

Transcript of the Shoah interview with Simon Srebnik
Additional Materials

Translation by Sarah Lippincott - Volunteer – Visitor Services – August 2008

Note: This is a translation of the French transcript of the interview that Claude Lanzmann conducted with Mr. Srebnik for the film *Shoah*. The transcript is in an unedited format and includes segments that were used in Lanzmann's final film. Any segment that appears in the final film is NOT available at the USHMM. The Claude Lanzmann Shoah Collection at the USHMM contains only the outtakes from the film. Outtakes are sections of a movie that are filmed but not used in the final version.

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CHELMNO 60A *French, Polish*

Complements pages 35-36 of the translation (part 3) for CH 60A.

Lanzmann sits in the church in Chelmno with Srebnik and the priest. Lanzmann speaks French and Srebnik and the priest speak Polish, translated.

C.L. Father, could you tell us what happened in the church at Chelmno?

PR. What I've heard from people is that the living conditions were atrocious. For example, the conditions were like this: they stayed down there... there were people who had their farms here and they made them live 3 kilometers away. If a man had his livestock here, he was obliged to come here. And he would work. Aside from that... the events, for example: the people who came here from Kolo, went into the woods. Here's how it went: in the woods there was a German and if someone went into the forest to look, he'd never come back out.

PR. More like a warehouse for belongings. The prisoners selected these belongings and they... they brought them elsewhere.

C.L. Other than that, nothing happened in the church?

PR. Nothing. The church was turned into a warehouse.

C.L. Does Mr. Srebnik have additional information about the events that unfolded in this church?

S.S. Yes, additional information. I not only have additional information, but I saw it all with

my own eyes. Here they sent... here, on the railroad a train arrived. We went to meet the cars and be brought the baggage to Chelmno, and the people were taken into the church, into... there was nothing in the church.

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S.S. And they spent the night here. Then the gas vans would arrive and 80 people would board the truck... And on the way to the woods the exhaust from the machine, from the motor entered the hold and that's how they were suffocated.

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CHELMNO 61 *Polish; French*

C.L. Did the people here ever tell this to the priest? Because people have talked to us extensively on this subject, and they told us a lot.

PR. Yes, I only had questions about where they were gassing people, and where they dumped their belongings. Was it in the manor? So what Mr. Srebnik says is actually true. He lived through it. But people are how they are. I had questions about where the warehouse was. Here or elsewhere.

CHELMNO 61 Face B *Polish; French*

Srebnik with the Poles

C.L. Here in the church Jews waited whole months for death. They were shut up all night in this church and waited for morning to be transported. Father, did you ever hear people talk about that?

PR. Yes, about the gassing, yes. It was hard for me to tell where it happened. I wasn't particularly interested because there were things that happened at the manor and the church.

C.L. This was where the Jews basically passed the last night of their lives. Then, in the churchyard they crowded them into trucks where they were gassed. Father, you never had time

to interest yourself in that?

PR. What I mean is I'd heard of a case, as it seemed... one time when they transported these people in the truck the door opened and the people were still alive.

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PR. So here there was a warehouse where people left the last signs of life for their successors.

S.S. The people who came to this church had no idea, they only knew one thing, which was that the next day they would be put to work.

And there were people here. . . the same people who didn't believe. . . . There was a man who wanted to escape through the window. On the other side was an SS. He killed him in the window.

No one wanted to believe that the next day they were headed to their death.

There were also those who said, "tomorrow you'll see, they'll send everyone to his death, tomorrow." But no one wanted to believe them.

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CHELMNO 61 *Polish; French*

Complements page 38 of the translation (part 3) for CH 61.

C.L. Mr. Lanzman wants to ask the priest, since, Father, you yourself showed us the inscriptions left by the Jews and it seems that the whole church is covered in these inscriptions; in any case, Father, you must have known something, and that's why he is so shocked that you said that this was just a warehouse for belongings.

PR. What I mean exactly... there, or somewhere... something... I didn't know, I knew that there were belongings and that the people were working. And where and what they were doing, where they were doing it, what exactly they were doing I had no idea. I wasn't interested.

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CHELMNO 62 *Polish; French*

Complements pages 39-41 of the translation (part 3) for CH 62.

PR. I was convinced that the gassing was taking place at the manor.

C.L. Then how do you explain the inscriptions, for example here on the altar are the last words of someone from Leipzig... notice...

PR. It hasn't been painted over. I think the priest who had the church painted and he left this like a clue that shows that such things happened here.

C.L. Father, is there something unsettling for you in the fact that the Jews spent their last night here before being gassed? Can you explain that to us, Father?

PR. In principle, what's it about?

C.L. Perhaps he's wrong. But it seems to him that the priest was telling him about a warehouse of belongings, on the other hand he says that perhaps there is something bothersome for the priest in the fact that these people spent their last night here.

PR. It was necessary for these people because they were penned up here. They had no escape. They couldn't fend for themselves.

PR. They couldn't fend for themselves.

C.L. What does that mean? What does that mean? Mr. Lanzmann would like to understand what was the necessity, why were the Jews there?

PR. They were under pressure. What they were ordered to do, they had to do. In a situation like that, a man loses his personality, his self-control.

Correction of the names of the cities on page 40 : Lodz, Wloclawek, Zgierz, Pabianice, in the region of Lodz.

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S.S. As I said just now, there were people here who could sense that there was something evil here, that something would take place; so they made inscriptions on the walls, but the majority of people didn't believe it.

PR. Now I can't say. In any case there were a lot of them.

S.S. But what was written on the walls? What was marked on the walls? Did they write that they were headed to their deaths? I don't know if they wrote that. Each individual, myself included, when I travel I like to write down that I've been there.

C.L. ----- . It wasn't written on the walls that we were headed to our deaths... that wasn't written. They would leave their names, that they were there.

C.L. Mr. Lanzmann says that the people who were at the synagogue in Kolo in that thoroughfare, left the message, "Brothers, we are here, they are sending us to our deaths." Do you think that people didn't know?

S.S. They knew. Here there was one case in Chelmno, in the camp. It was the following: we were, let's say 80 people, Bothmann came and said, "today, 40 people will go to Muhlheim to work." And we thought that it was true. So we asked... and we said to each other, "If you go there and you see that you're going past the woods, leave a sheet of paper. Write something in the trucks."

S.S. Afterwards the truck returned to Chelmno. They sent me to look inside the truck and I found...

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CHELMNO 63 Face B *Polish; French*

Complements page 42 of the translation (part 3) for CH 63.

PR. Yes, that's right. There was the priest from Sompolno. He's the only one who traveled and served in all the region. From time to time he came by and performed religious services. He would baptize at different homes, care for the sick. Even now when we want to find out if a religious service has taken place we inquire in Sompolno because he's the one who takes care of those things.

PR. Without religion. That was prohibited.

C.L. That's to say that they would baptize in the homes

PR. Yes, from time to time in the homes, that is to say when there was an old priest who hadn't been deported by the Germans, he would perform this service.

PR. There were also some priests left in the region and they could take care of that, but the Gestapo would decide how many functions he could fulfill. For example, I'm remembering...

C.L. Destroy the spirit?

PR. Yes, it consisted of destroying...

C.L. The destruction of nations because of the ideology of Hitler... in keeping with *Mein Kampf*.

PR. I was in Kielce, I had to take the Protectorate in Kielce, and there they received us and we had to buy clothes, all our food, because we had nothing.

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C.L. (interruption)

PR. I was still a cleric, I wasn't a priest yet.

PR. The bishops there had the right to consecrate without the curate... because they deported our bishops. The bishop of Radom left with the Army to go abroad. He didn't come back. He didn't return until after the war. The prospective bishop Kozak was martyred in the camps and we were without a bishop, without anything.

PR. It wasn't until after the war that we returned to being priests without habits and with holes in our shoes.

C.L. He doesn't know. I didn't ask the same question to the priest.

B. But he wants to answer it.

S.S. After what I saw here I don't know if I should believe it or not... Before I believed it, now I don't know anymore;

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CHELMNO 54 Face A *Polish; French*

Complements pages 22-23 of the translation (part 3) for CH 54A.

Interl. = translator translating from Polish

Cor. Well, by God they must have shot the German.

Interl. (p.22 Line 7) My brother couldn't have approved of that.

Interl. (p.22 Line 8) By God that one man would say...

Interl. No matter how they went to the annihilation.

S.S. (p.22 Line 11) Who was left? There was only one person left. They shot everyone...

The interpreter interrupts (untranslated): Oh yes, they shot everyone.

S.S. But if he hadn't escaped... you have to see it from all sides.

Interl. I understand that everyone wanted to save his own life.

S.S. Sir, you were afraid, too.

Interl. Of course.

S.S. If you were, Sir, in my place I wouldn't have let you return either, all I know is that there was no exit from here.

Interl. (p.23 Line 9) But, Madame, what could we have thought? What could they have thought? We were afraid, too.

S.S. It wasn't just Jews here. There were gypsies, priests, nuns, children.

Int. Children from Czechoslovakia.

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CHELMNO 55 *Polish; French*

Complements pages 25-27 of the translation (part 3) for CH 55.

Interl. = translator translating from Polish

Interl. No, I don't believe so; it's only thanks to this man that he had enough presence of mind, that he broke the headlights and succeeded in escaping.

C.L. But before, sir, did you believe that when there was a camp here a larger number of people could have been saved, if they had done something?

Interl. Hmm, hmm, they could have escaped, but everyone was afraid, they didn't have the daring. Perhaps, perhaps... a time will come when someone shall liberate the world. And that's what all this tumult is about. It was screwed up.

C.L. Do you believe that if the Poles had been in the woods there, they would have done the same thing? Would they have thrown themselves at the Germans?

Interl. I believe that they certainly would not have let it happen. No matter what, because they knew what was waiting for them.

S.S. I say otherwise. This gentleman says...

Interl. The Poles have a different outlook, the Poles are... too bad... if they win or not, they work, they will... Madame, why is that so? Because no matter how, it's death that awaits them. And the little Jews were more frightened... and perhaps... and perhaps... the Poles don't wait for "could've-been."

Interl. More so, more so than the Poles.

S.S. I would like to ask you something. You know...

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Interl. Yes, yes...

S.S. You know that there were priests here, nuns. Why didn't you do anything to save them?

Interl. Yes, yes. Why, we didn't know... We were only a handful of men. Here's a case... and how it finished... the Germans were playing cards and they were fighting amongst each other. It

was night time, 11:30. They were fighting amongst each other and one of them was knocked out. And the one who was still conscious said that it was the Poles who had beaten him. So Madame, when he came to, he said the Poles were innocent, but the Poles were already lined up in front of the gate... to the side. And they must have snatched them from 3 kilometers around and shot them.

C.L. Mr. Srebnik, Mr. Lanzmann would like you to respond to what this gentleman said. And, also, what is your opinion?

S.S. My opinion is totally opposite. When we left Lodz... in Lodz it was similar... in Lodz there was nothing to eat...

Interl. Yes, there was nothing, there was nothing.

S.S. We were in the ghetto, right? So, they told us we were leaving to work.

Interl. We know that.

S.S. ...and that here we would be comfortable...

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Interl. We know that.

S.S. Here we... they would give us food to eat and everything. So, sir, you know what it was like in Lodz... interminable lines to register for work. But we didn't know we were coming here...

Interl. I believe you.

S.S. I believe that if it had been... in Poland... if they did that to natural-born Poles, it would have been the same. No one knows... would you be hungry? Would you want to eat?... Yes...

You, sir, you, too would have signed up to work. Sir, you would also have come to Chelmno.

Interl. Yes, that's true.

Interl. Yes, I'll admit that.

S.S. ... where would you go?

Interl. ... but not like the Poles...

Interl. Yes, he had, luck was with him...

S.S. Because when the bullet passed through, I turned the light out again for him...

These words do not appear in the transcribed text. The following is incomprehensible.

Interl. We know that. Inaudible words—muffled voices

S.S. I didn't believe. Inaudible

Interl. My brother could not accept...

C.L. But Mr. Srebnik was in Israel, in the Israeli army. He fought. He was a soldier and he had

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Interl. Everybody was in the war, Madame. In 1939 I was also in the war.

S.S. Do you know how many wars I've taken part in in Israel?

Interl. I believe you.

S.S. I've been in four wars.

Interl. Me, too. I was there. I was in Warsaw with the civil defense... I was a messenger for the General Staff... and the bullets were flying everywhere... and we didn't care.

S.S. That's different.

Interl. I understand that...

S.S. We were here... because we were here...

Interl. Mr. Srebnik is quite right...

S.S. There were 100 Jews here, sir. If you had been here you would have felt very strong. Why? Because you would have been surrounded by Poles.

S.S. You would have escaped and found refuge with a Pole. But me... I'm not saying the Poles are bad, but they were afraid, too... **muffled words**...

S.S. Here in Chelmno, no, no, no, no...

The translator doesn't translate the part of Lanzmann's question, "But in Poland?"

In the end, afterwards yes, yes, I know, you can hear the interlocutor say, "they would save."