

JAN RZYMĘŁKA

Warsaw, 22 March 1947. A member of District Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes, Acting Judge Halina Wereńko, interviewed the person named below as a witness, without an oath. Having been advised of the criminal liability for making false declarations and the obligation to speak the truth, the witness testified as follows:

Name and surname	Jan Rzymęłka
Parents' names	Jan, Antonina née Wolfów
Date of birth	18 September 1877, in Józefowiec, near Katowice
Education	Jagiellonian and Theological University, 4 years
Religious affiliation	Roman Catholic
Place of residence	Warszawa, by the Holy Cross Church
Occupation	parish priest in the Holy Cross parish

Being the parish priest in the Holy Cross parish in Warsaw, I was first imprisoned by the Germans on 3 October 1939 along with 213 Warsaw priests and many people of the intelligentsia. I was put in Pawiak prison, where I found out that we'd been arrested as hostages, and if there was any operation carried out by the Poles on 5 October aiming to interfere with Hitler's victory parade, we would be executed. On 5 October, I was released due to my advanced age. 27 prelates and prominent priests remained imprisoned as political hostages. Having been the President of the West Kresy Defense Association [Towarzystwo Obrony Kresów Zachodnich] in the years 1919-1921, I was wanted by the Katowice Gestapo via the Warsaw Gestapo in connection with the Upper Silesia plebiscite.

In the period between 7 July 1942 and 17 May 1943 I was in hiding in various places due to alerts from the Polish Underground. Finally, having arranged things by bribing Gestapo men in Warsaw with 19 thousand zlotys, I was released after a two-day investigation on 18 May 1943.

Two months after the assault on Kutschera (7 February 1944) I was captured again, based on a denunciation. 21 priests were arrested then, including two brothers from the Holy Cross parish in Warsaw. After two days of investigation on Szucha Avenue, six priests were released: fathers Więckiewicz, Jan Dim, Józef Leńko, Stanisław Skorupiński, Witold Ornaf, Baner, Florko, Serżysko, Bronisław Szymański, brothers Józef Stopiński, and Aleksander Cap. Later, the priests Paszena and Cechala, who were ill, were freed.

On 29 March 1944, I was deported in a transport of 550 prisoners including 64 criminals, mostly smugglers. In a group of nine priests and six brothers, we were put in Gross-Rosen concentration camp. I stayed in that camp until 8 February 1945, when I was transported to Dora Nordhausen camp, where I lived from 8 February 1945 to 29 March 1945, and then I was moved to Bergen (Belsen) camp, where I remained between 30 March 1945 and 15 April 1945 until being freed by the English.

The transport from Pawiak was carried out in such a way that we were tied together in fives, squeezed into cattle wagons (with no buckets), with slaked lime covering the floor, 70 prisoners in each wagon. It had already been a pain to live with the criminals back in Pawiak, since those bums were stealing from each other and trading rags and shoes at night, which resulted in harassments by the *kapos*, to which we also became subject.

Upon our arrival at the Gross-Rosen station, we were pushed out of the sealed wagons and lined up in fives amid beating. Escorted by armed SS men, we were dropped at block 8 in the camp. They gave us soup and pallets, quartering three hundred people in a hall. They kept order through constant beating. Next day the personal data of the newcomers was recorded in alphabetic order and we were hustled to the roll call square. The priests were insulted because of their cassocks. I – the eldest one – was punched by an SS man seven times in two hours, having a couple of my teeth knocked out. Then, in a 15-degree frost, we were ordered to strip naked and run to the showers. They took our belongings into the storehouse. Having shaved all our hair off and bathed us, pouring disinfecting fluids over our bodies, SS men, with Drozdowski leading, beat us up with rubber truncheons. I took five blows in the head then. Next, we were dressed in wooden clogs and dirty striped uniforms, some of them with the “SUS” inscription, with crosses on the backs. We were assigned prisoner numbers. I received the number 26,046. Then, on the roll call square, the elder prisoners were appointed to earthworks, the younger ones to granite quarries and cement works. The work was extremely hard, lasted for the whole day with a meal break. Two weeks in, we were categorized

accordingly to our professions, placing groups in different blocks. The medical commission consisted of the *Lagerarzt*, the Polish doctors (Dr. Biały, among others) and the SS men.

What were the camp's regulations and whether all of the harassments of the prisoners were resulting from secret instructions, I don't know. I suppose all of the harassments were arising from the camp's organization, which was aiming to annihilate prisoners by extreme work and poor conditions.

I don't know the precise statistics regarding the number of prisoners; the camp, including the *komandos* could have had around 30 thousand people. During my stay there were 61 priests, 20 survived.

I don't know anything about internees [POWs] in the camp.

In November or December 1944, they brought around fifteen priests from Belgium, partly from Brussels, but they were treated in the same way as other prisoners.

The priests didn't have any privileges in the camp. I had heard from Paweł Morgała, a functionary prisoner, that from 1 November 1943, by orders of the *Lagerkomendant*, the camp's regulations were loosened in such a way that *kapos* weren't supposed to kill prisoners at work or in the blocks, as it had been until then. Nevertheless, beatings and maltreatment did happen past that date, too.

Initially I was placed in block 5 – the *Polen Block*. Bolesław Książkiewicz was the block senior there, and Figiel from Sosnowiec in another part of the block. Two people slept in every bed, beds were three-tiered. Lice plagued us, but – according to the regulations – if a prisoner was revealed to have lice, he was beaten up. We were given *mehl*-soup in the morning (a soup with grains) or overcooked chicory and bread. For dinner, they served a liter of badly cooked rutabaga soup or kale with nettle. For supper, we would get a ladle of soup and 100 grams of bread.

At first, I was assigned to earthworks. I worked with a shovel until 16 April 1944 when I suffered from hydrops [swelling] in my legs. I got better in spring and worked in the potato fields and at the crematory. I was retrieving bloodied bandages from boxes and digging them into the ground. I noticed ash and tiny, unburnt bones down below. I dug up all these, and then potatoes were planted in that place.

I got sick again, a wound broke open in my right leg, fluids leaked into the clogs, a membrane in my left ear popped. I was constantly put in front of the medical commission, stripped nineteen times. From June to September 1944 I was assigned to the so-called *Steikommando*, where mostly senior inmates worked – I was cleaning vegetables, washing the dishes. The functionary prisoners were rather leaving me alone, calling me *Prior*, but the SS men (with the skull's heads) beat me at every encounter. On the Maundy Thursday of 1944, an SS man caught me and another priest praying. He started harassing us, we had to do frogs, roll on the ground, and then clean lavatories as a punishment.

When it comes to guards, I remember Peter Pongartz, born in Aachen where he had a sister who was a nun. Pongartz didn't beat me – I actually managed to soften him, maybe thanks to my knowledge of German. However, in April 1944, I witnessed Pongartz beat up [?] priest Zygmunt Chmielnicki, a consecrated bishop from Żytomierz who had been brought with priests Syrowicz from Równe and Kąkol from Łuck. Priests Syrowicz and Kąkol left in a transport to Dachau in December 1944. Pongartz was beating father Chmielnicki with a pickaxe handle during work and fractured his kidney. When father Chmielnicki was dragged back to the camp after work, he died before he was brought to the *rewir* [infirmary]. I also saw Pongartz severely beat priest Pykosz, the director of Warsaw Salesians' Educational Care Center from father Siemiec's section, who – having been beaten on the kidneys – got cold in the rain and died. It was said in the camp that Pongartz was responsible for the death of 1.2 thousand of prisoners in Gross-Rosen and Sachsenhausen. Also Zbihorski, an ex-*starost* of Zamość, presently a lawyer or a clerk in Wrocław, got severely beaten while loading gravel onto a truck.

The guards on the watchtowers were Ukrainians, mostly *volksdeutscher* from Croatia and Slovakia. I don't know their surnames.

Known for his cruelty towards inmates was SS man Drozdowski, a former policeman of the mounted police of the XIIIth station in Warsaw, speaking with a Lithuanian accent. He was a dark-haired, tall man, thin but well built, with bright eyes, around 30 years old. Gładysz mentions him in his publication about Gross-Rosen.

The camp's authorities approved of torturing the prisoners, we never heard of reprimands for beatings, just the opposite – the functionary prisoners or SS men who were known for their cruelty were in a powerful position.

I don't know the camp commandant's name, I know that he rarely showed up in the camp.

I saw a public hanging of prisoners in October 1944. 4 German inmates were hanged for killing a *Lageraltester*.

Prisoner escapes were a rarity as it was almost impossible for them to succeed. More often, inmates would jump onto the electrified wires to find consolation in death from the electric shock or a guard's bullet. In June 1944, I saw a prisoner from a Białystok transport do just that and die. There were repressive measures within a block as a consequence of attempted escape. Those suspected of helping went to SK [penal block], and all others would have to do heavy labor. If a prisoner was missing during a roll call, the roll call lasted until he was found.

The medical assistance was provided by the camp's infirmary – the *rewir*. However, being admitted there was difficult. On the other hand, there was no space for the ill in the regular blocks, so – not being exempted from work – they died, tormented by beatings.

The sicknesses included those caused by the beatings, pneumonia, and starvation diarrhea – a result of wrecking the mucous membrane. Three quarters of prisoners were suffering either from ulcers, from the beating injuries or those caused by accidents at work. The ones who needed bandages reported to the block senior, and then they were directed to the *rewir* by the doctor, where they were assisted on an outpatient basis.

I didn't see living prisoners being thrown into the crematory.

I heard from the Germans that the most deaths during a workday in the year 1941 or 1942 was 170. I don't know the exact death statistics. More of them could be provided by Wejsberg (residing in Warsaw), who worked at the camp's offices.

At the end of September 1944, transports of troops from the Warsaw Uprising and civilians from Warsaw started arriving in the camp. They were isolated in a barb-wired barrack and we could only encounter them on Sundays. After tracking down a conspiracy against Hitler, around two hundred Germans were brought to block 8 – the conspiracy supporters.

From 8 February 1945, an ordered evacuation began. The weakest prisoners were left in the camp and I don't know about their fate. The healthy inmates were evacuated on foot, the mildly ill being sent by trains. Qualified as weak, I was placed in the *rewir*. On 8 February

1945, along with a transport of six thousand patients, we set off, allegedly to Buchenwald. On the way to the railway station (3 kilometers), two of the weak prisoners were killed by the SS, who threw the bodies into a ditch by the road. Others were threatened with trained dogs, who tore the uniforms and bit prisoners in the calves. We were loaded at night – it was freezing and snowing – onto open coal wagons, 109 people in each. My wagon was watched by two guards, *volkdeutscher* from Croatia. We were provided with rations for two days, we were traveling from 8 February to 12 February with no buckets, often going through side tracks, as the main lines had been bombed. Buchenwald refused to admit us, so we were taken to Nordhausen, to Dora camp where a huge Krupp factory was situated, hidden in a 4-kilometer tunnel of the Harzu Mountains. While being offloaded, it turned out that out of 109 prisoners, 21 had died. Out of 6 thousand, 1 thousand died or were killed on the way. I got off with frostbite in my leg; three of my toes got tramped and the blood soaked through my clog. We were walking from the station to the Dora barracks for more than an hour, marking our trail with the dead bodies of those who couldn't stand the exhaustion. The truck collected the corpses behind us. After four days I got into the *rewir*, where I shared a bed with two or three prisoners for eight weeks. My legs were intact, only my toes had gone numb. At that time, a type of red diarrhea rampaged through the camp due to mucous membrane inflammation, the bowels not being able to hold the food. People were dying of bodily exhaustion, in their own excrement, on the floor covered with an oilcloth.

Due to air raids from the Allied forces, the Dora camp was ordered to be evacuated in the first days of April via Hannover and Celle to the military barracks in Belsen (to the south, between Bremm and Hamburg). The hospital patients set off first, we were going by train, surrounded by the bombs of the Allies' aerial fleet. After 96 hours we got through to Bergen, and then walked six kilometers on foot. We stopped twice to bury the dead, once numbering 27, including 15 actually dead and 12 close to dying.

The prisoners who were well dug the graves, stripping the deceased of everything, while the German escort finished off the dying ones, shooting them in the mouth or in the eyes with a gun. I barely reached the Bergen barracks myself, and then lay on a concrete surface for a week, which caused leg paralysis.

On 15 April 1945, the camp was freed by the English.

The protocol was hereby ended and read out.