

Transcript of the *Shoah* Interviews with
Motke Zaidel & Itzak & Hanna Dugin

Translation by Anna Dhaliwal - Volunteer – Visitor Services – May thru June 2008

Note: This is a translation of the French transcript of the interview that Claude Lanzmann conducted with Mr. Zaidel and Mr. Dugin 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.

SHOAH ZAIDEL AND DOUGHIN

PONARY

FOREST: ZAIDEL 11, P31 AND 32, ON HIS OWN: There was the smell of...

FOREST: ZAIDEL 12, P31 UNTIL THE END

-1- (Zaidel 2)

Israel recording; Bobine no. 48; Zaidel forest; Zaidel 2.

Q: Ask them why they hoped that it turned here, is it... is it linked to any resemblance to Ponari, in Lithuania?

A: Yes, there is a resemblance.

Q: What is it, can he tell me about it?

A: The whole place resembles Ponari, the forest, the ditches, we used to say that what really bugged you was that the only difference was that in Ponari there weren't any rocks.

Q: But there were ashes, like here?

A: Yes, there was ash.

Q: But the forests of Lithuania, they're thicker than the forests of Israel, no?

A: Of course.

Q: And are they the same trees?

A: Yes, the trees resemble one another, but there they were taller and bigger.

Q: And were they firs or were they birch forests?

A: Yes, there were an equal number of fir trees and birch trees. But there were a lot of firs.

Q: I've read that the Ponari forest was very beautiful, that the people of Vilna went there on trips the Sunday before

-2- (Zaidel 2)

Q: the war, is that true?

A: Of course, it was a marvelous place, a splendid place, every holiday, every festival took place in the forest, young people came for example for the (?) holiday and had a good time.

Q: And for them, today, in their memory, it's associated with what, it's associated with beauty, with holidays? Or is it associated with horror?

A: Today for us the forest of Ponari is no longer something to see with beauty, for us that forest is connected in memory with the martyrs of Ponari and the region.

Q: And why would someone burn an Israeli forest?

A: In my opinion, it's simply a natural fire that is absolutely not premeditated, someone must have just thrown a cigarette and that's what happened. That's my opinion.

Q: There are also trees that have been cut, it's rare to cut trees in Israel.

A: No, no, as a matter of fact you'll have to ask those who are working at it, me personally I can't give an answer.

Q: And for them, it's really a precise evocation, this site?

A: More or less.

Q: And there were mass graves in Ponari, there are none here?

A: There, Ponari, that was the place to be above all forests but the difference was that that region was sandy.

-3- (Zaidel 2)

Q: Yes, but I was talking about mass graves.

A: Of course, here, there are no mass graves, and there there were eight.

Q: Were they large graves?

A: Very large. There was even one grave that after we counted contained twenty thousand, twenty-four thousand bodies of martyrs.

Q: Twenty-four thousand in one grave?

A: In one grave.

Q: They counted, they counted the corpses?

A: Of course we counted. We knew the number exactly because we were forced to count, every day we had to come up with a particular number of bodies, I remember that it....

Q: A precise number of bodies....

A: Every day we had to come up with the precise number of bodies, three hundred to four hundred a day, the Germans even had a special notebook in which they wrote down the number of bodies in each grave.

Q: Oh, the Germans wrote that down.

A: Of course;

Q: Dominique, you have them completely in profile, huh? Dominique, you have them completely in profile?

-4- (Zaidel 2)

A: No, very often, it's from the front for me.

Q: And the other?

A: The other, he is more in profile, but.... wait, I'll cut, I'll cut, that...

Bobine No. 49; Zaidel 3.

Q: Mr. Motshe Zaidel and Mr. Itsak Dogim were both at the Vilna ghetto?

A: Yes, we were both at the Vilna ghetto.

Q: Were they at the Vilna ghetto from the beginning?

A: Personally no, I was not at the Vilna ghetto from the beginning. But me, I was there from the beginning, yes.

Q: And they were born in Vilna, both of them?

A: I was born twenty-four kilometers from Vilna, in a little village called Zvilzianik.

Q: And Mr. Dogim?

A: I was born in Vilna and I'd always lived there.

Q: And what age were they, the one and the other, Mr. Dogim?

A: I was born in 1925.

Q: And Mr. Dogim?

A: I was born in 1916.

-5- (Zaidel 3)

Q: Nine years older...

A: Yes.

Q: And what is Mr. Dogim's memory of the Vilna ghetto?

A: I remember more or less the whole Vilna ghetto, it's something you don't forget; I remember the time that preceded the entry of the Germans into Vilna; they stopped Jews in the street, that was even before they created the ghetto, there was also a pogrom before they created the ghetto...

Q: Was it the Lithuanians who launched the pogrom?

A: No, no, it was the Germans who launched the pogrom.

Q: And then?

A: And then they created the ghetto; at the time of the ghetto they also took without end several thousand Jews each time. There was the time... there was the time of chanaïm, there were notebooks, tickets that permitted you to live or to die, those who received a yellow ticket could live, they took the others.

Q: They weren't tickets, they were certificates; does he remember very precisely what they called the action, there were two actions, the two actions of the yellow certificates precisely?

A: First it must be said that there was a second ghetto; those who had yellow certificates were put in the second ghetto and all those who remained in the first ghetto were taken into the Ponari forest.

-6- (Zaidel 3)

A: That lasted for three days.

Q: Can he precisely describe what happened during those three days? How did they separate the Jews from one another?

A: For three days, the Germans, with the Lithuanians, searched through the ghetto, in the hiding places, behind locked doors, and everywhere that they found Jews, they took them. I was with my family hidden in a room for three days.

Q: So he didn't see what was happening outside?

A: What do you mean to say, outside, in the ghetto?

Q: He said he was hidden in a room...

A: At the end of three days, the people that had the chanaïm that we spoke about suddenly came back, and life in the ghetto resumed its course.

Q: And did he have a chanaïm, his family?

A: No.

Q: Theoretically, he could have died then.

A: Of course, yes, that's why we hid ourselves for three days in a room, in a shelter.

Q: When did that happen?

A: The date, I don't remember any more;

Q: It ended in 1941...

-7- (Zaidel 3)

A: Yes.

Q: Was there a great fear in the ghetto among the Jews?

A: The fear was very great; even the children knew it already.

Q: And were they afraid all the time?

A: We weren't afraid all the time but we knew that just about every month they took several thousand Jews under whatever pretext, they always invented pretexts, one time it was the children, one time the

Q: How many Jews were there at Vilna, when the Germans came?

A: Eighty thousand Jews.

Q: And when the ghetto was liquidated, the last action against the ghetto, how many remained?

A: There remained ten thousand Jews in the ghetto, after the liquidation of the ghetto. From what I heard said, the number swung between fifteen and seventeen thousand Jews.

Q: That remained at the time of the liquidation?

A: No, after the liquidation, there was already no one in the ghetto.

Q: No, but at the time...

A: Actually, there were two different liquidations; the first ghetto was completely liquidated, the Jews ran away, and then little by little they came back and those Jews who came back suddenly heard it said that they had created, that they had set

-8- (Zaidel 3)

A: up a second ghetto and when the second ghetto was liquidated, there were, like I said a little while ago, between fifteen and seventeen million Jews.

Q: That's it, the first having been liquidated a long time before.

A: Yes.

Q: And, did they know what had happened to these Jews?

A: From what was said, they took the Jews to put them to work.

Bobine No. 50; Zaidel 4.

Q: Did they know what had happened to Jews throughout the year, throughout all the years? What did they know?

A: We knew that they took them, that they exterminated them and that's all, they never came back again. Yes.

Q: And did they know where that took place?

A: We knew that they took people, that there was only one possible place, that was the Ponari forest, about twelve kilometers from Vilna, besides there were peasants in the region who came and who told us that they had heard shooting, and finally there were people who sometimes fell into the mass grave with the others but remained alive and who when night came could get out, come back to the ghetto and then they told us exactly what had happened.

Q: That's the truth, there were people who survived Ponari, who were injured and who... who could escape

-9- (Zaidel 4)

Q: the mass grave...
So they didn't have any illusions about the fate that was reserved for the Jews?

A: No illusion.

Q: And that they themselves awaited?

A: I can only speak for myself; personally, I never believed that they would kill me, I always knew and I always hoped that I would remain alive.

Q: Where did this certitude come from?

A: I don't know where this assurance came to me from but in any case I had it.

Q: And Mr. Dogim?

A: I can't say that I had such certitude, I saw what happened with the other Jews and I said to myself, there, my turn is coming.

Q: So, can Mr. Motke Zaidel tell us what happened to him at the time of the definitive liquidation of the Vilna ghetto?

A: Yes; they took me near a... the city in a camp called Idnalina; I worked in what they called the organization Todt, that was the organization charged with making roads, the construction of roads, railroad tracks and when I finished that job they

took me with the others to another place, Palimonacz, that was called Palimonacz; then, I realized that hunger

-10- (Zaidel 4)

A: was larger than probably I would have the physical force to register; that was the month of October, it was approaching winter and I decided that I would not stay there, I absolutely had to escape; I escaped and I came to the Vilna ghetto, that was in 1942.

Q: Why did he come back to the ghetto?
Why did he come to the ghetto?

A: That, that's the question; because I still had my family my father, my mother and my three sisters lived in the Zvilzia ghetto; because I could enter the Vilna ghetto, I could make all possible efforts to make my family come there, my parents and my sisters, to the Vilna ghetto:

Q: I'll ask the question, why did he make everybody come to the Vilna ghetto, did he consider the ghetto a safeguard, a protection?

A: At that time we said that, maybe yes. At the time there were all sorts of rumors, people said that maybe they would make those in the ghetto work, the Judenrat made a lot of promises and like we said, I tried, I tempted my chance and I tried to bet on that maybe.

Q: And they didn't have any more luck, him and his family, remaining outside the ghetto since he knew very well that the ghetto was a trap, in one way and that it was very easy to take the Jews, to deport them to Ponari and to kill them, he knew that?

A: The problem is that at the time, when you found yourself alone, as an individual, without any organization, without any context, as a matter of fact you had no possibility to act, all you had to do was to walk around the area, immediately someone could betray you, bring you to the Gestapo.

-11- (Zaidel 4)

Q: How were the Lithuanians with the Jews, the Lithuanian peasants?

A: Their attitude was generally negative; I would like all the same to add something. If instead of being at Vilna which for me was an entirely strange place, I had found myself in my place of birth, in the city where I was born, then certainly that would have been much easier for me. I would not have had problems to manage.

Q: So he came back to the ghetto at the end of 1942, that's it?

A: Yes.

Q: Then... can he tell me what happened at the time of the liquidation of the ghetto?

A: In fact, my parents were going to come, but that took time and when the definitive liquidation took place, I escaped, then I lost all contact with my parents, and it must be said that in the ghetto they organized what they called zelshutz, I don't know very well how to explain that to you, but you could say that they organized to defend themselves if we were attacked.

Bobine No. 51; Zaidel 5.

Q: Were they both members of the ghetto resistance?

A: No, I met Dogim at Ponari, that's where I met him.

Q: Yes, okay, but that, that wasn't my question, my question is before the liquidation were they already linked with the organized resistance?

-12- (Zaidel 5)

A: No, neither the one nor the other.

Q: They were two simple Jews?

A: Yes.

Q: Now, then, who's telling it?

A: At the time of the liquidation of the ghetto, we hid ourselves in what's called a "malina," a malina is a kind of hiding place that was generally in a cave, you could enter it, there was water, a bit of food, and when everyone had come down, you could hermetically seal it, and there we more or less stayed for fifty days, only when it was intolerable enough, people started getting sick, then some decided to leave and...

Q: But many people were hidden at the time?

A: At the place we were, there were about fifty people.

Q: Were there other malinas?

A: Yes, that is, at the time we didn't know exactly which ones but there were others... Mr. Dogim says that he was also in a malina.

Q: The liquidation of the ghetto, that consisted of what, the liquidation of men, that is human beings, or did they also burn the ghetto like they burned Warsaw?

A: Well if we had taken up arms, if we had defended ourselves, maybe they would have destroyed the city, but that wasn't the case, they simply took

-13- (Zaidel 5)

A: all the Jews and they destroyed them and the place stayed as it was.

Q: So, the ghetto was liquidated, in spite of which there were still many Jews who were hidden in those malinas?

A: Yes; elsewhere there were still a certain number of people that the Germans hadn't touched, they were members of two particular groups, the Kailich and the Hakape. The Kailich were the people who were the mechanics who repaired the German vehicles that were sent to the front, who worked tin, pewter, and the Hakape group that was generally tailors and other tradesmen, so those were the people the Germans needed, they left them alone.

Q: And they were inside the limits of the ghetto?

A: No, absolutely not; the ghetto itself was completely liquidated. No, but a little while ago you asked the question why they didn't defend themselves, it must be said that those who were able to defend themselves were immediately, they left the ghetto and were enlisted in the Partisans.

Q: I never asked that question.

A: That's true, but these are things that come, that arise one after the other.

Q: I never said that... But, did the Germans search the malinas and look for the Jews underground, the hidden Jews?

A: Of course, the Germans looked for us, but in the end they couldn't find us as long as we didn't come out,

-14- (Zaidel 5)

A: the problem is we were forced to come out from one moment to another to search for food and in my case, in my malina, the people who, who left and were trapped by the Germans and tortured, finally gave us away; the people who were trying to eat were trapped.

Q: How... the malina was big?

A: The malina I was in, was relatively big.

Q: And you could live with fifty people?

A: With difficulty.

Q: What age were these people?

A: All ages, and... as a matter of fact it's true, we represented everything for the others, we had all the responsibilities.

Q: Were his parents with him in the malina?

A: No, me, from the moment when the ghetto was liquidated, I already had no link, no contact with my parents, I no longer knew anything about them.

Q: He no longer had any contact, what does that mean? He had broken contact, or his parents had been taken and liquidated?

A: My parents were certainly taken, but the problem is that from the moment when one of my friends proposed that I leave the ghetto with him, then I had to leave and I entirely lost contact with my parents, that is I no longer knew anything about them, I no longer had the possibility of returning to the house.

-15- (Zaidel 5)

Q: He left the ghetto?

A: I'm only talking about being out in the yard of the house I was in, I already couldn't return to the house from the moment I left the house.

Q: We'll have to clarify that... motor... turn...

Bobine No. 52; Zaidel 6.

Q: It must be explained to them that... that I need their help, they must understand that when you haven't lived in a ghetto it's impossible to imagine what it was like. So things that seem obvious aren't at all obvious for those who weren't there, they must have the courage to say even the obvious things, now, I didn't understand anything of what he said, for example that since he left the apartment where he lived, in short, he could no longer come back anywhere, so I would love if he explained that, that is... I've never been in a ghetto.

A: Listen, there are things... for example it was difficult to explain, but the will to live was... exceeded everything that you could imagine and for example from the

moment when the Gestapo trapped me, I don't know, I felt capable of doing anything, everything to survive, and that's something obvious for me.

Q: Really... So... I'm going to ask a practical, precise question, he said when I asked him if he had been separated from his parents, he said that he lost all contact with them from the moment when he left, I didn't understand that, so...

A: Simply because I did not want to fall into the hands of

-16- (Zaidel 6)

A: the Gestapo, nor in the hands of the Lithuanians. Perhaps this must also be added here, that from the moment when the Germans entered the ghetto, the Lithuanians helped them, someone told us they brought the Jews somewhere in Estonia, well I didn't believe that at all, so from the moment when the Germans and the Lithuanians were there, personally I was capable of doing anything that was in my power to escape and to not fall into their hands and to survive.

Q: And the will to survive didn't exist among the other Jews?

A: Of course that will to live existed with everybody, but sometimes it's... they simply didn't have the possibility, you see, if they had a family with small children, they simply didn't have a choice.

Q: Now, then so he stayed hidden in this malina, in this cave, and there were fifty down there and after several weeks, five I think, the ones who couldn't take it any longer left, they were taken, they were tortured, and they betrayed the hiding place, then what happened after that?

A: Then, the head of the Gestapo in Vilna came, drove us into the caves, in the basements of the Vilna Gestapo. Then in the basements of the Gestapo, they made a selection, they separated the women, the children, and the old men, while the young men, those who they saw who were capable of working, they separated them also. So every morning, in the basements of the Gestapo, they made a selection, and the women, and the children and the old men they put them in these enormous trucks and they

-17- (Zaidel 6)

A: took them, we knew that they took them to kill them, that no one ever came back. Outside, one morning, they also put us in one of these big trucks and we thought, this is it, this is the end and suddenly we found ourselves in the Ponari forest and around us were scattered a lot of clothes, shoes, personal objects and we really thought, this is it, we have come to the end. Actually, that whole story lasted just about a week, they made us work in the Ponari forest at cutting down trees, they would take us early in the morning from the Gestapo's caves, they brought us

back in the evening, and we thought, well there you go, our work will probably be to be butchers, only at the end of the week, the Obersturmführer came, and he said to us, listen, as a matter of fact the work is much more serious, there are just about ninety thousand people that are there, killed, lying in the mass graves and there must not be any trace. At first, we were a group of forty, like I told you, we returned every night to the Gestapo's caves, but there we had built two bunkers, one small bunker and one big bunker that we had started to organize, to build, we had made a roof to reinforce it and when the two bunkers were ready, the Obersturmführer said to us, there it's finished... the Obersturmführer said to us, there it's finished, now you will stay there, you will no longer return to the Gestapo, you will work there, then they brought another group of forty people, so in total we were eighty.

Bobine No. 53; Zaidel 7.

Q: I would like to come back to this talk of the Obersturmführer, is it certain that that's all that he said, the Obersturmführer? He didn't say anything else, in this speech?

A: In any case, it resembles it; it's not quite all that he said; actually he said, you have some work to do, such-and-such work, the Lithuanians made Schweinrein...

Q: Schweinrein, that means a mess...

-18- (Zaidel 7)

A: A mess, that's German... The Lithuanians made a mess, those who did their work well, once the work would be finished, they were allowed to go to Berlin, there they could normally practice their jobs.

Q: Now... I'm sorry to have to intervene, but it's pitiful all the same, no? Tell him that I don't understand why he doesn't remember that, then, what is this way of telling me the story. The Obersturmführer said, well, it wasn't the Germans who massacred the Jews, it was the Lithuanians, well, this is what he said, and it's rubbish, and you are going to eliminate all traces because we cannot keep traces of such horrors, that's what the Nazi said to them, so tell him again and ask him why he didn't tell me that?

A: In fact, that's what I said; actually, what he said, this mess, this work...

Q: Did they have the feeling...

A: That's it, he really said that this mess of the Lithuanians, it must absolutely be erased, that later those who had worked well could go to Berlin to practice their jobs. But for those who didn't let us... for those who didn't let us escape, they tied us up, they chained us with handcuffs and also with shackles.

Q: Always in the same speech from the Nazi, I believe that he spoke precisely of this, the Nazi, in his speech; ask Zaidel if he said this exactly?... about the escapes.

A: Yes, the Obersturmführer specified that there was no question that we would escape, that he had us chained, that each movement that you would make would be... would reach

-19- (Zaidel 7)

A: his ears since the chains we moved, each noise would be heard and he brought out of the ranks a blacksmith who immediately made the chains and chained us up.

Q: And how were they chained?

A: He also added here, from this moment when I have the least suspicion concerning an escape, I will hang the first one on this tree that I point out to you.

Q: There were a lot of Nazis there?

A: All, all who were charged with guarding us were from the S.S.

Q: It's... no, that's not what I'm asking; of course; how many were they?

A: Around fifty or sixty.

Q: And there were how many Jews?

A: Eighty-four.

Q: Only men?

A: Eighty men and four women, who worked in the kitchen.

Q: Jewish women, too?

A: Only Jews.

Q: Were there children?

A: No.

-20- (Zaidel 7)

Q: Were there adolescents?

A: Yes, there was one adolescent who was fifteen, I was hardly more than an adolescent, I was eighteen and a half.

Q: The bunker in which they lived, what was it?

A: When the Obersturmführer began to tell us this bluff, because for us it was clear that it was a bluff, that from the moment when we would have begun to do this job they would be well advised to kill us all so no one could tell what had happened, we asked ourselves the question, what could we do to stay alive, at least one stay alive.

Q: Yes... he didn't answer my question; I'm asking, the bunker...

A: Yes, that's it, I'm coming to the story of the bunker; one of the initiators of the project was precisely Dogim; we decided to dig a tunnel under the bunker to let us escape.

Q: Oh dear... Cut, cut, cut...

Bobine No. 54; Zaidel 8

A: The bunker was five meters in depth, a surface of fifty meters squared, there was a kitchen, as I said, two rooms for the workers, and two ladders, one that was reserved for the Nazis and the other one for the workers.

Q: Were they underground bunkers?

A: Of course they were underground bunkers; they were actually giant reservoirs that the Russians had built for gas and seven pits were prepared, the walls had been covered with stones and it was ready for

-21- (Zaidel 8)

A: gas.

Q: So they were reservoirs that had been dug in the ground?

A: Yes.

Q: There was only one of these reservoirs at Ponari?

A: There were seven big pits of which only two had ended up as reservoirs, that is with stones all around the walls and in the one of these two bunkers, we were, we lived.

Q: Then so, if I understand correctly, the pits in which the Jews had been killed during the three preceding years, these pits in truth it was the outlines of gas reservoirs?

A: That's exactly it.

Q: Good; then,... then can he describe their bunker, was there a roof, was there...

A: Actually, we had ourselves built a sort of roof that covered the... about three quarters of the upper surface of the bunker and we had left a big opening that simply allowed us to enter, to leave, to bring in provisions and to go to the toilets.

Q: And then, what was around it?

A: In fact, at the mouth, at the same exit of the bunker, there was a barbed wire fence and then a meter and a half further another barbed wire fence and in the space between of a meter and a half there were mines.

-22- (Zaidel 8)

Q: Good; and... and the pits then, if we suppose that this... this partition, that the stone on which they are seated, that that is the wall of a bunker, the Jews who had been killed were all interred there inside the interior?

(End first side of tape). Continuation of the taping Zaidel 8.

A: Of course, if we say that... supposing that this rock is the outer wall of the bunker, the Jews had been thrown inside of these pits, but I'm talking about the pits that hadn't been tiled.

Q: And... it was covered with dirt?

A: Indeed, there was dirt, but not much.

Q: Well, then, very good; so they finished building the bunker where they were going to live, what happens?

A: From the moment when the bunker had been finished, the Obersturmführer came, he made a big speech for us, he explained what our work would be then, he showed us the tools we would use, we started to work.

Q: Was it a surprise for them?

A: Yes, for us it was a surprise.

Q: Until then they didn't suspect what they would be made to do?

A: No, the idea never even came to us that they could order us, give us the order to bring up the bodies of the all these martyrs who had been killed and they would order us to bury them.

Q: They were chained only at night, or also

-23- (Zaidel 8)

Q: during the day, during their work?

A: Night and day we carried our chains, but...

Q: Where were the chains?

A: The chains as a matter of fact were at the top of our calves so that we couldn't make any step one bit bigger than another.

Q: What sort of step?

A: We couldn't take very big steps, we could really only move forward a little bit. But even before we could begin to work and to burn the martyrs, in fact we had to start building these sorts of big pyres on which we were made to burn the Jews and that was also our work, to build these pyres.

Q: They built the pyres before opening the graves?

A: Before.

Q: How many pyres did they build?

A: In fact, there were fifteen to seventeen pyres, because on each pyre we burned about three thousand five hundred Jews, in total sixty-four thousand.

Q: Well; and then, how did that happen, the opening of the first grave? First of all, did they all do the same work?

A: Actually, the work was divided up...

Q: There was a division of labor?

-24- (Zaidel 8)

A: Indeed, there was a division of labor; each was charged with a precise part of the work, some only had to build the Scheiterhaufen these kinds of pyres, others were charged with opening the graves, others with transporting the bodies, one other

we called the dentist had to remove the golden teeth before they burned the bodies, another was charged with setting fire to the Scheiterhaufen, and others still with then pounding the bones so that the bones were reduced to a fine powder, each one had his work.

Q: And the ashes as well, I suppose, they had to get rid of the ashes.

A: Actually, the ashes were mixed with sand, we made layers, one layer of sand and one layer of dirt and ashes.

Bobine No. 55; Zaidel 9.

Q: Did they all do the same job or was there a division of the work, how were the tasks divided up?

A: There was a division of the work, each of us was divided into a group, and we only knew on the morning we left to work.

Q: What were the tasks?

A: First of all there was the first group that was charged with preparing the pyres, preparing the ground, digging the pit, looking for beams, for wood,...

Q: The pit for the pyre?

-25- (Zaidel 9)

A: The pyre pit; the pyre was seven meters tall, so we had to pile up piles of wood one on top of another, pour the gasoline and place the bodies for burning.

Q: How was it... what was... what was a pyre made out of?

A: So for each pyre we made seven ditches, each one eight meters long, on these seven ditches that were one and a half meters deep we piled the logs of wood with a thickness of one meter and on these piles...

Q: ...the ditch itself was clear, although it must've been open to the air?

A: Yes, the other... Of course. Underneath we put the sideways beams and...

Q: That means perpendicular to the ditch?

A: We put down the beams perpendicular to the ditch and like that we built a pyre that was square and then we poured on all sorts of flammable products, gasoline, fuel oil, to make the bodies burn.

Q: And where were the corpses put?

A: In fact, there was a layer of wood, a layer of corpses, a layer of wood, a layer of corpses until we came to a height of seven meters.

Q: Seven meters tall;

A: Seven meters tall;

Q: And how did you build the top?

-26- (Zaidel 9)

A: Actually we built with... with the help of the beams that we had placed against the pyre, of course we climbed.

Q: And how did you put together the last layer of corpses?

A: Actually that didn't happen until seven meters, that is until the height of the pyre, we climbed,... the beams were just about four meters.

Q: And how did you put on the corpses?

A: We carried stretchers, exactly like you carry the gravely wounded; before we built these sorts of stairs and with the stretchers we managed them... actually, when we'd already come to three four meters, there was already three thousand five hundred corpses on the pyre and then we began to pour out the flammable materials and we built the fire; we waited for a big wind and generally the pyre burned seven, eight days.

Q: No, but, there's something I don't understand very well, he said a little while ago that they build the pyres before opening the ditches, then given that the corpses were themselves an integral part of the composition of the ground, I don't understand.

A: That is when I said that we prepared the pyres, we prepared the ground, we dug the ditch that formed the pyre and from the moment when everything was ready, we began to build the first layer of wood, we brought out the corpses and we began to work.

Q: Does he think that these technical questions that I'm asking him are crazy?

A: No, for me, they're normal questions, now, says Mr. Dogim, I would like to explain;

-27- (Zaidel 9)

A: I would like to explain something; so there were groups, some were charged with building the Scheiterhaufen, others were charged with opening the graves and when they opened the graves, it was exactly like when you open a tin can, the bodies were squeezed in like sardines in a can, one top of one another; and when you opened the bodies that were underneath, on the upper surface, were normal, they were corpses in a normal state, but the bodies that we found in the lower layers, the further you descended towards the bottom of the graves the more the bodies were reduced by the weight of the pressure, so well that sometimes they were only ten and even five centimeters in thickness.

Q: Why were the corpses on the top layer... were the corpses still fresh?

A: Actually... The corpses that were underneath...

Q: No, no, I'm asking this question because I want to know if it wasn't them who had been killed most recently?

A: The dead in the topmost layers were indeed those who had just been killed recently in the weeks before.

Q: Oh, is that what he said?

A: In the weeks just before whereas the further you went toward the bottom, the older the dead were, maybe eight months; what's more, another phenomenon, is that they had poured each time on each layer a layer of chlorine and what's more there was pressure.

Bobine No. 56; Zaidel 10.

A: He wants to add something: the upper layer was easily recognizable, that is to say rather that the form

-28- (Zaidel 10)

A: of the body was recognizable but the face itself no longer had all its features and there was something else as well: when we tried to grasp the body it totally crumbled, it was impossible to pick them up, now the more we dug towards the bottom and the flatter the bodies got, it was practically something... a flat slice; a little while ago I said like a fish in brine, and like Mr. Dogim said they no longer had any form, any trace, no longer any face at all, now some of the bodies were naked and others were dressed, and some of the clothes were work clothes because they said to people, you know, you're going to work, then you could tell from the clothes what sort of work, if it was a carpenter or if it was an ordinary craftsman.

Q: How were they in the graves, the ones who sorted the corpses, they were on top of the corpses... they were... how did it happen, they were standing up, they were...

A: (Z) It's Mr. Dogim who must explain, because he worked at that. (D) First I must clarify something, we were absolutely forbidden to say aloud the word "dead" or "victim," the Germans forced us to say, concerning the bodies, that it was a "figuren," that is... marionettes, dolls, figures or "schnapschiss," that is rags, that's... We added the name of the job, it was the figurine _____, I don't know the name in German.

Q: That is, among those who moved them, that's it...

A: ...several jobs, some were the "Figurenräger," that is...

Q: ...the division of work, that is those who carried the figures, those who pulled the figures, from what I understand.

-29- (Zaidel 10)

A: There was a division of work, some pulled the figures, that was the Figurenziehen, they used a sort of big bar of bent iron with a hook at the end like _____ showed...

Q: They stuck and they pulled...

A: And with that bar of iron they made an opening in the middle of the grave to remove the corpses.

Zaidel 11.

Q: At what time did they tell them that... that they could not say aloud the word "cadaver" or "corpse," but simply figures, at what time was that said to them?

A: From the instant when we began to bring out the bodies; those who said the word "dead" or "victim" were beaten.

Q: They gave an explanation for that, the Germans, anyway.. did they simply give an order without basing it on anything or did they... did they explain that?

A: It was an order; an order.

Q: They didn't add anything else?

A: On the contrary, at first, when we were forced to open the graves, they forbid us to use the tools, they said to us, you must get used to this, working with your hands.

Q: At first, they made them start with their hands?

A: Yes; at first, when we opened the graves, we couldn't hold back, we all burst into sobs, but then the Germans approached us, they beat us

-30- (Zaidel 11)

A: near to death, they forced us to work at a crazed rhythm for two days with unending beatings and without tools.

Q: They all burst into sobs?

A: Yes, he even added that we were forbidden to use the word "dead" or the word "victim," that it was exactly like a block of wood, that it was of absolutely no importance.

Q: He said "Schaizdreck"...

A: He said that it was "Schaizdreck"...

Q: "Schaizdreck," that means shit...

A: He said that it was shit, that it wasn't of any importance, it was nothing.

Q: That is, they realized among themselves that the Nazis forced a completely inhuman job on them.

A: Of course.

Q: Then, I come back to what I asked, when they were inside the graves, chained there, how did that happen, they drove in, they had boots... how was it... how?

A: Actually, it was very very hard; it's true, sometimes you fell and simply, well, you did desperate things, each one wanted to manage to do the work, it was very difficult, very difficult.

Q: And were they told, at first, when they began, how many ...Figuren there were?

-31- (Zaidel 11)

A: No; they knew exactly as soon as we opened each grave, they knew exactly how many corpses there were inside.

Q: How could they know?

A: It was written, they had a statement.

Q: Oh, they had a... the Germans knew?

A: Of course.

Q: Not them?

A: No, us no.

Q: Then, but the graves, they didn't open them all at once, they opened them one by one?

A: No, of course, we opened each grave one after the other, so obviously, after having taken all the corpses out of one grave, we already knew, since we took them out, we knew how many were in there.

Q: Did it... it smelled?

A: What a question, horrible! Horrible! Even after we had been rescued, no one could stay standing near us, after!

Q: They themselves stunk that much?

A: First of all there was the smell of the human cadaver, then the smell of the pyre, the fire, that was a double odor.
I would like to add a different anecdote. At one point,

-32- (Zaidel 11)

A: when we were in the forest, the Germans came with dogs and one of these dogs came up to me and smelled my hand and once he smelled me, he ran away, because since I smelled like the dead, he must have thought that I was also dead. That's not an anecdote, that's true.

Q: Yes, but it's a true anecdote.

Bobine No. 57; Zaidel 12.

Q: Motor... Let's go...

A: I insist on adding something on the subject of the smell; when we managed to escape the Ponari forest, we were forced at one point, we were so tired, to sleep under a tree, it was just about four or five o'clock in the morning and at one moment, the Germans began to circle the area with dogs and one of the dogs was passing right next to us and this dog really smelled my hand, given that my hand

smelled like the dead, the smell of all the dead in the area, he went away and they didn't find us.

Q: It saved him;

A: Yes.

Q: And throughout the whole period that this lasted, did they smell their own odor?

A: After a while, we no longer smelled it, we were already completely indifferent to it; for example, they wouldn't let us wear shoes and me personally that drove me to take the shoes or boots from one of

-33- (Zaidel 12)

A: the victims, clean them, wear them, I did that.

Q: He washed them?

A: Yes.

Q: And... what was the result of that?

A: We used a sort of disinfectant, yes, we had something; we had a bit of water for washing our faces with... but I was talking about the boots, we used a disinfectant and then we hung them, because it was very very cold we left them outside for about two days and then we wore them. Once a month, we made a sauna.

Q: A sauna... How long did you do this work?

A: Three and a half months. Four months.

Q: When did it begin?

A: It began even at the time of the Gestapo, it was in January, January 10th.

Q: January 10th...

A: January 10th; from the beginning of January 1944 we began to bring up the corpses.

Q: Until the month of April?

A: Until the month of April, yes.

Q: But so that was the height of winter, it's terribly cold in Lithuania.

-34- (Zaidel 12)

A: Yes, it's very cold.

Q: The soil wasn't frozen?

A: Yes, there was a small layer of sand, there was a little snow, however underneath, well, nothing, nothing mattered to us. They threatened us, they beat us; when we cut the trees we really cut them right at the base and unfortunately for us if there remained there was only a few centimeters above the soil, he picked up... the Germans picked up a piece of wood and hit us on the head.

Q: They began at what time in the morning?

A: At six o'clock, five-thirty, six o'clock.

Q: Until night?

A: Until night; we returned on all fours, we really felt like the dead, but the spirit of initiative, the energy, the will, we had that, there was a group among us who were able to overcome the situation, a group who weren't able.

Q: What was... how did that line come about... the division because those who were able and those who were no longer?

A: You could say that twenty percent among us were able, and eighty percent not.

Q: Those eighty percent, what were they waiting for?

A: Actually, those eighty percent were waiting for the same thing as us, we had apprised everyone of our escape project and whether those who had taken the initiative or the other, each one had the same rights;

-35- (Zaidel 12)

A: when Dogim said that he would be the first to get out, I didn't ask why he was the first and I was after, in fact I was the sixth and each one got out in turn.

Q: Then it was them who... who dug up and burned all the Jews of Vilna?

A: Actually, from my calculations, I think there were still sixteen thousand... sixteen thousand victims in one of the graves. We took out sixty-four thousand corpses of martyrs.

Q: And did they know that Himmler had given a name to the special unit of Jews charged with that task which he called the One Thousand and Five Unit, did they know that?

A: No, we didn't know.

Q: _____ (airplane noise, inaudible)

A: No, we didn't know.

Q: It was the name that Hitler had given to the Jews who did that work everywhere, in Ukraine, in...

A: Hitler or Himmler?

Q: Himmler, sorry;

A: No, we didn't know; what number, one hundred and five?

Q: One thousand and five;

A: Actually, I knew there was a similar unit at Kovno; the tools we used to bring up the dead, they were the ones we received from Kovno and there the men worked on what was called Fort 9;

-36- (Zaidel 12)

A: It was a sort of citadel, a fortress there and that was Fort 9; besides they also escaped but I don't know the exact details. That's it, it was from them that we received our tools.

Q: And, in the graves they found members of their families?

A: I found, I found my whole family. Even at the time of the big liquidation of the ghetto, the Germans had captured women, children and during the last period, we opened a small grave and there, I found my whole family.

Q: He found who, his wife...?

A: My mother, my sister, and the children, three sisters, the whole family; I had three sisters;

Q: How did he recognize them?

A: From the clothes; in fact, even the faces, the features were still,... since it was winter it was... the features were still recognizable. Actually, they had been inside

the grave for four months, in the ground. Shalom Gol also found his wife, the children and he recognized them, there was someone else who found his family, but he's no longer alive.

-37- (Zaidel 13)

Zaidel family interview; Bobine No. 126 A; Zaidel 13.

Q: Now, Mr. Isaac Dogim is alone here, but the family of Motke Zaidel is whole, first of all I must know how many Zaidel generations are here.

A: Three generation; four generations.

Q: Four generations; then I would like each one, except the children, starting with Mrs. Zaidel, to present themselves, from left to right.

A: I'm Mr. Zaidel's wife, Soshanna;
Shraga, Mr. Zaidel's younger son;
Dahlia, Shraga's wife ; daughter-in-law to Motke.
Eded, Hanna's husband, Mr. Zaidel's daughter.

Q: Then?

A: Hanna, Mr. Zaidel's daughter;

Q: And, who is in Hanna's arms?

A: My son, Hohi;

Q: And to her side?

A: Our great-grandmother;

Q: That's the grandmother of everyone?

A: Yes, that's the Mama of Mama.

Q: And...

A: My name is Gershen, and I'm the older son of Mr. Motke, Zaidel.

-38- (Zaidel 13)

Q: Very good; does the whole family know what happened in the forest, did he tell them what happened?

A: Yes, of course; I told them all;

Q: How do they suggest... I would like to make them a proposition; how do they suggest I continue the interview?

A: You could continue in the place where it ended in the forest, it's for you to...

Q: Do they remember the place where it ended?

A: I think that we stopped telling from the moment where we came to the Scheiterhaufen.

Q: It's Mr. Dogim who was about to speak...
When we finished talking at night, it's Mr. Dogim who was about to speak. He said that...

A: Yes, we told how we built the Scheiterhaufen, the pyres, we talked about the dead, the people they forced us to call the Figuren...

Q: Yes, and Mr. Dogim was telling us something very specific when we were interrupted, something very very dramatic.

A: Yes, we were talking about cases in which some people looked for their family and didn't find them, my case was specifically that I found my family.

Q: Can he tell us who he found and how he found them?

A: Mama, my sisters, three sisters, they were all together

-39- (Zaidel 13)

A: in a malina...

Q: Malina, that's a...

A: In a malina...

Q: In a hiding place...

A: They were all together in a hiding place, a malina.

Q: And how could Mr. Dogim recognize them? How was he certain that it was his mother and his sisters and the children of his sisters?

A: They had been executed four months before, since it was winter, they were still in a good state of conservation, and what's more I could recognize them thanks to their clothing.

Q: Good... cut...

Bobine No. 127; Zaidel family 14.

Q: We stopped last time in the forest at... a story by Mr. Dogim and it was a very dramatic episode.

A: Yes, it's... it happened as we opened the last grave, I recognized my entire family and the people who were with us in the malina, in the hiding place, there was also a man named Godberg, with his whole family.

Q: And how... which members of his family did he recognize?

A: Mama, and my sisters, three sisters, with their children; they were all there.

-40- (Zaidel 14)

Q: And how... how could he recognize them?

A: Since they had stayed underground for four months, and it was winter, they were still in a good state of conservation, so I recognized their faces and then also their clothes.

Q: That is, they had been killed relatively recently?

A: Yes. Yes, it had been four months.

Q: And it was the last grave?

A: Yes, it was the last grave situated near the road, it was next to the entrance to Ponari, there was a little grave there.

Q: It's... that is to say that the Nazis had made them open the graves according to a precise plan, they began with the oldest?

A: Yes. Yes, the later graves were the most recent and we began with the oldest, those from the first ghetto and then we continued through the graves... in the first grave there were twenty-four thousand corpses, then we continued to the graves from the second ghetto.

Q: Tell him that I'm going to ask him a very very difficult question, that I'm very sorry, but... when that happened, when he opened the grave and he found his

mother and... and his sisters, it had already been several months that they had... they had accomplished this dreadful task, and... I want to say... what did that... what did that do to him, was in another horror that was added to all the ones that had already happened to him, or was he already blinded, in a way?

-41- (Zaidel 14)

A: No, it was a very difficult moment.

Q: When that happened, they were already digging the tunnel?

A: It was already the end.

Q: Can he say now, can he tell that extraordinary story, when the idea of escape came to them?

A: (D) My friend knows Hebrew better... (Z) We had already been there for a month when the idea came to us. From the moment when they made us bring up the corpses and we understood that we wouldn't get out of there alive, we reflected on what we could do. In the bunker where we were, we had a kitchen, a warehouse for food and that's where we lived; so we began to dig a half-meter under the stone, and under the bunker itself, we began opening of the tunnel.

Q: No, no... but what I want to say, it's even though... they were... they were chained night and day?

A: Of course, we wore chains night and day, we couldn't even dream of removing the chains, they... they examined us every evening.

Q: Did they have tools?

A: Yes, we could salvage tools from the bodies of the martyrs, there were a number of martyrs who were taken when they left for work, so we salvaged their tools.

Q: What sort of tools?

A: I worked there as an electrician, so I had

-42- (Zaidel 14)

A: a screwdriver and a Schleier... pliers... I had pliers...

Q: But what does that mean, that he worked as an electrician?

A: In the forest, there wasn't any electricity and the Germans wanted to light up the surroundings of the graves and they even lit up the inside of the graves.

Q: That means that the profession of Mr. Dogim, was that of an electrician?

A: Yes.

Q: ...what I would like to know, there were how many there, they were eighty, I think?

A: Yes, eighty people.

Q: Good... cut, cut...

Bobine No. 128; Zaidel 15.

Q: Now, there were seventy-nine men and four women, I think?... and there were even three children, no?

A: Not children, adolescents.

Q: Who were how old?

A: One was fifteen, seventeen, the other kid was seventeen.

Q: Now, I would like to know... the idea of escape, it didn't come to everybody at the time? Who had to idea to escape?

-43- (Zaidel 15)

A: We had a committee of about four people and they had a number of ideas, they even thought of escaping through the fence, near the traps, near the trapped zone, they also had a number of ideas, in particular to dig under the bunker into the rock itself, there was a distance of maybe thirty meters between the bunker and the first trees.

Q: I would like you to ask Miss Zaidel what she was about to say, what she whispered?

A:

Q: cut, cut, cut, cut!

Zaidel 16.

Q: Ask Mr. Zaidel's daughter what did she say, what did she whisper in her father's and Mr. Dogim's ears?

A: I think it's very important that they explain why they didn't escape the bunker other than by... by digging a tunnel, I think they ought to explain how the Nazis watched the bunker, why it was impossible to escape another way.

Q: Okay, they'll do it, they'll do it.

A: We must tell the story of the first fence.
Around the bunker there was a first fence of barbed wire, then an entirely mined zone of around seven meters up until the second fence of barbed wire.

-44- (Zaidel 16)

A: And after the second fence?
The guard was very tight around the bunker, you could say that every three or four meters there was an SS with an automatic gun.

Q: But Mr. Zaidel's daughter seems to know the story better than her own father?

A: I think that it's simply... Papa is very emotional.

Q: So they collaborated every three... Well, then I'll ask the question again that I asked a little while ago, who had the idea of escaping, because Mr. Dogim spoke of a committee, I don't know what this committee is?

A: Among the eighty people who were in the bunker, there were four people who had a very strong will to escape.

Q: Was he among these four people?

A: At first there were five of us, but as the work went along, we needed more labor, so there were eight of us, ten, fifteen, and at the end, there were twenty of us.

Q: Good, but so, if we come back to the idea of escaping by digging a tunnel, from what I understand, extraordinarily few tools and they were bleeding, etc... It's not obvious at all, all this, so I would like them to insist on...

A: Simply because we understood that we no longer had anything to lose, we were in a place where we knew, where we felt that, living, no one could get out. We had nothing to lose. So we began to dig; it's very difficult work, really very difficult, after a day of work that was

-45- (Zaidel 16)

A: already hard itself and we had few tools, we were sometimes forced to sleep on top of one another so we could remove the sand, it was really horrible work, horrible. And what's more, from the moment when we revealed the idea, we

asked the others to come dig, which wasn't possible for everyone because there wasn't enough air, it was even impossible for some to dig.

Q: Was everyone in agreement, with escape by tunnel?

A: Of course.

Q: Are they sure of what they're saying, that from the start everyone was in agreement?

A: Of course from the start, not everyone knew, but finally, as soon as we could let everyone know, those who had been told were in agreement, no one was opposed to the idea.

Q: Who was Abraham Ambourg?

A: That was the foreman.

Q: But what was... what was his function?

A: We had... his task was to check all of our actions and gestures, and when we had complaints or demands, we could address ourselves to him; in fact he knew exactly what we were doing in the bunker and we had a common language with him; in fact, he was a blacksmith.

Q: No but, what I'm asking, he was a Jew himself, a prisoner like them?

-46- (Zaidel 17)

Bobine No. 129; Zaidel 17.

A: After everyone was in agreement with this idea of the tunnel, we were in the warehouse where the bread was, and we built a wall about one meter, that left one meter between this new wall and the old wall and it was in that interval, that crack of one meter that we dug a tunnel two meters deep.

Q: So, the tunnel, can you describe the tunnel? ... it wasn't the Mont Blanc, no?

A: The earth was sandy, so much that each time we were forced, all along the tunnel to reinforce, to bank up the ground with beams... The tunnel was five centimeters wide by fifteen centimeters tall, so there was just enough room for a man lying down to move forward.

Q: It wasn't a tunnel, it was a hole...

A: I have to add something, because the work we did was particularly difficult; we dug the tunnel, a sort of canal in the form of a tunnel, for that matter I don't know how to define it very well today, today when I try to tell the story I don't believe myself, because the work was so... so impossible, so difficult, not only did we dig, but we also had to procure wood, the wood we had to bring for the kitchen, we kept some for the tunnel.

Q: But the tunnel like they had planned, had to be what length, to be able to escape, to be able to leave the bunker they had to go out a number of meters or hundreds of meters or kilometers, I don't know?

A: We thought that it needed to be between thirty-five and forty

-47- (Zaidel 17)

A: meters, that's what we dug and that's what we needed.

Q: Thirty-five or forty meters long?... Not more?

A: No, not more; after four or five meters, there was no more air, you couldn't even light a candle inside the tunnel.

Q: Then?

A: Since I already had the tools, I built a sort of electrical system.
Yes, since he was an electrician, there was the possibility of lighting it.
But the real problem, the big problem, was where to hide the sand we dug up.
Yes, it was absolutely the biggest problem, hiding the sand; we had one piece of luck, which was that the bunker was very big, so we invented whatever, we spread out the sand and sprayed it with water, we tried to hide it on the roof, between the walls, anywhere, any place we could think of to hide the sand.

Q: But who dug, one man at a time?

A: No, we actually entered four at a time in the tunnel, at first we dug with our hands, and at the end we were forced to stop simply because our hands were bleeding, then we salvaged some spoons from the bodies of the victims, the martyrs and the first who entered the tunnel dug with a spoon, he passed the sand under his own body and passed it toward the second who removed it, etc...

Q: And the second passed it to the third one, who passed it to the fourth?

A: Exactly.

-48- (Zaidel 17)

Q: Then now we finally arrive at the truth, at something concrete, good, earlier they spoke of tools salvaged from the... from the martyrs, they said, from the corpses, from the “figures,” now he said they dug with their bare hands or simply with spoons, were these the tools?

A: That’s true, at first the hands and after the tools...

Q: The tools or the spoons?

A: Spoons.

Q: Spoons, those aren’t tools...

A: Well, those were the tools we had; we didn’t have tools, yes you could say they were spoons.

Q: Who called those tools, it was them, or you translated spoons with tools?

A: No, they said tools.

I would like to add something, we spoke of pliers a little while ago, and we were effectively served by the pliers afterwards when we could cut the chains, but at the time we were digging the tunnel, we only used our hands and the spoons.

Q: Then so, if you had to visualize it, you should visualize men with hobbled ankles, who are in a hole, and who move forward in a hole in the sand digging with... with their hands or simply with spoons, well, and then who pass the sand under them, is that good?

A: Yes, and there, it must be said that we had an advantage, that the dirt was sandy, it was a bit like flour, it was

-49- (Zaidel 17)

A: almost a miracle for us.

Q: And what did they do to avoid mistaking the direction?

A: Yes, the story of Youri, the engineer, with the compass that he managed to steal...

Q: How did that happen,... how is it that... she knows this story so well?... and that she whispers it like she does?

A: I will tell you, it’s very simple, I’ve written it, she’s written it five times, so I practically know it by heart.

Q: Translate that.

A: Yes, I must say, I have to add sometime, when we were digging, the problem was that the dirt collapsed twice, and then again, the dirt collapsed... we risked it collapsing all the time, it was a big problem, and then at one point, it was very difficult, because we were forced in our... while digging we realized that we had gone in the wrong direction, we were forced to turn towards the right, so that was really a big problem, because we were afraid of making a mistake, and, adds Hanna, they were afraid of falling on a German patrol while mistaking their direction and of opening out finally inside one of the graves perhaps.

Bobine No. 130, Zaidel 18.

A: We entered four at a time, five, six, in the tunnel, we lay down and the one at the end of the tunnel dug, took the sand, passed it under his belly, in the

-50- (Zaidel 18)

A: following manner, moved it toward the second, who also took the sand, moved it under his belly toward the third, and continued like that, and the one who was outside the tunnel had a bucket, and could bring out the sand.

Q: So how did they breathe inside the tunnel?

A: It was difficult, it was particularly difficult, in fact there wasn't any air to breathe, we could at maximum, with all possible effort, stay, say, one hour in the tunnel.

Q: So, they would take over for one another, then?

A: Yes, we got out and a second group replaced us.

Q: When did they dig, they dug at night?

A: Yes, actually we began to dig once we'd finished what you could call the job that the Germans had forced on us; in fact each of us knew that once we had finished outside, we could... we had to go back in the tunnel and do our work, we took over for one another in that manner and we always tried to be available; I remember one case when we really nearly had problems, that was when the guards suddenly came to do a roll call and then everyone had to go stand outside, and four or five people were inside the tunnel; only, thanks to the electrical system installed by Dogim, we had a little signal which let us warn those who were in the tunnel and I don't even know today how, everyone was standing, in a line, they didn't notice anything, there you go.

Q: How deep was it, the tunnel?

-51- (Zaidel 18)

A: The bunker already being five meters deep under the soil itself, we also dug two meters under the bunker, so the tunnel was seven meters under the surface of the ground.

Q: And the direction?

A:

Q: And the direction?

A: We had already dug 20 meters in length along the tunnel when suddenly we had the impression that we were going the wrong way and really it was a very, very big problem, we stopped for two or three days of work to try to think about a way to resolve the problem and we decided to make an abrupt turn to the right; that was particularly difficult because the dirt began to settle and collapse; and I have to clarify, since my daughter asked me, that if we changed directions, after twenty meters, it was because we feared finally ending right next to the guards and worse still, inside the graves.

So we made a turn to the right as I said, that was very hard, but we continued to dig around another fifteen meters and there we managed to come out exactly at the place that we predicted.

Q: So, how long did that take?

A: Three months.

Q: And, who got out first?

A: It was me;

Q: It was Itsak Dogim who got out first?

-52- (Zaidel 18)

A: Dogim, you must remember exactly when you cut the electricity?

Q: I want to say... he dug... sorry... he dug the tunnel,... and one beautiful day he opened into open air... well, who opened into open air first?

A: Dogim; ... yes, but the night before, they had already cut their chains so they could get out of the tunnel.

I will tell you the story; when we had begun to reach dirt that was a little blacker and a little harder we understood that... that it was nearly the end; there were already roots, so then we had a meeting with all our comrades and we said, it'll almost be the end of the work and we must take our provisions; then we formed

groups of six people, each group was directed by a... a group leader, by a person in charge. Then we made plans to know in which direction we would escape and what would be the place where we would all regroup and who would get out first.

Q: The plan, it was that everyone would escape?

A: Yes, the night before the escape, we warned everyone, we said to everyone that we were at the end, that we would get out and that above all no one could make any noise, everyone was in agreement, there wasn't any noise, and we were ready to leave as a group.

Bobine No. 131; Zaidel 19.

Q: I heard the word Betchimuch

-53- (Zaidel 19)

A: That's already another story, first do you want us to finish the first one?

Q: Who will tell this one?

A: Which, this one, of

Q: Yes.

A: With the sand, that was really a whole story; by dint of removing the sand, of piling it on the floor of the bunker, the ground of the bunker had risen twenty centimeters; then we claimed that we were cold and we had to build walls, so we built walls so we could actually hide the sand. As far as the bathrooms are concerned, we had, in a word if you could call them bathrooms, it was a sort of big pit with planks and every time you went to the bathroom you had sand in your pockets and you emptied your pockets and finally when it filled up very fast, we claimed that we had to dig a second toilet. Then we had to hide the sand on the roof of the kitchen, that made a problem, because each time you opened the door, the sand fell off the roof into the pots then people complained, because they said that they were given foul food full of sand, they didn't know, they didn't know what it was about.

Q: Who didn't know?

A: Just about half the people who still weren't told, even until the last stage.

Q: Oh so half the people... the Jews who lived in the bunker, who worked at Ponari, weren't in the know?

-54- (Zaidel 19)

A: No, they didn't know.

Q: But how was it possible to keep a secret like that, while they all lived together in a community, overcrowded, uncompromising?

A: Actually, what happened, is that we took advantage of moments when people, after a day of so-called work, went to rest, stretched out on their beds, after the meal; it was at that time that we dug and then still another time, was when we reached about twenty feet of the tunnel's length, it was impossible to work with so few people, so we were forced to enlarge the secret and to take another ten people. In any case, all eighty were never in the know.

Q: First of all why, why do you say the people... the people... you weren't at a social function, people instead of Jews... say the Jews, I like that better. Now, and the second thing, I asked a very precise question, I said how was it possible that people didn't know?

A: Because when the Jews returned from their work, they were so tired they collapsed.

Q: Or were they afraid that someone would betray them?

A: It was also the cold, it was in the height of winter.
Of course;
But in the end, everyone knew. In fact, already two days before the big escape, everyone was in the know.

Q: Good then, now, let's come back to the end of the digging of the tunnel; so, they progressed and they found tree roots, blacker dirt, they thought that they

-55- (Zaidel 19)

Q: would soon reach the day, the light, what happened then?

A: We were set up in groups of around six people, each of which was directed by someone in charge who knew how to follow the itinerary exactly and who knew where to meet up. Then there still remained about a meter for us to dig. At that time, a discussion began among us to know who would climb out first, so someone asked me to be the first to get out simply because I already knew the road and above all we had to...

Q: The road, what does that mean?

A: I knew the road outside and we also had to open the fence with the pliers I owned; but I found myself in such a mental state that then more than anything I wanted to escape myself.

Q: Why?

A: Because it was just when...

That is, it was only a little while after he opened the grave and there he found his whole family, so at that time, he was already a broken man, he no longer wanted to escape, but his friends forced him, they compelled him, because he had worked so much, he had done so much for this, he knew the road outside, and finally it was he who would get out first and was at the fence to open it.

My idea was to get out last and once all my comrades had passed, I had decided to throw a rock inside the mine field to blow it all up, the Germans, the bunker, blow it all up. But our committee didn't agree that I should leave last, I didn't have a

-56 (Zaidel 19)

A: choice, I had to get out first and since I was from the Vilna area, I knew the surroundings, I had to get out first; I accepted with one condition, that my father came with me.

Q: His father was with him?

A: Yes.

Q: Why didn't he ever speak of this all throughout the interview and in the forest, and here?

A: You didn't ask the question.

Bobine No. 132; Zaidel 20.

Q: Was Itsaak's Dogim's father in on the secret of the digging of the tunnel?

A: He knew, but he didn't work on it.

Q: He knew they were digging a tunnel?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: From the beginning?

A: No, it was forbidden to tell him from the start. Aside from my father, I also had two brothers-in-law there.

Q: And how old was his father?

A: Fifty-four, fifty-five years old.

Q: Fifty-four, fifty-five years old, and he had been selected to do such difficult work?

-57- (Zaidel 20)

A: Yes, yes.

Q: He was very strong, his father?

A: Yes, he was a very strong man.

Q: He had a close relationship with him, during that period?

A: If I had to tell you all the stories, it would really take a long time; now, one fact that I remember, is... it was still the time when we slept at the Gestapo's and we went to work at Ponari, it was a time when it snowed, it was very cold, it rained, the conditions were really difficult; one day, we were returning from work toward the Gestapo and my father had no more strength, he collapsed and a German approached him, then a man with a cart and horses walked by and proposed that he take my father in the cart, my father climbed in, and he had seemed to follow our column, at the end of four hours, he had never arrived, and suddenly I saw him coming on foot, he told me that the man who had taken him in the cart said to him, but why are you returning to the Gestapo, go, escape, and my father said, no, I can't, my son is there.

Q: Was his father with him when he opened the graves and when he found his own mother, so who was his father's wife and his sisters who were his father's daughters?

A: He was... he was in another place but I told him, so he already knew. I remember also another episode, one time the Germans asked me to install at Ponari cables, wires, in short an electrical installation; for that, they allowed me to travel outside Ponari because there were villas in the area

-58- (Zaidel 20)

A: and they told me to take apart the wires, cables, etc... they also gave me an assistant and since I had to climb up the pylons they had taken off my chains. Now, there came a day where the German was no longer there, so I was alone in the forest, without a guard, and my assistant, I think his name was Goldberg, said to me, listen, look, we're here without a guard, go, let's escape and I answered him, if you want you can escape, but me, I can't, my father is there.

Q: Good, and at last, when they came to the end of the digging of the tunnel, so he said that he accepted being the first like the others asked him, under the condition

that his father follow him, that's great, or that his father was among the escapees, no, I didn't understand very well?

A: That my father was among the first ones.

Q: And that was accepted?

A: No; no, they... they thought about it, they decided that it would be worth more if I left with the third group with my brothers-in-law.

Q: ...he was the first to get out or he left with the third group?... They decided that his father would leave in the third group with the brothers-in-law?

A: My father not working, he had to be in the last group, those who left last of all, I insisted so that he could leave in the third group with my brothers-in-law.

Q: So, along what criteria did they decide the order of the escape?

A: First of all it was those who had done the most, in fact

-59- (Zaidel 20)

A: all the first people were members of the committee, and right after them the young ones, those who had the intention of enlisting with the partisans, those were the first. It was also along degree of participation in the work;

Q: Of the digging of the tunnel?

A: Yes, of the digging of the tunnel.

Q: Were there conflicts?

A: No conflict.

Q: Everyone was in agreement?

A: Yes.

Q: What did they think... did they think that everyone would manage to escape?

A: Yes, that's what we thought.

Q: Manage, that's well said; did they think that the first ones had a better chance than those who would get out last?

A: Actually, we thought that the first group and the second group were in the most danger because the first ones to stick their heads out of the tunnel, they risked receiving a discharge from a machine gun.

Q: Absolutely; now, then so they let... no, they didn't dig the tunnel until the end when they knew that they succeeded, they came back and they prepared for the escape; so now I would like to know

-60- (Zaidel 20)

Q: this: was everyone in agreement about escaping?

A: ...

Q: Translate...

A: Yes, we were all in agreement, we were all organized in groups of ten with leaders and we had also prepared the pliers so we could take off our chains.

Bobine No. 133; Zaidel 21.

Q: What happened when those were weren't in on the secret of the opening of the tunnel knew that... that a tunnel had been dug and it was proposed to them to escape?

A: It was very simple, they listened to the story and they accepted it. Actually, there was, there was silence; there were some small expressions of joy.

Q: They became wild with joy?

A: No, everything happened in the biggest silence, we were afraid; we were surrounded by Germans, you must remember that we had to pay very close attention, so of course joy existed but everything happened in silence.

Q: Then, I'll ask again the question I asked a little while ago: was everyone in agreement about escaping?

A: Everyone was in agreement about escaping.

Q: Do they remember a man who was called, I don't know if I'm pronouncing it right, Goschus or maybe Goschkaus?

A:

-61- (Zaidel 21)

Q: He was a rabbi, it seems.

A: Yes, there was a rabbi; yes, among us, there was a rabbi, but his name, I don't remember.

Q: He was young or he was old?

A: He was... he was maybe ten years older than me.

Q: I... I know, but maybe it's another invention, I know from Shalom Gol that there was a particular rabbi named Goschaus, who when he learned that a tunnel had been dug, he organized a _____, he blessed them, he wished them good luck, he asked everyone to listen to them and obey them, he said that he would stay because he was too old to escape.

A: I don't remember such a thing; I remember that near me someone told me once that he had studied to be a rabbi, but that's all I remember.

Q: Could a similar thing have happened and at the same time is it possible that if it happened, they don't remember it?

A: No, you couldn't forget a thing like that and from what Gol said, I don't really know what he's talking about because there wasn't any rabbi, the person I remember who told me that he had studied to be a rabbi was young, and I remember another who was old and who was... who was pious, but in any case there wasn't a rabbi.

Q: Maybe he wasn't a rabbi, but did it happen that an old pious man organized a _____, blessed them, wished them good luck and said I'm too old for this, go...?

-62- (Zaidel 21)

A: No, we didn't... first of all no one performed a _____, and what's more there weren't any old men in that place.

Q: Still his father was there who was fifty-five, that's not very young?

A: But in any case, there wasn't anyone there older than my father.

Q: I'm asking these questions, it's S. Gol who was with them, and who I saw in Jacksonville, in Florida, who told me that story; now, maybe he invented it?

A:

Q: I don't know why... I don't know why he would have invented it... I'm asking these questions, it's to help them to help me, to try to represent to me their state of mind after months of that horrible task, after having dug the tunnel, freedom... I'm not sure that they can remember it all.

A: Fine, let's say that I don't remember a rabbi, but in any case, I remember very well that at that moment we hadn't organized any_____, any prayers, I remember that I approached my father and that I greeted him in a certain way, but we didn't have any demonstrations other than... than that.

Q: What does that mean, he greeted him in a certain way?

A: He said "shalom" to him.

Q: Then why didn't you say he said "shalom" to him?

A: ...I hugged my father, I hugged my brothers-in-law,

-63- (Zaidel 21)

A: [Z] You know, when we began to leave, we still hadn't come to the end of our sorrow, as soon as we stuck our heads out, we still had to cover some distance, get to the fence, could... we were also inside Ponari and as soon as you stuck your head outside the tunnel, the lights began to inundate us with light all over, they fired on us and it wasn't simply little guns, it was really machineguns, fire burst from everywhere, and there were still quite a lot of us, there was a group of fifteen to twenty around me, suddenly it was no more than five.

Q: They were too fast, they were too fast... First of all they didn't... they didn't say how they took off their chains?

A: [D] I'll tell the story of the pliers; so I had the pliers and it was me who opened the chains, so I gave liberty to the men and I was followed by twenty people and finally we passed the pliers from person to person.

Q: I want to say, were the seventy-nine unshackled?

A: We can't really know, because each one entered in the tunnel and freed the one following him, so we passed the pliers and as soon as we entered the tunnel we no longer knew what was going on behind.

Q: With the pliers, they cut?

A:

-64- (Zaidel 22)

Bobine No. 134; Zaidel 22.

Q: Now, Isaac Dogim was designated to leave the tunnel first, I think it was the first night of Passover, what time was it?

A: The exact time, I don't remember anymore, I think it had to be eleven or twelve o'clock.

Q: What happened?

A: When all the preparations were done, then I left a little bit in advance since we still had to clear out the surface of the tunnel; I started to work and I still hadn't quite finished when there were already twenty people in the tunnel and I felt that I really could no longer, I didn't have any more air to breathe. I had a bar of iron in my hand and I tried, I attempted to make holes in the surface of the soil and suddenly I made a hole, two holes, and finally I had air. It was then that we cut the electricity, there was electricity inside the tunnel, and when we took off... when we removed the chains and I opened the hole, I widened it and I had open air. When I stuck my head out, I already saw the sky, the stars, but I also saw a group of German soldiers who looked precisely in the direction of our tunnel and I have to say that our tunnel... the exit of the tunnel was a half-meter, fifty centimeters from the place we picked, I think that today engineers with the most perfected instruments can't come to such precision. So I enlarged the entrance to the tunnel...

Q: The exit...

-65- (Zaidel 22)

A: I enlarged the exit to the tunnel and I began to crawl on all fours and behind me my friends followed me. I was already about hundred meters from the tunnel when in the forest I heard the soldiers speaking German, so I suddenly changed direction and those who were following me didn't understand very well what happened since that hadn't heard anything, but I couldn't explain it to them, we couldn't talk at that time. When we came to the edge of the forest, we stood up straight, so I was standing, I moved forward and there I fell into a grave, there was just one grave ahead. Since I was in the grave, I said to my friends...

Q: Which grave, one of the graves that they had opened?

A: No, it was a grave, but not opened, it was still covered. So, I said to my friends not to wait for me and to continue their route, unfortunately they took the wrong direction, they were headed for the German camp and then, the alarm was given.

Q: Why, did they make noise, the Germans heard the noise, what happened?

A: [D] In fact the alarm started when we left our bunker where there was an alarm signal, and they opened fire. I managed to get out of the grave and I rejoined my comrades, I had also lost my sense of direction, I no longer knew where I was going, I found myself near the German military camp and they were firing on all sides, we were caught between two lines of fire.

Q: I would like to know, the Germans started firing, how was the alarm given?

A: [Z] I would like to add something; we had, we

-66- (Zaidel 22)

A: agreed to go in the direction of the first grave near the road and effectively we took that direction, but in that direction there was an enormous amount of dead branches and in walking on the dead branches, I think that it was those dry branches which alerted the Germans and that's when they started firing.
[D] I think otherwise; when I got out of the tunnel, the Germans were five meters from me, if twenty people leave five meters from the German soldiers, it's fatal if they hear something.

Q: Now so, the Germans started firing on all sides, good, how many managed to run away?

A: [D] We were, from what we know, there were eleven survivors; [Z] in fact, me, says Motke, I remember that, when the alarm was given, we were rushing forward... supposing that I'm Dogim, he opens the fence with his pliers, I rush, I'm not looking in front, or behind, I go, I run, we're a group of twelve and suddenly there's no more than five.

Bobine No. 135; Zaidel 23.

Q: How many people managed to escape from Pona?

A: As far as we know, eleven or twelve people are still alive.

Q: But at the time?

A: I think that up to fifteen people managed to get out, but along the way some were wounded by the mines or by shooting.

-67- (Zaidel 23)

Q: So, everyone didn't manage to get out by tunnel?

A: That's at least what we thought, because from the instant when the Germans opened fire, they tried to understand what happened.

Q: So they killed people even inside the bunker?

A: It's possible, we don't know.

Q: Did Mr. Dogim's father manage to run away?

A: No.

Q: He died there?

A: Yes, and the same thing for my brothers-in-law.

Q: The ones from the third group?

A: Yes.

Q: Only those from the first group managed to run away or those from the first and from the second group?

A: Yes, the second group too, of course.

Q: What does Hanna think of this?

A: You would like to know what I think of the number of people who managed to run away?

Q: No, no, what does she think about... this whole story?

A: I have the impression that finally he's missing quite a lot of the details in this story, they haven't really told it all;

-68- (Zaidel 23)

A: I know the story, from all the questions I asked my father, to really know all the details, I questioned him and questioned him again, always questioned until I managed to extract all the scraps of truth from him that he hadn't said because as a matter of fact he began to answer me in half-sentences, I really had to pull the details out of him and finally I had a more complete image, for example, something that he didn't say, is this extraordinary impression of breathing fresh air when they left the tunnel; he told me, yet you must remember that they worked for months next to corpses, corpses of martyrs, in any case corpses, and suddenly this pure air.

Q: Why was she so curious about this story?

A: Actually, it's a very long story; I know that when I was a very young girl, I had very little contact with my father, at first he worked outside, I saw him rather little, and then he was a silent man, he didn't talk to me and I had difficulty... simply even talking with him; it was Mama who, at home, threw out here or there a piece of the story, my father's friends told me as well, but in the end it was very curious, I didn't have any details of the story directly from my father and then when I grew up, I had the strength to be face to face with him and to wrest from him materially wrest from him the details of the story, little by little I knew a bit more, but in fact it was when Mr. Lanzmann came for the first time I think I heard the story in its totality for the second time. Yes, since Mama reminded me of something, there's still something very important, there were five people, so I always heard them speak of an extraordinary family, the father, the mother, the grandparents, the brothers, and when I

-69- (Zaidel 23)

A: asked, Papa, did you run away under those circumstances and how did you run away then, I didn't have all of the answers and the only points of indication that remained to me, it was when we watched for example a film on the Holocaust, and then, on principle, we watched very little of it, but when we watched one, Papa suddenly threw out a remark, "in comparison with what happened to me, there were still things that were much more difficult."

Q: Why does she say, on principle we watched a little?

A: Because I'm a "sabari," that is someone who was born here in Israel, and like all sabaris, I had some time to live what is called "yom roshoa," the Holocaust journey, it's... it allows you once a year to go for example to _____, or to another place of commemoration and to hear a certain number of stories; but otherwise, it's hardly six or seven years ago that they began presenting films of the genre in Israel "The ninety-first coup" or other films on the Holocaust and finally we had very little time to be in direct relation with the events except in the story of Auschwitz or of Bergen-Belsen which everybody had heard told from the beginning.

Bobine No. 136; Zaidel 24.

Q: Does Hanna love her father more because of all this? Does she love him more than if he had had an ordinary existence?

A: No, I don't think so; a father, is a father for all children, he is foremost a father; but I think that there's one thing that I succeeded at, that... it's to come to understand him and that I don't think everyone comes to, for other reasons;

-70- (Zaidel 24)

Q: What does that mean?

A: That is to say that it has no connection with anything that's happening of this specific fact, there's always a lot of things between a father and his daughter, and father and his child, and of course we've had misunderstandings, but in any case I think that I've come to understand him.

Q: And the Holocaust, what does she think of that? Why did it happen?

A: I don't think that I'm the person qualified to analyze here and clearly answer your question, but I'm ready to answer you on a point, and that's the attitude the Israelis have toward the Holocaust survivors. Of course the Jewish people have in their history gone through enormous periods of suffering and difficulty, but the very fact of having tried to completely annihilate, to eradicate, to destroy an entire people, I think that's an abnormal situation, that's simply not possible, that you can't even visualize and imagine, and I think that the attitude we have in Israel toward the people who went through, who lived those events, I think that that attitude isn't good.

Q: Why?

A: Why? Because the people who survived the Holocaust are tired people; I've had the opportunity to grow up in a family where my parents and my grandmother were Holocaust survivors, and for example, if I throw away a piece of bread, my father becomes angry with me, even if today I have the ability to buy five pieces of bread, five loaves of bread, he becomes mad at me, and so that's a very unusual feeling.

Q: What does she mean to say when she says that they're tired, the reason is... what does she mean to say?

-71- (Zaidel 24)

A: It's a sort of moral tiredness; they're people, imagine people like you and like me, who suddenly leave their daily life, who are introduced to conditions, which aren't human conditions, who are outside in all possible imaginable conditions, and six years later they are introduced to everyday life, and you say to them, there you go, continue to live, they're people who simply have no strength left take Mama, if I said no to her one time no for something, she started to cry, because she simply had no strength left, because she has a heightened sensitivity, because the people who went through such a life, such an experience, remain marked for the rest of their days.

Q: And the children of Holocaust survivors?

A: That is there are children who live and who grow up in families where the parents decided not to tell them anything and I think that those parents are wrong; elsewhere there are families in which the parents didn't live through the Holocaust, but know the facts and tell them and finally there are families who lived through the Holocaust, and who tell their children, and personally I think that on that level I succeeded, because I managed to understand.

End of Zaidel interview.