

MIECZYŚŁAW KOŚCIELNIAK

Warsaw, 4 December 1946. Acting Investigative Judge Halina Wereńko, delegated to the District Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Warsaw, heard Mieczysław Kościelniak, former prisoner no. 15,261 of the concentration camp in Auschwitz, as a witness. Having been advised of the criminal liability for making false declarations, the witness testified as follows:

Name and surname	Mieczysław Kościelniak, pseudonym "Zawrat"
Date of birth	28 January 1912, in Kalisz
Religious affiliation	Roman Catholic
Citizenship and nationality	Polish
Marital status	married
Place of residence	Warsaw, Dobra Street 2, flat 43
Education	Academy of Fine Arts
Occupation	painter

On 6 March 1941 in Kalisz, I was arrested by the Gestapo agents, who possessed precise information about me. I was taken away from home and transported to a provisional concentration camp in Kalisz. During the interrogation, I was questioned about my membership in an underground independence organization and about an anti-German painting. It was about the painting I had painted before the war in 1939, which depicted civilians being shot by the Germans during the First World War (1914–1918).

I did not admit to being a member of the Polish Underground State, however I was a ZWZ [Union of Armed Struggle] member, under the pseudonym "Zawrat."

On 2 May 1941, I was transported with 208 men to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. We were transported by train, crammed into cattle cars under a strict military escort led by a policeman from Kalisz, *Oberwachmeister Dirks*.

When we arrived at the siding next to the camp in Auschwitz, the moment the car door was opened, SS men with dogs – sent to escort our group to the camp – lunged at us and beat us with sticks. Having jumped out of the cars, grouped in fives, surrounded by the escort with dogs, we were rushed to the main camp in Auschwitz through the gate with the inscription *Arbeit macht frei*.

In front of the gate inside the camp, *Lagerführer Fritzsch* welcomed us with a short speech, in which he announced that we – Polish criminals – had come to a camp which could only be escaped from through a chimney. After the speech, we were herded in front of block 26. We were let in, several people at a time, after waiting for a few hours. In the hall of block 26, we had to undress and hand over all of our belongings. Naked, beaten and pushed, we were rushed to the baths, then shaved and dressed in prison outfits: stripped trousers and jackets and wooden shoes, most often clogs. Naturally, the clothes were badly fitting and dirty. Functional prisoners wrote down our personal data and distributed metal plates with numbers. The number I received was 15,261.

When I arrived at the camp, there was only the main Auschwitz camp and there were about 14,000–15,000 thousand male prisoners, I don't remember the exact number. There were concrete, single-storied blocks; the sewage system was still being built. The conditions were harsh, there was no water to wash oneself, there was one toilet for five blocks.

The main Auschwitz camp was continuously being expanded by the prisoners at a rapid rate, so that in 1942 the sewage system was ready and new stories were successively added to the buildings. The pace of work was such that it cost the lives of many prisoners. The building in Birkenau started in the summer of 1941; in the fall, 12,000 Soviet prisoners were dragged into carrying out that work. They worked hungry; after a few months only 56 of them remained alive.

The first transport of women (several thousand of them) from Ravensbrück arrived in Birkenau in March 1942.

In the spring of 1941, building works commenced on the so-called *Buna-Werke*, at the Monowice train station. The prisoners worked on that building site. Those factories were

expanded until the camp ceased to exist. There were huge synthetic gasoline and synthetic gum factories (IG Farben Industrie). The *Buna-Werke* was especially destructive to the prisoners.

In 1941, there weren't many Jewish transports, and those which arrived were directed to the penal company. It was common knowledge that a Jew didn't stay at the camp for longer than two weeks. In 1942 and 1943, Jewish transports became large in number – they were arriving from France, Belgium, Holland, Germany and the Czech Republic.

When I arrived, Rudolf Höss was the camp commandant. Generally, Höss was said to use a system of killing the prisoners with hunger and excessive work, but his system also included prisoners harassing and exterminating each other. Functional prisoners – that is, *kapos*, orderlies, *Vorarbeiters* – had unlimited power over the prisoners' life and death. They received special directives from the camp authorities to torture and murder the prisoners. Using their power to earn better living conditions, they were killing them off.

In this state of affairs, SS men usually gave orders to torture or exterminate. The orders were carried out by functional prisoners. There was an intelligence system for the Political Department. In this way, prisoners, in exchange for better living conditions, spied on other prisoners, especially the intelligentsia – the more well-known people.

A Polish prisoner, former vice president of Warsaw, Olpiński, was a famous spy at the camp. He was killed by an underground organization of prisoners in 1943. Other known spies at the camp were German prisoners: Malorny and an architect, and Engineer Otto Willi Kauer. All three of them tried to unmask the underground organization and betrayed more than a hundred prisoners, who were then shot, to the Political Department.

In 1942, an underground organization of prisoners came into being on the camp premises. It communicated with the underground movements in Poland and abroad. Its leaders were Józef Cyrankiewicz, Professor Rajewski, and Dr. Dimm. I belonged to that organization since 1942.

At the end of 1943, after Höss had been dismissed, Liebenhenschel became the camp commandant. The system of treating the prisoners did not change while he was in office.

Having arrived at the camp, I was employed, together with a group of prisoners from my transport, at finishing block 11. The work consisted of pushing wheelbarrows with soil, while the *kapos*, standing by the road in order to supervise us, rushed us along, beating us

with sticks. After a few days, I was assigned to paving the roads; two weeks later – to the demolition of houses, where I was employed for two months.

A German named Thimm was the *kapo* of our crew, and Hanys from Silesia was his deputy; both of them were cruel to the prisoners. Hanys had the habit of beating the prisoners in the head with a stick, which often happened to me.

Almost every day during work, Thimm and Hanys would entertain themselves by tying a prisoner chosen at random to the crank of the well by his hands and legs, in such a way that the shaft around which the chain twisted was at stomach level. When the crank was turned, the prisoner would faint.

In May 1941, at the moment when the prisoners were to bring down a wall, Thimm ordered that it be hit with a pole so that the wall went down on top of the prisoners, causing three prisoners to die and five to get injured. In 1941 (I don't remember the exact date), a cross was found on a wall when a house was being demolished. Thimm, Hanys and SS man Hartwig – later the camp *Rapportführer* – told Father Niewęglowski to stand on the cross, and when he refused, they beat him unconscious.

Thimm's working unit consisted of about three hundred prisoners, most of whom came from our transport. I remember that a dozen or so prisoners from our transport died during work; however, I don't remember their names.

In the summer of 1941, I was assigned to DAW (*Deutsche Ausrüstungswerke* – German Equipment Company), to work at a carpentry shop for nine months. DAW was headed by *Untersturmführer* Wagner on behalf of the SS. The working unit consisted of 150 prisoners initially, while at the end of the camp's existence there were 1,500. The *kapo* at DAW was Arno Boehm, who was moved to Dirlewanger's division in the spring of 1944. Boehm – a hairdresser by occupation – tortured many people, but I don't remember their names, as I didn't know many prisoners at DAW. He hit me in the face a number of times. The work at DAW took place under a roof and outside (digging in the ground). We would carry heavy logs, while being constantly rushed and beaten.

In September 1941, Boehm was sent to the camp in Birkenau, and his place was taken by *kapo* August, who also harassed the prisoners and murdered many of them. I don't remember the names of the prisoners murdered by August.

Regardless of our daily tasks, on Sunday mornings we were usually rushed to work on the expansion of the camp in Birkenau, so we could rarely rest on a Sunday morning.

At the beginning of 1942, I managed to get assigned to work at the warehouses, where I worked for two years. Nearly all of the people who worked there were Polish. The work consisted of unloading trains at the sidings. These carried some products, things for the SS men, transports of chlorine and Zyklon B. Two hundred to three hundred prisoners divided into sections worked at the warehouses, nearly all of them Polish or Jewish.

Kubica from Silesia, deputy *kapo*, was the one who tortured the prisoners over there with beating and excessive work. He was in the habit of prolonging work by an hour. In 1943, *kapo* Walter, who was at the service of the Political Department, came to the warehouse. He was especially cruel to the Poles. In 1944, he was moved to Dirlwanger's division.

I will now talk about the conditions in the blocks. When we arrived at the camp, along with three hundred prisoners from my transport, I was assigned to block 4, where the German prisoner Krankemann, a well-known criminal at the camp, was the block leader. During my stay in Auschwitz, Krankemann, as he himself would recount, murdered at least three hundred prisoners. He beat me unconscious for no reason at the entrance to the block. I woke up in the room where we slept. It was a room measuring 6 by 4 meters, built to fit forty prisoners at the most, where ninety – and later 105 – prisoners were crammed together. We slept on straw mattresses, three or four prisoners to a single mattress; some prisoners slept on the floor.

Krankemann was killed by the SS men on 2 August 1941. Wacław Rudzki was the deputy block leader. He was a Polish prisoner with a red triangle, a former seaman, who died of typhus in the summer of 1941, exterminated by a Polish underground organization at the camp.

Rudzki was cruel to the prisoners.

I don't remember the names of the prisoners he murdered.

Jerzy Jaszczenko, a Ukrainian from Warsaw, was the senior orderly of block 4. He was a political prisoner who turned out to be a sadist towards other prisoners. He was a tall blonde with pouting lips, a pointed head, 20 years old at that time. I heard from my friends

that in 1945 the American authorities arrested Jaszczenko in Ebensee (an American zone in Austria) and released him due to lack of evidence.

I can confirm that Jaszczenko harassed the prisoners in a cruel way, and he murdered many of them by beating.

When I was in block 4, Jaszczenko would constantly beat the prisoners with a wooden ladle, administering blows to the head and kidneys. In the evening, after putting the prisoners to bed crowded into a small room, amidst vulgar insults about Polish national saints, he would walk on the prisoners' heads, stepping on them in his hobnailed boots and hurting them.

He beat me many times. I remember in particular that in May or June 1941 he didn't let me go to the hairdresser's. On the following day, which was Sunday, he knocked me down, stepping on my chest with his hobnailed boots, because I hadn't had my hair cut. As a result, I bled from my mouth for a few days.

In my presence, Jaszczenko beat many prisoners, who then died after several days of illness. I remember that this was the case for:

- 1) Dezydery Muszyński from Poznań, who suffered from a brain inflammation after being beaten and died on 24 May 1941;
- 2) Father Łopuszański from Kalisz, who was taken to a *rewir* [hospital] after he'd been beaten and died a few days after Muszyński;
- 3) Jerzyk, whose first name I don't remember, beaten unconscious, who died at the hospital three weeks after the beating. All of them were beaten for no reason. It was said at the camp that Jaszczenko, while he was on duty as a senior orderly, killed several dozen prisoners on the spot, not counting those who were ill and died after being beaten.

Moreover, Jaszczenko stole food from the prisoners, cutting the rations and giving the rest of the food to the German criminals. He also harassed the prisoners with willfulness, that is, accusing them of spilling the soup from the pot, which he himself had knocked with a ladle. He administered the punishment of the stool, which involved the prisoner squatting while holding a heavy oak stool in their hands, on which Jaszczenko would put a bowl of soup. After ten minutes, the prisoner would become weak, the stool would shake and the soup would spill. Then Jaszczenko or a block leader would beat the delinquent for spilling the soup.

In 1941, in block 4, I saw Krankemann, Rudzki and Jaszczenko murder a prisoner with sticks because he had apparently taken some bread.

I don't remember the name of the prisoner and I don't know if he had actually taken the bread.

A prisoner's day began at 4.00 a.m. in the summer and at 4.30 a.m. in the winter. After the gong, amidst the beating and swearing of Jaszczenko and other orderlies, we folded the straw mattresses and tidied the room. There were troughs with water set outside for washing in the summer and winter. The water wasn't changed. Shirtless prisoners would form a queue and Jaszczenko would beat them so they would hurry. Those who managed drank a bitter black coffee or herbs that were supposed to imitate tea. At 5.00 a.m. there was the morning roll call, after which the working groups went to work, accompanied by the sounds of the orchestra comprised of prisoners. We came to the camp from work for dinner, carrying heavy concrete beams or stones for 2,5 kilometers. There was a roll call followed by dinner, which included a liter of soup low in nutrients. After an hour-long dinner break, during which there were also two roll calls – before dinner and before going to work – the work lasted until 5.30 p.m. Again, there was the evening roll call, which lasted until midnight if the number of prisoners was correct.

Living in the block was so harsh that we preferred even the hardest work. I stayed in block 4 until August 1941. During that time, the following prisoners were staying there with me:

Father Łopuszyński,

Father Biniewicz,

Father Dr. Niewęglowski,

Father Herbich,

Father Nowacki,

Prosecutor Wyrbser [?],

Soap Manufacturer Stark, who didn't want to admit to his German origins,

Prince Czetwertyński with his nephew,

Artist Zbigniew Sawan,

The Ogłódek brothers, both engineers (one of them was Szyszko-Bohusz's assistant for the reconstruction of Wawel, the other one – an architect), executed on 11 November 1941.

Priests and intellectuals were especially harassed by the block authorities.

From August 1941, I was assigned to block 8 together with a group of prisoners whose names I've listed. Bednarek from Silesia, a prisoner with a red triangle, was the block leader there. He was a sadist and a murderer. I don't remember the names of the prisoners he murdered, but I do remember how he beat the prisoners, tortured them with corporal punishments and prolonged the roll calls at his own risk. He was in the habit of beating the prisoners with a rubber pipe or a stick.

At the end of August 1941, after the general delousing, I stayed in block 6 until the beginning of October, when I was moved to block 10a. Bolesław Wierzbica, famed for his cruelty, was the block leader, and Kremzer was his deputy. The block leader and his deputy beat the prisoners for the smallest offences, such as for finding a straw next to the bed. Both of them murdered many prisoners. I witnessed Wierzbica kill prisoner Kubski from Warsaw. Wierzbica started by beating Kubski with a stick, probably not intending to kill him. But because Kubski, while being beaten, made moves similar to dancing, Wierzbica, entertained, kept beating him until he died.

Wierzbica and Kremzer organized the so-called black balls. The prisoners who were to be punished undressed and positioned themselves on the concrete. Two prisoners would take a third one on their shoulders, holding him by his head and legs. Such trios had to run for two hours or longer. The black balls took place almost every day in the winter.

Wierzbica made bets with the block leader of block 10, Skrzypek, about who could knock down a prisoner by hitting him once in the face. Mostly Muslims, that is, the weak prisoners, were chosen for this game. At night, Wierzbica only let the prisoners go to the bathroom barefoot and they had to take the snow-covered stairs. The block leader didn't want his sleep to be disturbed by the stomping of boots.

I memorized the names of the following prisoners, staying with me in block 10:

Korwin Pawłowski (professor of a university in Cairo),
Adam Bobelski (graphic designer, currently residing in Warsaw),
Rydzewski (dramatic artist, host of the Polish Radio in Toruń),
Lewicki (murdered in Gross-Rosen),
Bronisław Narciarz (Czechoslovak).

In March 1942, I was moved to block 24, whose block leader was a German named Ochse, a calm man.

After the typhus epidemic, during the general delousing in June 1942, I was moved to block 4 and a few weeks later to block 15.

At the beginning of 1943 I was assigned to block 16, whose block leader was a prisoner famed for his cruelty, whose name I no longer remember. A Polish prisoner, 20-year-old son of a colonel from Warsaw, Malinowski, was the block's clerk. He treated the prisoners with cruelty – he murdered several prisoners by beating. I don't remember their names.

From the spring of 1943 until the evacuation of the camp, I was moved to different blocks several times.

On 18 January 1945 the general evacuation of the camps at Auschwitz took place. It was organized in such a way that the healthy and the sick prisoners were rushed on foot in the south-west direction, while the weaker prisoners, who couldn't keep up with the rest, were shot on the way.

Most of the victims were female. I came out on 19 January 1945, in the last transport from the camp, and – after much effort – I reached the Wodzisław station near Bogumin on foot. From there, people were transported by train to the camp in Mauthausen, and a few days later – to a branch of that camp, Melk.

Because the Soviet army was approaching, we were then moved to Ebensee near Salzburg, from where we were released by the American army on 6 May 1945.

At the camps in Mauthausen, Melk and Ebensee, I had the number 116,942.

At this the report was concluded and read out.