12] As usual, people didn't believe that and, on that day, not everyone came to work. As the roll call was to take place at 2 o'clock the morning shift was kept in the shops. They worked from 6.30 to 2.30, lunchtime.

The afternoon shift left the settlement at 1.30 to get to the camp at 2 o'clock and get their lunch. When the afternoon shift arrived the people were counted together. They were counted by [the] Lagerspiess[13] Gley. Several dozen people did not turn up. Gley wanted to look for the missing in the "settlement". Once Gley said: "Die Pension muess man vernichtet."[14] At the same, in the "settlement", there was a an *Arbeitseinsatz* roll-all at 2 o'clock, which lasted till 4. There should have been a roll-call in field 5 of the *Arbeitseinsatz*, but it didn't take place. The Többens people ignored the roll-call and didn't go to work. During the roll-call, they joined the SS groups, because the flats were supposed to be vacant from 2 to 4. Also mothers and children under 4, who had the right to miss the roll-call, had to leave the flats on that

[11] Gicewicz does not give their first names, either (op. cit., 93). Bauch, a Saxonian, was to be the second director of Többens' factory at Poniatowa.

[12] Only counting will be done (Ger.).

[13] Literally: sergeant, camp feldfebel (Ger.). Gicewicz does not give the SS-man Gley's (Glei) first name or rank. Probably it was Heinrich Glei, questioned by the German public prosecutor's office in Hamburg about the Poniatowa murder (Lothar Hoffmann's case, see P. Black, "Prosty żolnierz", *op. cit.*, 119).

[14] The pension must be destroyed (Ger.).

day. Still, there was something in the air. A dark grey cloud hung in the sky, as if shrouding the camp with heavy mourning. At 4.30 Gley phones the "settlement" and asks if the roll-call is over. An SS-man called "Bryluś" replies that it is. The Lagerspiess gives the order to summon up everyone again. He says that he's on his way. And again a loud voice of the *Werkschutz*:[15] "Everybody out". Shots already fired at the crowd. Women are wounded already. People leave their flat doors open and their coats off in their panic. Under a hail of bullets they run toward the square, where the roll-call is already taking place. The Ukrainians are already there, with guns, awaiting orders of course. Everyone quickly forms groups of five. [A]bsolute silence, hearts pounding, eyes wide open in fear. No questions are asked, though it was usually noisy during the roll-call. "Bryluś" asks the group leaders how many people they have, [and] each gives a number. He asks again in disbelief. Menacing words are spoken. If the group leaders do not admit that they have aliens, they'll be shot immediately. They started looking for aliens. It turned out that there were several dozen of those unfortunate people missing from the shop. Including several with a doctor's note. The rest were immediately surrounded by the Ukrainians, who drove them toward the forest at the very entrance to the settlement. In the meantime, the camp gong was sounded: 4 o'clock work is over. The group that at 4 o'clock leaves the camp simply to head home for the settlement assembles. At the entrance to the settlement they stop a group of about 1,500 people. By accident I was in one of the front rows and, willy-nilly, had to witness what was going to happen. The women were weeping, in spasms, one swore aloud: "Herr Lagerspiess ich schwoere bei Gott, ich arbeite jeden Tag, nur heute . . . ."[16] The words are interrupted. We hear shouts and crying. They order everyone to take off their clothes and lie down. Several dozen shots are fired. Blood curdled in our veins. I get spasms; my ten-year-old daughter I accidentally brought with me that day tries to comfort me. My husband puts his hands on my lips to close them and covers my eyes. We must be quiet. I also saw the Werkschutz Gedanken, who in order to save his wife, asks that they let her go. He, too, was told to take off his clothes and lie down with her. After the execution, the Ukrainians returned to their barrack. The SS-men Gley, "Bryluś" and [the] Rottenfuehrer[17] drove to the camp, probably to the hotel, where [they] all lived. Immediately after the incident, our group was allowed to enter the "settlement". We walked over the corpse of a young man, lying with his clothes on across the road. He was probably hurrying to the basket shop for the roll-call, but he didn't make it. Bread, apples and his haversack lay scattered by his body. As we passed naked corpses, we burst into the "settlement" like crazy. Each of us had left a family member at home. Everyone wanted to see their family. We hear shouts, crying and calling. A young woman comes running and says: "Daddy, I killed you, I didn't let you go to the shop for the roll-call, how do I live now with your death on my conscience?" With these words she ran on. In front of the barrack we bumped into my husband's daughter-in-law (he was my second husband). "Dad, did you see Mietek

[15] Plant security (Ger.).
[16] Mister Commandant, I swear by God, I work every day, only today. . . (Ger.).
[17] Not a surname but an SS rank.

in the group that left the camp at 4?" He asks her at the same time if she saw him at the roll-call. The son worked at the site and very often he came at 1 o'clock with smuggled [goods] to the settlement. Luckily, it turned out that he didn't leave his group. He went with them to the camp after work. As he did not have his pass, for 5 zlotys he bought a single-entry pass to the "settlement". When he came home, we had to buy a litre of vodka (we got the vodka through our contacts). Not in order to feel better, but [to regain] internal balance. After this incident, executions for the smallest infractions happened at lightning speed. It started with the arrest of the richest [prisoners]: the Opoljoczows, Neufeld, Prenzel, Niedźwiedź, Szach and others. They were released for big money. Executions and arrests took place every day. People were shot for a nap during work hours, and we could not sit while at work. They also shot the sick with doctor's notes who did not stay in the barracks. In those tragic days I only had a small ordeal. I was working (as I said) at the cement-mixer in field 5. It was a shop where men manufactured flagstones. One day in the second half of October I got a terrible cold. I had a runny nose and splitting headache. It was a beautiful, sunny day. I left the shop and sat on the flagstones, bathing in the sun. I did not notice Gley riding on a horse. He stopped in front me, 5 metres away; I hung my head low and held it in my hands; suddenly, I hear in German: "Was machst du den, schlafst du?"[18] I jump to my feet and reply: "Ich schlafe nicht, ich habe Schrumpfen und Kopfschmerzen."[19] Fortunately a "*kapo*" came, started talking to him and shouted at me: "quick, run quickly to work." This is how I escaped death that day. On the same day over a dozen people were shot for napping, sitting while working, for having no pass and for other minor infractions. On 24 October, as usual, we came to the square. The roll-call was taking for ever. Fisch reported to Lagerspiess Gley how many people he had. Gley, in turn, to Lagerfuehrer Hering. Untersturmfuehrer Walerang also came; he first stopped on the road, like an artist on stage expecting applause, and only then slowly approached us. The most important work details – tailors, cobblers, joiners and sewage workers – went to work. Meanwhile the less important details were suddenly surrounded by Ukrainians; we were handed spades and sent to the woods to do different work. Some frightened, some indifferent, we went to work. Opposite field 5 was field 6. In this field, very close to the forest, was a big, nice two-storey house. Inside it, there were nicely furnished and carpeted rooms for the SS-men and office rooms where the Jews worked. This building was called the "hotel". We had to clear an adjacent area and dig a ditch. The area was full of roots and bushes. About half a kilometre of length was marked with wire and posts. This was where we had to dig a ditch, 1 m wide and 2 m deep. We used spades, pickaxes and axes. Untersturmfuehrer Walerang was with us all the time. He put up the posts, worked with a spade, gave us instructions. As much as he could, he beat [us], pulled women by their hair and kicked [us]. His friend, Gircyk, with a thick whip and a dog, beat the workers, and set the dog [on us], shouting: "tempo, tempo". We had to work at that tempo. The day was frosty, without sun, but we still had to take off our coats, gloves and headscarves. I looked

[18] What are you doing, sleeping? (Ger.)

[19] I'm not sleeping, I'm shivering and I have a headache (Ger.).

up toward the people working and then noticed a red-haired woman, conspicuous on account of her hair colour. I saw her stop for a moment, I think to stretch her back. Gircyk approached her and hit her back with a whip. After that, whenever I turned my head toward her I noticed that she never straightened her back again. So, as I had fair hair, conspicuous among the dark heads of working women, I never straightened my back again. I thought I'd go mad with pain. We worked from seven in the morning to 12 noon. At 12 the gong sounds, a 20-min. break. The SS-men went to lunch, having marched the Ukrainians in to guard us. During the break they put us in groups of five and counted. They forced us to sit down and the group leaders were to hand us our haversacks. That day we had no breakfast. I thought the kitchen would send us coffee during the break, knowing that we had been suddenly taken to do special work. There were 2,000 people on the work detail. Our throats were simply dry with thirst. Everyone shouted for their haversacks. I had barely eaten half an apple – I couldn't eat bread because of terrible thirst – when we had to get back to work. Our "guardians" usually had their lunch between 12 and 2.30. On that day, however, their dinner took only one hour, and they returned quickly to torment us again. I had bloody blisters on my hands and had difficulties working. In such conditions we worked till 4 o'clock, waiting for the longed-for gong to relieve us from hard labour. Unfortunately, 4 o'clock came and we weren't relieved. Every 15 min. felt like a century. [We were] tired, hot and thirsty, and Walerang drove us to work on. It took us a moment to jump out of the ditches and start to get dressed. As we are getting dressed, in the distance, we hear Walerang's loud voice: "Who let you stop working?" Before Gircyk could explain that it was on Hering's order, we had to quickly jump back into the ditches, grab the scattered spades and carry on with our work. Anyone who did not manage to get into the ditch quickly got a few kicks from him. Fortunately at 5 Hering arrived and explained to Walerang that we could be relieved because it was already dark. We jumped out of the ditch, formed groups of five, taking our spades, pickaxes and axes, because we had to return them to the warehouse. The axes belonged to us. Around 5 October they issued the order to return [our] axes on pain of death. We returned them, of course, thinking our "guardians" were already leaving us and were clearly afraid that we might attack them. Because we'd been working till 5, there was a mess with food coupons and almost 2 thousand people did not get their dinner. Those who lived only on these provisions went to sleep hungry. The day before the shooting, it was 3 November, we turned up for the roll-call us usual. It took a while before the number of people was reported. In the meantime, one more platoon of Ukrainians arrived. No detail was sent to work. We had no idea what was going to happen. Suddenly, I see they are picking people, probably for deportation. Being without my husband and my child, I was scared. I look around to find a way out of this terrible situation. Without thinking I report to the group leader that after the catarrh, I have a problem with my sinuses and all my face hurts. Before I got his reply I found myself in a group going to the doctor, guarded by an SS-man. I wrapped my head in a headscarf. In the meantime, on the square, those selected were surrounded by Ukrainians and driven to an empty barrack. Lagerspiess Gley did not forget to search everyone carefully. The people were not prepared for deportation, so they did not hide their money. So

Gley took it. After he'd taken the money, Gley, with tears in his eyes, said that they had phoned Lublin and requested that their people be left where they were. Supposedly, they did not want to part with us and suddenly everybody was released. 4 November – Thursday. Terrible wind was blowing, stripping leaves from the trees, laying beautiful carpets in the woods. That day, as usual, the gong was struck at 5 o'clock. On the second gong I was already with my husband downstairs, walking towards the road. Strange panic in the street. I didn't know why. I want to walk on, but a *Werkschutz* comes running and shouts: "roll-call at 6, everybody out." I turned back, running home quickly, I had to dress my daughter and pack her breakfast. I packed all the bread I had in the flat, a bit of butter and some apples. I put in a towel, soap, comb and razor for my husband. My husband was shaving, thinking there'd be a selection. He donned one more pullover, because we were aware that it was winter and they might be sending people away. I'd barely put everything in when I heard the *Werkschutz*'s voice: "everybody out." We had to leave the house quickly. Our neighbours are noisy, people are dressing in a hurry to leave the block quickly. We walk onto the road, no one bothering to form groups of five. We walk to the camp in disorder. After several steps, on either side of the woods, we see the Ukrainians with rifles pointed at us. We walk on and see we are surrounded by SS-men, also with their guns pointed at us. Unable to grasp the situation, I hear an SS-man's voice: "Warum wollen Sie nicht bischen laufen?"[20] Unfortunately, we had to run about half a kilometre. Then we walked more slowly, and we could take a closer look at the SS-men in grey overcoats and green collars with lapels; some said they were soldiers from the Werhmacht. So why would they guard us with so many machine guns and soldiers? Unable to grasp all that, we walked on in silence and reached the guardpost. We no longer had to show our passes, but the men still had to take their caps off. After we'd passed through the guardpost, I said goodbye to my husband, because he was with the Többens people. By the guardpost I saw Hering and Walerang standing by a car with unknown SS-men. This meant that there was no one on the roll-call square. I felt my legs go from under me. After I'd said goodbye to my husband, I walked on with my child and saw Gley select a group of women to send them to square six. On that square, there were already over 100 people, guarded by SS-men. When we first saw them selecting people, we thought there might be another deportation. I wanted to join them, but as I had my child with me, it would have been conspicuous so I decided not to. Seeing that there were people walking around on their own, I made for the barrack to find my husband. Unfortunately, he was nowhere to be found. The SS-men began driving everyone into the barrack. It was a barrack in which, earlier, 8 thousand people had lived, [but] recently, when new barracks were being erected, people were moving to the new ones, men and women separately. Only the mid-section of the barrack was inhabited. The side section was being adapted for a metallurgical shop. Over 13 thousand people were driven into the barrack. We heard shouts and crying, mothers lost their children, wives lost their husbands, people were looking for one another; the despair of women who couldn't find their children was boundless. Not all the moth-

[20] Why don't you want to run a little? (Ger.)

ers had taken their children with them; the Ukrainians searched the blocks, and when they found children they sent them down, half dressed, to the barrack. They did the same with the sick. The SS-men closed the barrack gate and forbade anyone to come to the window; one of them fired a shot into the ceiling, thus ordering men to leave in groups of 50. I was sitting on a bunk near the exit and so I saw all my friends leave the barrack, nodding them farewell. When I saw a group of men talking quietly with Lent, the camp's mayor, I approached [them] to ask what happened. A Viennese replies: "Wiesen Sie nicht, dass wir eine Stunde vor dem Tode stehen?"[21] This reply didn't sink in. After several thousand men had left the barrack I saw my husband, who told me that this was camp liquidation, [and] the men would probably be driven in an unknown direction, while the women would be put on a train. I was so unaware of what was going to happen that I didn't even tell my husband what I'd heard from the Viennese. I just forgot all about it. My husband broke down completely. He cried like a baby, unable to calm down. 50-man groups were leaving quickly. Women were saying good-bye to their husbands, crying quietly. Finally my husband's turn had come; he was crying, and I stood by quietly, looking at him, feeling, for the second time already, as if a part of my soul was being taken away from me. My husband, unaware that he'd be shot shortly, says to me that he'll be looking for me in all the camps, and with these words on his lips, he left the barrack. The *Werkschutz* were the last to leave, soon after all the men had left. The men were driven out within two hours. Now it was the women's turn. The women were putting on make-up to look good, thinking there would be a selection. The Werkschutz commander, Bauman, together with the SS-men, told us to form 50-woman groups, and the women began to leave. This was going rather smoothly. The SS-men were searching the barrack thoroughly, searching the bunks, the suitcases and bed clothes. I don't know if they were looking for people or money; they scattered everything all over the place, stripped the bedclothes with [their] rifles, [and] after the search, the inside of the barrack looked as if a pogrom had taken place. I was going to leave in one of the first 50-woman groups to find out what had happened to my husband. My friend didn't let me; people say we had time to leave yet, because it's not good to be one of the first for the selection. The women were leaving quickly, and then our group's turn came. I held my child's hand very tight and left the barrack. When we left the barrack and heard shots, we started looking around, but still didn't understand what was going on. We were stopped on the road by the new barracks, where we were told to take off our shoes. I say loudly: "Women, it seems to me we are going to the grave!" In our stockings we approach the second barrack, where we heard an SS-man's voice: "Geld, Gold, Schmuck, Uhren abgeben, wer nicht abgibt wird erchossen."[22] I lift my head up and see naked women with their hands up, turning around, as if showing their bodies. Then I thought: well, it's a selection of naked women. I'm young, well-built, but I can't make it through the selection with my child." I had to enter the barrack quickly and undress. I also saw a young woman jump off the stairs, shouting at her mother-in-law:

[21] Don't you know we have one hour left to live? (Ger.)

[22] Hand over [your] money, gold, jewellery, watches. Who doesn't will be shot (Ger.)

"Mum, see you in the other world." In one of the rooms of the barrack three women were sorting. I thought for a while that I might jump in and start sorting, but I couldn't leave my child. I had a few thousand zlotys on me, I wrapped [the money] in a handkerchief and hid it, telling my friend that I would take the money to the grave. I had to hand over my rings because I had them on my finger. I hid the other ring in my hair and fastened it with a hairpin. We undressed quite fast and with our hands up went toward the ditches we'd dug earlier. These graves, 2 metres wide, were already full of naked corpses. My neighbour from the settlement, with her 16-year-old daughter, a pretty, fair-haired girl, with an innocent and slightly smiling face, seems to be looking for a comfortable place. When we arrived, an SS-man was loading his revolver, or perhaps it had got jammed, because he was fiddling with it. I looked his way, and he says to us: "Nicht so schnell",[23] but despite that, we lay down quickly to avoid looking at the dead bodies. My daughter asked me to cover her little eyes, because she was afraid, so I put my left hand around her head, and with my right hand I held her right hand and so we lay, faces down. In a moment shots were fired in our direction; I felt my left hand burn and go further through the head of my 10-year-old daughter, who didn't even twitch. I hear another bang near me. It shakes me, I am terribly dizzy, I don't know if I was unconscious for a while. I hear my friend's wheezing voice. It stopped a moment later. I know I am still alive and wait for another bullet, but I show no sign of being alive. Several minutes later, an SS-man brings a woman and a child; I hear her begging to be allowed to kiss her child, but the murderer refuses; she lay down on my right, resting her head on mine. A shot is fired and her blood spurts on my head, splashing on my nape and hair; from the back, I must have looked dead. I heard shots until it all went quiet. So I'm still alive, but I can't think what is going to happen next. One hour later I hear voices of the SS-men; one puts his foot on my back, shoots and says loudly: "Die Blonde, die Schwarze".[24] I realised he came to check if someone was still alive. There must have been [some] wounded, because I heard moaning, and after these shots everything went quiet. The SS-men drove away, but I did not have enough courage to lift my head. I had a trembling fever from the cold. The corpses were already cold, but in the morning hours, the naked bodies still gave some warmth. The wind shook the dead bodies, as if saying *Kaddish* for us. The Ukrainians came a few times. I heard them spit aloud on us, saying "job twoja żydów" (fuck the Jews), and leave. The hours dragged slowly; each hour seemed a century. When twilight came, the Ukrainians returned and covered us with spruce twigs, [so] I thought they might be planning to burn us. I was scared and wanted to shout I was still alive, but could not make a sound. I heard the[ir] steps receding in the distance, and only then did I whip up the courage to raise my head; the leaves of the branches covered me, so I was able to look around a little. It was nearly dark. My first glance was at my daughter. She always had an oval face, but now her face was round and was deadly pale. I touched her hair and back with my lips and her hand slipped out from mine. I looked at my left hand, because it hurt, and saw two holes, [and] it was covered with

[23] Not so fast (Ger.).
[24] The blonde, the brunette (Ger.).

blood. I put my head down again, because I was very tired. Despite exhaustion and dizziness, I asked myself the question, what to do next? I didn't know the area, didn't know exactly where I was, and I thought that if I managed to escape I must head for the woods – but I was naked. We were not far from the road that led to the "settlement". Maybe I should go to the settlement and get dressed? But in order to get there, one needs to pass by the guardpost. The gate was lit, and the [distance] to the settlement was about 2 km. Then I see two Ukrainians [coming] from the settlement, walking briskly, as if afraid of the dead. My plan was unworkable. I'm still lying down, asking myself why the bullet missed me, why didn't I give a sign of life? I have no chance of rescue, because I'm naked. I kept looking at the Ukrainians' barrack and the hotel – the windows were brightly lit. I see clearly – it seems I don't know whether it's a phantom – this naked woman running toward the gate, which I thought was impassable. I don't know if she passed through the gate, whether she survived – I couldn't see from that distance. My attention focused on the naked woman was distracted by shouts coming from the barrack or the hotel, I don't know exactly. Terrible shouts of women could be heard: "help, help!", repeated a number of times. I thought it would have been better if they had killed them like us; finally the shouts stopped. Suddenly, I heard a voice in the grave: "mummy, mummy!" and some other words I couldn't understand because they were drowned by the raging wind. I wanted to ask who was alive, but I was afraid. It became totally dark. It must have been 7 o'clock, or perhaps later, when I noticed that on the guardpost side a wild fire had just started. The glow was moving toward the barracks where our clothes were. Seeing the fire, I was scared. I thought they were burning the corpses, and to be burnt alive would have been horrible. Scared to death, I stroked my daughter's back, afraid to kiss, frightened of the naked, blood-spattered bodies. I threw the twigs off me, climbed over the pile of corpses and ran toward the woods. Having taken a few steps on all fours, I see two naked women. I joined them and not knowing what I was doing I touched them with my hand and asked if they were alive. They reply that they are alive and I started stroking them in disbelief. We couldn't stay there much longer because the site of the execution was too close. We decided to head for Młynki, the nearest village. I remembered that I had four thousand zlotys, so I tell my companions in distress: "Don't worry that you're naked. I have some money and we'll be able to get some clothes." They were delighted, asking how I kept the money, and I showed them that it's not hard to hide paper money. We had no time to lose and we quickly burst on all fours into the nearest hut. In one room an old couple lived. God, how warm it was in there. The elderly couple were scared of us and crossed themselves, seeing three naked women. The old woman threw us a pair of shabby trousers and a shabby dress and started throwing us out, fearing that we might bring the Ukrainians. I ran to the stove to get some warmth, but the hag didn't let me; we had to leave. One of my companions tore off some drape and wrapped it around her. On my way out I took some of that drape and covered myself a bit. We burst into another house, asked for some hot water, a blouse for me, because I was still naked, a piece of bread each, and we had to go on. We entered one more hut. A young girl threw us a linen skirt and told us to leave at once. We decided not to enter any more huts. It was dark and we were looking for a haystack to

hide. There was a haystack nearby; we climbed it and hid in it completely. The wind blew through and the hay gave no warmth. It was already daylight when we heard a peasant working near the stack. A woman came out of the hut to feed the chickens; it must have already been quite late. One of my companions, called Rózia, didn't hesitate, jumped out of [our] hole and entered the hut, asking for some clothes; of course she was thrown out together with us from the stack, and ran so fast that we lost sight of her. We walked on our own, [but] we took a wrong course. The area is marshy – we waded in the mud up to our knees and luckily we reached the end of that village. A woman stops us and says, "Which of you has money, come with me." I was afraid to say I did, but when she said the third companion was in the house, I followed her. Rózia arranged with her that we'd stay with her for two days and she would bring us some clothes. She gave us an old summer coat – Tusia (my second companion) put it on. I gave the woman 1,000 zlotys to get us one more coat; there was a friend of hers, who left and returned saying that we had to leave the hut because all the neighbours had seen us coming in. Naturally, we ran out quickly, leaving her the 1,000 zlotys for that rag. We went further toward the village of Poniatowa, but here no one would let us in, so we had to head for the woods. In the woods, there were heaps of leaves and sticks, which peasants collect for firewood, and as we were cold, without thinking too long, having a piece of bread, we got into the [heap of] leaves, and covered ourselves completely so as not to be seen by anyone. We stayed there till morning. In the morning, when we heard voices we stuck out our heads; we saw a couple of peasants, a man and woman, [so] we decided to approach them. He turned out to be a decent man, and agreed to bring us some old clothes and hot milk. It didn't take him long to actually bring them, but they were literally rags and shabby shoes, and a pot of hot milk and some bread. We drank the milk first to warm up a bit. My companions put those rags on, but I, unfortunately, could not get dressed on account of my hand. I wore a man's jacket; the sleeve stuck to my wound, and I had to tear it off. The hand was swelling and hurting. I put the empty jacket on my shoulders, wrapped my feet in rags and slid them into the shabby men's slippers. I paid a pretty penny, being grateful for what he'd brought us. That day we walked on, because we had to get as far away from the camp as we could. We went to one more village, but they threw us out because we were conspicuous because of the clothes we were wearing and our terrible appearance, [as] our faces were full of pain. We again found some hay and hid there for the night. In the morning we went to a village again. Tusia was still barefoot; we needed to find her some shoes and have some hot coffee. We went to the poorest huts to pay and sit in warmth for a few hours. Tusia bought some shoes and torn stockings for us all. Rózia also bought a scarf to cover the rags I was wearing and after some dispute, [with] a woman who had no change to give us, they threatened us and we had to leave the hut in a hurry. We decided not to stop in every village but to walk quickly to Warsaw. We found out that no peasant would agree to keep us on account of the Ukrainians. We only stopped in Kowale. We saw a shop at the entrance to the village, with a shop assistant outside. Rózia took my 500 zlotys and approached her; she then brought us bread and sausage, and promised to hide us in a barn for a few days or more. As I have said already, we were conspicuous because of our clothes

and appearance; children came running after us, so we ran in different directions. I found Tusia. We wanted to hide away from the children, so we sat down by the haystack, not hiding inside. Unfortunately, the children found us, and soon some adults surrounded us. They threatened to take us to the head of the village council or to the gendarmes. I asked them to let us go; I begged, I cried. Finally they searched us thoroughly, even gynaecologically, where I hid the money, which, luckily, they didn't find. I asked them to let us stay there for the night and cover ourselves with straw, because it was raining. They did and I thought it was over. But, some minutes later two peasants came again and told us to get up, saying they would take us somewhere, where we'd find a better place, but they wouldn't tell us where. We went with them for a long time, and finally I asked them to let us walk alone. They agreed and left. Tusia wanted to walk where they told us to go, but I decided not to. A few minutes later we hear dogs barking, the same peasants come, approach us, give us bread and tell us to follow them; we had no choice, we had to go. They led us out of the village by a back road, pointing to a path we were to follow. I ask about the name of the village we are to reach. They wouldn't tell us. I felt instinctively that we shouldn't go in the direction they pointed, and I did the right thing not to do that: the road led to the camp, as I found out later. They left us on our own. So we sat, waiting for the footsteps to fade away and for the lights to go out in the whole village. It was raining harder and harder, the wind was raging, and we got soaked, so we cuddled one another, hoping it would be warmer that way, and thus we sat for three hours or so. When everything went quiet we decided to go back to the village. In the dark we looked for straw, but there wasn't any around. We only found clover covered with straw. So we sat down, covering ourselves with a thin layer of wet straw. Only early in the morning, at daybreak, did we look for a more convenient place. It was Sunday and we didn't want to walk on, afraid of the peasants. We didn't reach our hideaway until Monday morning. It was too late to look for Rózia and we never saw her again. On Monday morning we reached the village of Huty. When we saw a small, low hut, we entered a room with only an 11-year-old girl inside, who was stacking tobacco leaves. I asked if she wouldn't be afraid if we stayed with her and if her mother wouldn't be angry when she found us here. She gave positive answers. After an hour or so [her] mother and grandmother came. Somehow they weren't angry. I apologised for the intrusion. The women guessed who we were; I offered her [some] money for hiding us for a few days, because our legs were swollen and all in wounds. She agreed but her 13-year-old whelp wouldn't. We had to leave and look for shelter in the dark. In the morning we left the haystack and headed for the woods; there was more warmth in the leaves and there we spent the whole day again. At night, when it was very dark already, we returned to that peasant woman, giving her money to buy us clogs, stockings for me, a skirt and headscarf; we asked her to cook us some potatoes with milk because we hadn't had a hot meal for two days. We were to come back to get it next evening, that is on Wednesday. One more day in the leaves; fortunately, she turned out to be a decent woman and bought us everything. We hid, ate, got dressed, then back again to the woods and into the leaves. In the meantime, my wound grew wider day by day, and my hand was swollen to the fingertips, I had constant fever. I thought I had an infection, be-

cause I hadn't cleaned the wound; after all, I didn't have the necessary things to do that, and I didn't have a clean rag to dress the wound. I decided to see the doctor in Kazimierz on Thursday morning, though it was dangerous, because of the work detail that was executed on Friday 5 November. Still, I was determined, because I needed a doctor to see my hand. If it had been necessary to amputate, I would certainly have poisoned myself, because living alone as a cripple would have been truly pointless. We weren't far from Kazimierz when a car appeared and we instinctively pulled back and off the road, and we entered a hut. We told a story that we had been deported from the East, I got wounded and had to see a doctor in Kazimierz. The peasant woman understood that our situation was difficult and said we shouldn't go to Kazimierz, because they check the papers at the town limits. She said we'd better go to Męczmierz. There were fishermen who would certainly ferry us across the Vistula river. I decided not to see the doctor, and without thinking we carried on. On our way we met a few women carrying baskets, as if on their way to a fair; I asked one of them if she'd sell me a headscarf, because I was cold, and she said no. But another one said, "Tell me women, where are you coming from? Don't be afraid, tell me, where are you from?" She added, "If my sister was here, she would certainly be interested in [helping] you." When we heard this, we told her everything. I took hold of her hand, asking about her sister. It turned out that the sister was in church in Kazimierz, and probably would be coming soon. We begged her for a long time and the woman stayed with us, waiting for her sister. Soon the sister we wanted to meet so much arrived. When she saw us, she started crying, and said that on the Thursday, that fateful Thursday, she had arranged to meet with her foster child who she wanted to pick up with her husband and child. On the Thursday, she went to the settlement, approached, as usual, the barbed-wire fence and heard the shots only. The settlement was quiet – only the wind shook the trees. So, with those people on her conscience, she wants to save us, [and] will take us to Warsaw. She asked if we had some money for the trip. I replied that I had some for the trip. She told us to stay in the woods, because she could not take us home in broad daylight, and said she would later bring us hot soup. In the meantime we had to go to a ditch which ran along the entire width of the forest. We headed for this ditch, picking up sticks to avoid looking conspicuous. We were tired, so we sat down. Then a young peasant came to the ditch to collect some leaves. When we saw him we suddenly bent down to pick up sticks. We wanted to find out if he could be harmful, so I asked him about the weather – it was a beautiful sunny day, and in the sun it was even rather warm. The peasant realized that we were Jewish, [because] he knew in the first place that we were strangers, and people in the country know each other very well. He told us in the first place not to be afraid of us, that he would do us no harm, but would try to help us. He said that they had been hiding a certain Abramek from Kazimierz for a long time, but he didn't know what had become of him. He said he knew a city lady who several times had already taken Jews from the camp to Warsaw. He said he would put us up for the night and would contact . . . . After he described Maria we realized that it was the same woman who agreed to help us. In the meantime this peasant's sister arrived. She was picking sticks, and he asked her to tell his wife that he'd be bringing two Jewish women. Before nightfall Maria came with some hot

soup, and seeing that we were talking with this peasant, she asked him to put us up for the night, because her flat was very cramped. He replied that it was what he was going to do. He only didn't know that we knew her already. At the time I was afraid to admit that we'd already made arrangements with her. It was already dark when he took us in. He lived in one small room, had a wife and two small children, and despite all that he let us stay for two days. We had to tell this peasant's family our story, how we survived. We were worried because we didn't know what we'd do when we got to Warsaw. The money was gone, we had no IDs, no friends. In a word, we were in an unenviable situation. Stefan kept reassuring us that rich Jews would certainly help us; he knew there was some aid for the poor. Of course I [l]aughed at his words, not knowing there was aid for us, the unfortunate ones. On Saturday the gendarmes arrived to collect the levy, so we had to leave the village quickly. Mrs . . . brought us clothes, helped us get dressed, and we went to Kazimierz, stopping at the doctor's on the way. I had to tell the doctor another story, that we had been attached by bandits, giving him the name of some village, and that I left the place and was accidentally shot. The doctor dressed the wound and told me to visit him every day, because the wound had been neglected and the hand was putrefying at a frightening speed. Mrs . . . , having done some more errands, bought us bread and sausage, took us to her friends' home, where we ate, and then took a droshky to the Puławy train station. We had a little adventure on the train, namely, Tusia was holding Mrs . . .'s basket. Gendarmes, looking for smuggled goods, approached her, and searched her basket; she got lost and became terribly anxious. The civilian who was with the gendarmes shone his torch straight into her eyes and said, "Looks very Jewish". She turned away and somehow luckily it all passed. Without any further adventures, we arrived in Warsaw.

In the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, in the "testimonies of Jewish survivors", I found under No. 1013 an interview with Ludwika's companion, Tusia, i.e. Estera Rubinsztein, born in 1913 in Warsaw. The interview, by an employee of the Jewish Historical Commission, Klara Mirska, written down in Łódź on 15 November 1945, amounts to 33 manuscript pages. Klara Mirska put a comment at the end: "Even now the witness has very strong feelings when she talks about her experiences. Evidently, these stories bother her. They are a real ordeal, still shocking." I also have the second testimony of Ester, later Mrs Winderbaum, written down in 1964 and deposited in the Yad Vashem Archives (03/2344).[25]

A comparison of the two testimonies, written down almost exactly within two years of each other, allows us to formulate a few cautious observations on the nature of Holocaust survivors' testimonies. I use Estera's second testimony only in the footnotes to show how her memory of her most tragic experiences evolved further.

The fact that there are independent testimonies by people who experienced unusual events, impossible even to imagine for the man in the street, puts a Holocaust historian in a special situation. First, we have very important proof that not only confirms the truthfulness of Holocaust survivors, but also even the suggestion that

[25] I am grateful to Barbara Engelking-Boni for making it available.

many details of the more frequently bad than good contacts with the witnesses of their tragedy were very quickly suppressed. This is extremely important in the context of the recent discussion on the nature of such testimonies which began in the wake of Jan. T. Gross's *Neighbours*. Gross suggested that the testimonies of Jewish survivors be believed first and only then, in good faith, should one correct the minor discrepancies in the stories. In the background, however, there was a more radical opinion, which is directly related to Polish-Jewish relations. Simplified, it could be reduced to the opinion that if there is so much evil in those testimonies, then, in fact, there must have been far more evil than that. With some caution, I am inclined to accept this view and I think that, in this context, the historical materials justify it. During the war, evil came to light more often than we would wish today, and it had more variety than the good which sometimes surfaced. However, anyone who stood face to face with evil, and of those hiding Jews only a few survived the encounter, rarely pondered on the motives behind evil people's actions. We, mainly historians, too often fall these days into the trap of trying to explain these motives at any price. To do that, we often contextualise accuser's words, unaware of the profound influence of ideology on Polish reactions, in this particular case anti-Semitism and national xenophobia. We try to demonstrate, at any price, how much Holocaust witnesses were risking, even in the slightest attempt at offering help; we keep recalling the 700–1,000 Polish victims of German terror for helping Jews. Some historians even write about the banditry of groups of ghetto refugees and escaped Soviet POWs, adding that Polish partisans were primarily obliged to help their countrymen, that taking risks in conspiratorial activity relieved them from taking other dangerous actions, because it would increase the risk of being uncovered by the occupier. This multitude of arguments drowns the obvious observations based on sources that there were simply many evil Poles, evil people.

Nevertheless, a comparison of these texts shows the episodic nature of the memory[26] of people who had such experiences, as, for example of both refugees from the Poniatowa graves. Both texts have an identical narrative structure, and are dominated by a very detailed, even graphic description of the execution and a profound memory of the subsequent fear of Poles met during the escape. In Rubinstein's testimony this distrust is evident even in her attitude to the landlords in whose flats both refugees were hiding until the Warsaw Uprising. In the testimonies of their escape and their subsequent hiding there is virtually no mention of Germans or Ukrainians or of them being the threat to their lives. At that time, only the local Poles counted: the peasants who could call the gendarmes or the blackmailers (*szmalcownicy*) hunting the so-called "cats" on the Aryan side, or drunks and other riffraff giving

[26] In his review of Jan T. Gross's book ("Sąsiedzi – zwykła recenzja", *Więź* No. 12 (2001); 72 – 99) he says that retrospective memory largely depends on the changing schemata of collective memory which organise human memory. In other words, human memory is not a mechanical record of events, but a construction made up of one's own words, one's own imagination of these experiences and testimonies of these events by other people. Also, "biographical memory is episodic: it retains the essence of things, developed by the mind, while the unimportant details shift onto other situations, e.g. onto other murderers."

vent to their phobias. In this context, Maria Maciąg, who in fact saved them, is not an ordinary, religious, noble Polish woman, but an angel, whose relations with the outside world are accidental. In Warsaw, it is not Poles who help the refugees, but an "organisation" with Dr Adolf Berman being the only one remembered.

Naturally, Fiszer's testimony of her escape is more detailed, and as her memory was more vivid, she was able to distinguish between different threats encountered in different villages. The peasants she met looked differently and differently expressed their surprise at the sight of the refugees. Thanks to this story we can "make a still," which shows how the witnesses' surprise at the sight of the two women turns into their decision how to react to that very encounter and to the helpless people. Sometimes fear takes the upper hand, sometimes compassion, sometimes also calculation and aversion. This type of testimony is extremely rare, even in those given by Jewish survivors in the immediate post-war years; the picture they give is too sketchy to identify what Holocaust witnesses actually were thinking. On the other hand, in testimonies written down many years after the war, the witnesses' characteristics as well as dialogues are always fiction. In our case, we see, as early as two years later, what disappeared from memory burdened with such a great trauma, aware of the magnitude of personal and social disaster. Even the third companion disappeared from memory; those who survived could not help her, so she was suppressed into oblivion. Estera remembers Ludwika's name only after a direct interviewer's question, and does not remember calling her tenderly "Tusia". Perhaps the reason was fear or remorse that probably Ludwika did not survive the war, and that the sequence of miraculous accidents in her life was suddenly interrupted. Her memory returned in the 1960s. I do not know how both women established contact so close that Estera included in her testimony a copy of Ludwika Fiszer's (Fischer) testimony. This is what she said about her: "My unexpected companion was wounded in the hand. She'd told me that the same bullet which wounded her hand killed her 12-year-old daughter. Just like me, she'd lost consciousness, and she found herself in a mass grave, next to her dead daughter. She informed me later that her name was Ludwika Fischer and she had a hairdresser's shop in Warsaw before the war. At present Ludwika is in America. She remarried and her name is Chanesman."[27]

We know more about Estera than about Ludwika. This is largely thanks to Klara Mirska, who interviewed her, and hence the testimony quoted below. She was born in Warsaw in 1917. She described her occupation as a laboratory assistant, although her testimony demonstrates that she was an experienced seamstress. By April 1943, she had worked for seven months with her husband, two brothers and at least one sister in law at Fritz Schultz's furrier's shop in Nowolipie Street (the main shop was located at No. 44, the second at Nowolipie 80, the third at Pawia 38), which had operated since September 1941. They lived in that street at No. 25, and during the uprising they stayed in a camouflaged bunker. They left the ghetto (without the second brother and his wife) during the so-called "third amnesty" (the Germans announced via shop employees that those who left of their own accord would go to labour camps) around 28 April. After selection at the Umschlagplatz, they were transported

[27] A Yad Vashem testimony.

in cattle trucks, packed to the limits of their capacity, via Lublin, Nałęczów and the subsequent selections to Poniatowa. Here Estera worked for seven months in the basket shop and her husband in the spinning mill. Like Ludwika, she recalls the chief tormentors, Gley and Hering, inhuman work conditions, life in the barrack/factory building and in the "settlement" and work in the details. Not many people escaped from or otherwise got out of the camp. Only "a group of artists, who for big money made it to Hannover, [but] before that they had been taken to Warsaw to Długa Street." Thus: "some fled to the countryside, but there were gangs, who had nothing in common with the partisans, and people had to because they had no choice." Estera's description of the executions so much overlaps with Ludwika's that I decided not to quote it. Let me begin with her departure from the grave: "Suddenly I woke up and lifted my heave head, not knowing where I was. I saw a big fire. Then I recalled my brother's story about Germans burning people alive. I didn't want to be burnt alive. I summoned all my strength to stand up, but I couldn't. As I didn't know what to do next, I began crawling on my belly over the dead bodies, and I got across the field to the woods. In the woods I found a naked woman, just like myself. We looked at one another, and, in silence, we crawled further, fell into the water, but we got out and thus we reached the first hut. Unfortunately, we got no help. The peasant, seeing two naked women shouted: Jesus, ghosts have come to strangle us."[28] We ran to the next hut. The same thing happened. We were terribly worried, and we needed to get some rags to cover our naked bodies. Thus we wandered in the woods till morning. We decided to steal something from a hut because we couldn't walk naked. In the morning we entered a hut, snatched a table cloth from a trunk and we covered ourselves with it.[29] We continued through the forest and found a heap of leaves and hid inside it. We covered ourselves and like that we lay there all day. Early in the morning we went to find some food. On our way to the village we were attacked by hooligans, who dragged us to a barn, threatening to shoot us if we didn't give them money. They thought that since we'd got out of the camp, we had to have money. Our begging was to no avail – they kept as all day in the barn, tormented us horribly and carried out a gynaecological search.[30] Seeing that we had nothing, they released us only in the morning, directing us toward the camp. We were forced to head in that direction, as they were following us. Suddenly there was a downpour. They left us in the middle of a field and threatened that if we didn't go straight on, they would take revenge on us. We waited for some time, but they were still in sight. We were desperate. We hadn't eaten anything for three days.

[28] AJW testimony: "After a long journey in already dark woods, we reached a hut, but the people there got scared and chased us away. The peasant shouted, "Ghosts". We were both covered with blood, naked, and the peasant could easily think we were the ghosts of the murdered."

[29] AJW testimony: "Finally, in the morning, desperate and terribly cold, we entered a hut where two old people lived. They too were very scared of us, but we, determined to go to any lengths, snatched a rag off a trunk and covered ourselves with it."

[30] AJW testimony: "Early in the morning we came across some hooligans from the village. They drove us to a barn, where they beat and tormented us, looking for hidden money. When they didn't find them, they decided to take us to the camp. Fortunately, it started to rain hard and the hooligans left, threatening us."

We decided to take a chance again. We entered another hut, asking for some rags, got a piece of bread and heard that we'd better move away, because everyone in the whole village knew that two naked Jewish women were wandering from village to village.[31] We quickly ran back to our shelter, that heap of leaves, and thus we spent 8 days in the woods. Peasants came in horse-drawn carts to collect leaves to put them on their huts. When a good peasant, who was picking up leaves with his fork, saw us, he took pity on us, and decided to pick leaves from another heap, while others uncovered us with pleasure, laughing at two Jewish women hiding in the woods. Usually they chased us away.[32] We decided to move on, because we could no longer stay there. The entire village knew about us. We wrapped our feet with rags, which fell off after a few steps and we had to fix them. We couldn't walk through villages in such clothes, because even children threw stones at us. We had to walk across fields; it was terrible. Thus we reached Kazimierz.[33] On the way we bumped into a woman, Maria Maciąg[34] from the village of Rogowo, who enquired about our situation, and whether we were coming from Poniatowa. After some time we did admit we were and asked her for help. She showed us the way to the pits and promised to bring us some hot food. We waited impatiently for her to return, thinking she was not coming back. Then we heard footsteps, and finally it was the same woman with a pot of soup. She gave us the food and said she couldn't do more to help us. We both, as if as one, started crying. We were so helpless, and we knew we couldn't survive like that. We begged her not to leave us – we promised that if she took us to Warsaw, we would reward her generously. After some lengthy persuasion, she took us to her hut, gave us hot water, and we were finally able to wash the blood off our

[31] AJW testimony: "In one of the huts we got a piece of bread, but were chased away at once, and they told us that everyone in the whole village was talking about two naked Jewish women wandering through the woods."

[32] AJW testimony: "The peasants who came to pick leaves and sticks in the woods often found us there. Sometimes a merciful peasant did not disturb our heap of leaves, and even gave us something to eat. But more often they would torment us and ridicule us."

[33] In the AJW testimony, Estera before describing her encounter with Maria Maciąg, added: "in our sojourning we met one more Jewish woman, who escaped during the execution. Her name was Rózia (I can't recall her surname) and she accompanied us for some time. But one day, when we weren't lucky in one of the villages and were chased, we lost sight of her and never saw her again." Estera remembers as well: "we were already (a few weeks later) dressed so-so in some rags, because Ludka had managed to hide (gynaecologically) some money and we brought some clothes from a peasant woman."

[34] AJW testimony: "Then we met Maria Maciąg, a peasant woman from Rogowo. Before the war, she'd been a nanny with a Jewish family in Warsaw. She told us she'd been trying to save her young employers and their child, but when she arrived at Poniatowa it was too late. The young parents and the child were already dead. She had pangs of conscience for not saving them. Then, moved by our appearance and our hopeless situation, she decided to save us and thus at least relieve her conscience." As for people with that name I only found information in *The Encyclopaedia of the Righteous Among the Nations. Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust. Poland*, S. Bender and S. Krakowski, eds., (Jerusalem: 2004), 273. The encyclopaedia mentions Stanisław and Maria Maciąg, but their biographical entry does not specify whether during the occupation they lived in Kraków or the Lublin region. They did help a Jewish refugee from Lublin, Artur Wellner.

faces. Then she found some old clothes and gave them to us. We were lucky because God had sent us an angel. We stayed with her for three days. She took us to the doctor, who dressed our wounds. We had to tell the doctor that bandits attacked the village and we got wounded. Three days later we went on, but not on our own and in a slightly different state. Our guardian bought the tickets and we got on the train; we thought that everyone was looking at us, knowing who we were. There was even a small incident on the train. Someone who was watching us carefully, in the presence of a German, said that we must be Jewish, but, fortunately, the German walked away and didn't hear these words. We finally reached our destination."

The next part of Estera Rubinstein's testimony supplements our knowledge of the subsequent experiences of our heroines and those of Estera after they were separated. This material is so interesting that I quote it in full. It does, in fact, supplement our knowledge of the "Aryan" side, and the conditions survivors had to live in, hiding among their fellow citizens and neighbours. Each reader will certainly formulate their own opinion on the war, the occupation, human nature, the role of accidental events, etc., and I shall refrain from comment.

"In Warsaw. Our guardian took us to a flat in Mariensztat. It was in the basement and there was a bed in it. 'We're so lucky,' we said, 'we can lie down in a bed.' Through her niece who died [later], our guardian got in touch with an organization which offered help to Jews in hiding. (Already here, in Łódź, I met Dr Adolf Berman during a talk. I introduced myself to him. He didn't know me personally, but knew that I was on the list of those being offered help.) My step-daughter got in touch with Guzik. He quickly sent us some money and a doctor. We were the focus of everyone's attention, because we had witnessed the slaughter of Jews at Poniatowa. The people from the organization promised to find us a place to stay. Five days later, a messenger from the organization arrived, and told us to get dressed and follow him; he also said that if anyone were to stop us on the way, he would shoot and we were to run toward Krakowskie Przedmieście. We got dressed, left the house, got into a droshky, but the driver suspected something and demanded extra money for the 'cats' (a colloquial term for Jews in hiding). When he saw a revolver in the hand of our guardian he relented.[35] We got off in Muranowski Square. The new landlord didn't like us and bluntly refused to put us up for the night. We were terribly worried, [because] such a sojourn across Warsaw took a heavy toll on me. But our guardian comforted us and remembered that he had one more flat where he used to put up people for a few days. He took us to Próżna Street to the janitor. His flat was under the stairs. He put us under a cupboard, where we could only sit, and it was impossible to stand up. Thus we sat for an entire day. On the second day, our landlord got drunk and started hitting us, and we, two emaciated, sorrowful women, had to fight with an old drunkard. Three days later, people from the organization came to collect us. But we were afraid to cross the street, aware that, given our state, we might look suspicious, and asked our guardians to bring our new landlady to take

[35] AJW testimony: "Suddenly, when we were on the way, the droshky driver said to our companion, 'Give me something for these cats,' with an evil smile, 'but not this... .' Then the young man, without saying a word, drew his revolver and put it against the droshky driver's head."

a good look at us, so that we wouldn't have to come back if she didn't like us. But, fortunately, she did – that is, not us, but twelve thousand zlotys that she was promised to be paid every month. Our new landlord's name was Dubiecka, and she lived in Mokotów, at 42 Madalińskiego Street. There were 13 Jews (including ourselves) hiding in her flat, and she received for each of us 6 thousand zlotys a month.[36] She was hiding a famous rich Warsaw family, the Rowińskis, who had a big tricot clothing wholesale store in Nalewki Street, known as Braun and Rowiński company. The family survived, and I think that they live in Warsaw. Only here did I break down. I was seriously ill for five months. I had fits of fury, and had to be tied. We lived with her for 6 months, but because our landlady had contacts with the Home Army, her flat was blown. It was in May 1944. Our landlady went to church for the May service and put a padlock on the door, locking us in. After she'd left a Gestapo car pulled up and the functionaries turned toward our staircase. Then we a heard the padlock move. Each of us was prepared to jump out of the window if they entered the flat. Fortunately, they went back downstairs, entered the janitor's lodging and then left. We were calm again. After some time, the landlady returned. We told her about what had happened and she moved us to the attic. As it turned out, the janitor knew she was hiding some people, but he didn't know that they were Jews, because our landlady had told him she was hiding Polish soldiers.

After this incident, my companion and I were moved to another flat, where the conditions were far worse. We lived with a fortune-teller in a single bedroom in Puławska Street. When her clients came we would hide. During the uprising we hid, together with other tenants, in the basement. Some women identified us as Jews. They began to drive people out of the basement. My companion and I decided to stay put. We hid under the coal; we were hungry and cold. The Germans searched the basements, taking away goods. That's how we survived three weeks. At night we would leave to get water and food. The Germans started setting houses on fire. The building began crumbling down. Three weeks later Poles came to steal things. Once a German flashed his torch into our eyes. But he didn't see us. We wanted to leave the basement so we could at least die in the open air. But something happened and it saved us. After three weeks came Poles, escorted by SS-men, to dig trenches at Okęcie. During their lunch break, they came down into our basement in order to steal something. One of us stood facing them, dirty and covered with down, asking for help. One of the Poles advised us to follow him to the work detail, and then, after work, we could go where we wanted. We got dressed and went to the work detail in the trenches. From there, separately, as we had decided to separate due to the way we looked, we went our own ways. I have never seen my companion since and don't know what happened to her. Her name was Ludka Fiszer. She was a hairdresser by occupation, a Varsovian, and lost her child at Poniatowa.

I headed for Piaseczno. Then I came to the village of Cieżków-Helenów. I entered a peasant's hut, and told him I had escaped from Pruszków and that I had bought

[36] AJW testimony: "Our guardians found us a new hideaway. This time with a lady in Mokotów, who was hiding over a dozen Jews in her flat. She told her neighbours she was hiding Polish officers. She charged 6 thousand per head."

my way out with a Ukrainian. I told him that my family was across the Vistula river. I said I was a dressmaker. They gave me a dress to make, but I ruined it; later I did knitwear. This peasant's daughter stayed with him for a short while, and she claimed I was Jewish. With my heart pounding, I gave her my false ID, so she could register me. They did not realize it was false, but I was not registered because only relatives were entitled. The owner's daughter wanted me to work for her for free. Seeing she was getting more and more impudent, I decided to leave her. In order to earn some money I had to go to the market to buy things, but people recognized that I was Jewish. I never dared to turn up at the market again. The owner's son finally put me somewhere else. There they also whispered that I was Jewish. I had a terrible experience when I was getting my local registration. A woman was standing behind me. A policeman picked her up as a Jewish woman, took her outside and shot. I got my registration.

I had no peace in my new flat, either.[37] My landlord's sons often got drunk and harassed me. I told them my husband was in Prusy. I would write fake letters from my husband, which would move them. I also suffered for another reason. My landlord often reproached me for my lack of piety. In order to divert suspicion I would go to church and pray, but I was still afraid they would find out I was Jewish. From the material point of view I was all right, because I had enough food. I did crocheting and sewing and thus I went on until the Red Army came. When the Red Army came, I went to Piaseczno, where I found out that the Committee was located in Praga[38]. There I got some money and went to Łódź. Despite my searching I didn't find my sister, who was hiding on Aryan papers."

Klara Mirska asked Estera a few more questions about stealing the tablecloth and not running away from the provocative peasants. Whether the explanation convinced her is hard to say, but she noted: "Estera Rubinstein explained that they were terribly resigned, that they'd escaped from Poniatowa not to live, but to die a different death, that they simply were not avoiding death". Finally she added a comment I have already quoted: "Some remarks on the witness: Even now the witness has very strong feelings when she talks about her experiences. Evidently, these stories bother her. They are a real ordeal, still shocking."

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[37] AJW testimony: "When the uprising broke out, our situation changed. When the Germans drove the Poles to Pruszków, I went to a village and told the peasant that I'd escaped from Pruszków. I asked for work. I could sew and did a little crochet. In order to pass for someone else, I would go to church. Life was hard, because despite the name in my ID, Maria Konopka, some began to guess that I was Jewish."

[38] AJW testimony: "When the Russians came, I was liberated. But fear didn't go away. The situation was still uncertain, the authorities were only beginning to function, and a Jew could easily be killed by unknown perpetrators. Once I came to the market in Pruszków to sell some dairy products and I heard a peasant woman shout: 'Look, a Jew!' This is how sensational the appearance of a Jew was in those days. I ran away quickly to avoid danger. But slowly things were getting back to normal. With the money I earned selling things, I bought a blanket and a pillow. The deadly fear of being discovered as a Jew was slowly disappearing. I was slowly returning to normal life."