

Poland

Three Polish Jews recall their internment in Auschwitz-Birkenau

Geography is destiny, historians often say, and Poland's misfortune is that it lay between greater and more powerful states.

Nominally ruled by a king with few powers and a squabbling nobility, the Kingdom of Poland was dismembered in the 1790s by Russia, Prussia and Austria and it disappeared from the map of Europe for the next one hundred-twenty-three years.

Poland re-emerged after the First World War in 1919, then Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union dismembered it again in 1939 at the beginning of the Second World War. Two years later the Germans chased the Soviets out of Poland, then the Soviet Army routed the Germans in 1944 and occupied Poland until 1989.

More than three and a half million Jews lived in Poland in the 1920s and 1930s, making it the largest Jewish community in Europe then.

During the Second World War, Nazi Germany set up its death camps in German-occupied Poland. Over three million Polish Jews, as well as over a million other Jews, were murdered in the Nazis' gas chambers, were shot in the forests or were starved to death in Nazi ghettos.

Well over a hundred thousand Jews tried to start their lives again in Poland after 1945, but Jews were attacked, beaten and murdered by their neighbors. Tens of thousands of Jews fled, and in 1968, an antisemitic campaign by the Communist Party took away the passports of another 20,000 Jews.

Remarkably, a small Jewish community remains in Poland today, and it is an exceptionally lively one. Further, a great many Poles have embraced their country's Jewish heritage and they attend university courses on Jewish history and Jewish cultural events.

Between 2002 and 2005, Centropa's team in Poland, headed by Anka Grupinska, interviewed sixty-eight elderly Jews living in five Polish cities and digitized seventeen hundred privately-held photographs and personal documents. Our Polish database of interviews and images [can be found at this link](#) and you will find stories of men and women who rich and poor, who lived in large cities and small towns, and who were either religiously observant or wholly secular.

Almost none of the sixty-eight Jews we interviewed in the early 2000s are still with us. But their stories live on through these interviews.

To commemorate the seventy fifth liberation of Auschwitz, we have provided excerpts from three of our Polish interviews: Teofila Silberring and Josef Seweryn were both born in Krakow, while Irene Wojdyslaska's family came from Lodz. Each of them recall their internment in Auschwitz Birkenau.

Special thanks to Tamar Aizenberg for editing these stories, as well as Lauren Granite.



Irena Wojdyslawska

Lodz, Poland

Interviewer: Marek Czekalski

Date of interview: November–December 2004

[CLICK HERE to read Irena Wojdyslawska's Centropa interview](#)

Irena Wojdyslawska was born on May 9, 1921, in her family's home on Maja Street in Lodz, Poland. Irena had one sibling: Franciszka, or Franka, who also survived the war. Irena describes her father, Mendel, as an "open, intelligent, talented man," who could speak several languages, had traveled for work, and who supported Irena's interests in books and leftist politics. Irena studied at a Jewish school and she has particularly fond memories of taking school trips to Krakow and putting on plays with her classmates. After graduating, Irena wanted to study to become a teacher, but because the family couldn't pay the tuition, she worked as a tailor.

Beginning in the 1930s, Irena and her family could feel the growing antisemitism, but they never considered leaving the country. When the Germans invaded in September, 1939, Irena's sister moved to Bialystok. Irena remained in Lodz with her parents. In 1940, they were forced into a ghetto.

In August 1944, she was transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where Irena was imprisoned for three or four months. Afterwards, Irena was taken to a camp in Birnbaumel, a subcamp of Gross-Rosen. In the midst of a death march, Irena was liberated by the Russian army. She returned to Lodz and was eventually reunited with her sister. Irena received her teaching certificate, studied medicine, married Karol Weksler, and had a daughter, Janka. Irena worked as a psychiatrist until her retirement.



I don't remember anything about the departure for Auschwitz, just that I found myself in a cattle wagon. [It was mid-August 1944.] I'm sure I wasn't working that day. I must have been walking from home because I was with Mother. Rozka, Mother's sister, was also in that transport.

I remember that we entered a wagon packed with people. There were no windows, just two air grates at the top. People relieved themselves in this wagon. We knew where we were going because the railway workers told us. But when I saw the sign, "Katowice," and that we were going in the direction of Auschwitz, I was a hundred percent sure of what was waiting for me. I didn't have much hope for survival.

I do remember how the train was unloaded. There were dogs that jumped on us and Germans shouting and hurrying us. I remember I entered a bathhouse. I was sure they'd release gas. I didn't want to bathe myself, turn the faucet on. But I remember there was some shouting, I was forced to do it.

I was in the same barrack as Mother. I never met any other relatives who were brought there. I was in Auschwitz for three or four months [from late August 1944 to November 1944].

I did, however, meet Abram Habanski, my friend from the ghetto. He was in a group that worked in the women's barrack. They cleaned, or something like that. We greeted each other warmly, but what else could we say? After all, the situation was hopeless. I stood naked during roll call every day. Every day they chose more people from the barracks to be gassed, so what could we plan? I think he died, but I don't know that for sure. I know that if he hadn't died, he would have searched for me.

One night or evening—regardless, it was dark—our entire barrack was summoned for roll call. And that's when they took Mother to be gassed. I stayed on the other side, among women not sent to be gassed that day. I was stunned, confused. I can say this honestly—I didn't have enough courage to walk over to the other side and be gassed with Mother. I was only conscious of the fact that I didn't want to live at all anymore.

I had a high fever. Until this day, I don't remember how the other women and I were transported to the reloading station. I know that I was lying in a corner somewhere in that station. Only the next day did the Germans take me from that corner and load me into a car. Those were coach train cars because they were passing through Germany. They were completely different from those [cattle wagons] in which people were transported to Auschwitz. They had windows and normal seats.

We were taken to a new camp in Birnbaumel [a branch of the Gross Rosen camp near Swidnica, currently Rogoznica]. It was a women's camp.



Jozef Seweryn

Warsaw, Poland

Interviewer: Zuzanna Solakiewicz

Date of interview: May–October 2004

[CLICK HERE to read Jozef Seweryn's Centropa interview](#)

[CLICK HERE to see Jozef Seweryn's family photos](#)

Jozef Seweryn was born in Kracow, Poland, in 1917, to Adolf Lehr and Dora Seweryn. His father fought in World War I and returned home crippled and with no connection to his wife and child. Jozef's mother left her husband and son soon after, and Jozef was raised by his grandparents, Jakob and Felicija Kraus. Growing up before World War II, Jozef describes himself as a Pole of the Jewish faith—he felt Polish and spoke Polish at home with his grandparents.

After finishing elementary school, Jozef studied at and graduated from an economic school. He worked for two years and in 1938 he was drafted into the Polish army and fought the Germans during the invasion of September, 1939.

In 1941, Jozef and his family were forced into the ghetto. In October 1942, Jozef discovered a tunnel leading out of the ghetto and he escaped, although he returned to help others. In November 1942, he was arrested and deported to Auschwitz, and in 1944, sent to Sachsenhausen [Oranienburg, Germany], Ravensbrück [Germany], and then Barth [Germany], from where he was liberated by the Soviet army.

After liberation, Jozef returned to Kracow. Jozef, his wife, and children lived in Israel, Italy, and Austria before moving to Warsaw in the early 1960s. In 2004, Jozef was living in Warsaw with his second wife. At the end of the interview he asked, "How did I manage to achieve all of this? How is it that I am talking about it today? That I remember it all?"

I reached the camp in Auschwitz on December 16, 1942. I was there for more than two years. I was issued a number: 83782.

At the very beginning, I met a friend with whom I had served in the army. He was a Pole—a mountaineer from Zakopane [town at the foot of the Tatra Mountains]. When the war broke out in 1939, he would guide people who wanted to leave Poland through the mountains to Slovakia. He arrived in the second transport to Auschwitz in 1940. He recognized me as soon as I arrived. Since he had been there for some time already, he knew what to do and how to behave. He helped me a lot; he taught me everything. Others helped, too.

I also survived because the SS men needed me—I fixed their fountain pens. Several months after I arrived in Auschwitz, the Germans wanted to find someone who could repair fountain pens and typewriters. I volunteered and was given the job. I worked for SS *Unterscharführer* Artur Breitwieser. He was from Lvov and before he became an SS man he had served in the Polish army in Biala at the same time that I had served. Perhaps that's why he chose me.

I became his *Füllfederhaltermechaniker*, that is, his fountain-pen-fixer. The Germans had a lot of good fountain pens that they had gotten by looting the possessions of the Jews, but they used poor ink. As a result, their pens needed to be rinsed and fixed every two months. And I knew how to repair pens because I'd done so in my wife's bookstore.

I worked for Breitwieser and for the other SS men, commandants, and German physicians. They thought I was useful, so much so that they gave me a watch so I wouldn't be late when I came to see them. Besides, I didn't just fix their pens; I would also shave them and give them haircuts. They addressed me with *Sie* [formal] and the others they called "*Du verfluchter Hund*" [Informal; German: "You damned dog."] And then they killed them.

I used to write letters to my wife since doing so was permitted. She'd answer them. But my letters and her answers were so official. You had to write in an official manner and also had to write in German. And you couldn't say anything more than, "I'm here—I am waiting—goodbye." I couldn't even write that I was hungry because they censored all of the letters.

Sometime in 1943, an SS man came to see me. He had a higher rank than Breitwieser and he told me, "Make me a wig and a beard—red." I said I would, and that it would be ready in several days. When he came to pick it up, he told me to get on his motorcycle and he took me to the commando for me to put the wig and the beard on him there. And then he told me to drive him to the theater, which was nearby, but on the

other side of the fence. We got there and he said, "Now go to the camp." I answered, "I can't go, there's no one to guard me. If anyone sees me on this side of the fence, I'll get shot." But he made me go, so I did. I was in the striped prison clothes. I had a huge fight at the fence; the guard took out his gun and shouted. I was so scared I almost shat in my pants, but he finally let me go.

In 1944, I was moved to Sachsenhausen, from there to Ravensbrück, and finally to a camp in Barth [today Germany]. There was an aircraft factory there where we all worked producing two-engine bombers. Most of the inmates were moved out of that camp on April 30, 1945. We were led toward some town when the Russians cut us off. The Germans surrounded us when they saw them approaching and started shooting at us. I survived.



Teofila Silberring

Krakow, Poland

Interviewer: Magdalena Bizon

Date of interview: November 2004

[CLICK HERE to read Teofila Silberring's Centropa interview](#)

[CLICK HERE to see Teofila Silberring's family photos](#)

Teofila Silberring was born in 1925 in Krakow, Poland. Her parents, Juda and Gustawa Silberring, both came from families that had lived in Krakow for generations. Teofila and her older brother Henryk grew up as assimilated Polish Jews. They spoke Polish, attended Polish as well as Jewish schools, and celebrated Jewish holidays.

In September 1939, the Germans invaded Poland. German soldiers shot Teofila's mother in 1939 because she tried to stop them from taking the family's furniture. By December 1939, Teofila explains, the Jews in Krakow had to wear identifying armbands and their apartments were looted. Soon after, Teofila and her family were forced to move into the Podgorze ghetto. While living in the ghetto, Teofila worked in a factory and was constantly hungry.

The Podgorze ghetto was liquidated on March 13, 1943. Teofila was sent to the Plaszow concentration camp, where she worked in Oskar Schindler's factory. After Plaszow was liquidated in October 1944, Teofila was deported to Auschwitz. Teofila remained in Auschwitz, then went on a forced death march to Germany in January 1945. Teofila was then imprisoned in Ravensbrück concentration camp [today Germany] until the camp was liberated by the Russians in April 1945.

Teofila "flew to Krakow like a madwoman" to look for her family, but they had all been murdered. Teofila remained in Krakow, received a degree in chemistry and married Adam Silberring. Their son, Jerzy, became one of Poland's leading scientists in addiction research. Teofila died in 2010.

In Plaszow, I was in a different barrack from Father and my brother. I lost touch with them and didn't know where they were. You weren't allowed to walk between the barracks, so I didn't know anything: when they had taken them, where they had taken them. Nothing, nothing at all. I wasn't in Plaszow for long, because I was taken to Schindler's—the Emailwarenfabrik in Zablocie [the Oskar Schindler Enamelware Factory, a branch of the Plaszow camp]. I stayed there until they liquidated Plaszow [October 1944], and I was taken to Auschwitz.

I had it very good at Schindler's because he made sure that we had food. Apart from that, we worked with Poles. They helped a lot. If you knew any of the Poles, they would pass on letters. And they brought us bread rolls. If anybody had anything to sell, they would sell it and bring something else for the money.

There's a Polish woman still alive, Zofia Godlewska. She lives on Smolensk Street and worked at Schindler's with her mother. They were really poor, but they helped us the most. Zofia brought us letters—that was risking your life. She was my age. After the war I saw her on Szewska Street. I said, "So you're alive, so you're alive!" And she said, "Yes. And the Lord God has rewarded me, because I've married a Jew and have a wonderful husband." He was a neurologist, but unfortunately, he died. And she was a nurse at the Narutowicz hospital. When her husband died, she didn't want to meet up and we just lost touch.

From Plaszow they took us to Auschwitz. At Auschwitz we sat on the railway ramp because Schindler didn't want us to be sent to Auschwitz—he wanted to have all of us who had worked for him in Plaszow in his new factory. He was waiting for a transport that was supposed come from Austria. Finally, I don't know after how many days, these wagons came in. And someone said, "Everybody from Schindler get up," and about 2,000 people got up. Schindler said, "Don't worry, you're all going with me."

And there were these OD-men [short for *Ordnungsdienst*, law and order]. They were the so-called Jewish police. They were Jews and prisoners, too. Schindler picked three of those OD-men to put us into the wagons. One of the OD-men, whom I, in fact, met after the war, had evidently taken some money for me, because he didn't read me my name out. He took someone else instead of me—actually, ten people were taken instead of myself and others. We ten were standing there, and Schindler was by the wagons. I ran to him, looked, and the wagons were starting to move off and they were locking the wagons. And I told him that the OD-man didn't read my name. And he said, "What do you mean?!"—because he even knew me personally. I mean, he knew that I'd worked for him in Plaszow. He called the OD-man and he said, "Hang on, hang on, hang on." How he [the OD-man] pushed me, how he flayed me with that whip! The wagons left and the ten of us stayed behind; that was

in Auschwitz-Birkenau [Auschwitz was a concentration camp; Auschwitz II-Birkenau was a death camp].

I met him [the OD-man] after the war. "You're alive?!" he said—because we were destined for death. You see, we knew that because we'd come with that transport, they would send us to be gassed. But they put us in the barracks in Birkenau. There were selections but, somehow, I was lucky; I was sent to be gassed and then sent back.

Surprisingly, I still looked great. I was never a *musulman* [in concentration camp slang this meant a prisoner who had lost the will to live]. They were sent straight off to the gas. Because I looked so good, this German *Obserwierka* [Polonization of the German 'Aufseherin', meaning female guard, warder] selected several of us and they took me to Auschwitz [Auschwitz I—the main concentration camp].

In Auschwitz I, there were brick barracks. There was water. We pinched ourselves, wondering if we were in the next world or this. We couldn't believe it was true. The food there wasn't better: just a slice of bread once a day. But there was water, and toilets instead of the latrines in Birkenau. In Birkenau, they had let us out to the latrines three times a day, and if you couldn't wait you did it where you stood. And then they shot those who did it where they stood.

And then, from there, they took me to the experimental block, also because I looked good. I was very happy because in that block they gave you not one slice of bread but two. All of my friends were so jealous that I got into that block—we were unaware of what happened there, all because they gave me that slice of bread more.

In the experimental block, they injected us with typhus bacteria to make vaccines for the Germans on the front. Actually, I don't know exactly what they were doing. All I know is that they were injecting us with typhus, I had a fever of 40°C (104°F), and I was suffering from some disease. Since I was useful for these experiments, I remained in this block and wasn't sent to be gassed. I was there until Auschwitz was liquidated.

When the liquidation began, everyone who could possibly move, left. But there were some who couldn't get up, the so-called *musulmans*, these skeletons. They couldn't move, so the Germans shot them. But they didn't have time to shoot them all and some were liberated. It turned out that the Russians were already in Krakow then [January 18, 1945]. None of us knew that. The older prisoners heard some rumors and they stayed behind, pretending to be *musulmans*. But I didn't know anything, even what time of day it was. And when they ordered us to go, I went, because they threatened that if we didn't go it would be the gas for us. But they actually weren't sending people to the gas anymore because they were fleeing themselves.

That journey was the worst. It was called the death march because we walked...I walked to Leipzig. Walked! It was winter at the time. It was in January 23, as far as I can remember [the Auschwitz death marches set off on 17–21 January 1945; in all, 56,000 prisoners]. Snow up to here [shoulders], -20°C (-4°F), and me in one shoe. A Dutch shoe, it was called—the clogs that were typical in Auschwitz. As we walked, nobody could bear the sound of those clogs. And the snow was red, literally. Because if you stopped, stood for a moment... The road was littered with corpses, these red bloodstains on the white snow. Awful. They shot if you just... it was enough to stand for a moment.

I'd never have thought that you could sleep while you walk. We learned to and took turns with our friends. We walked four in a row, slept in turns, and the people on the outside supported the one who was asleep. I could sleep as I walked. And we helped each other survive—in fact, all four of us survived. I had one friend, Helenka Groner. We were very close. She died two years ago. She was a lot older than me; she was already married before the war. She had a son my age; he died in Plaszow. Her husband had died in Plaszow, too. She was with me from Auschwitz. We had lived somewhere near each other, then in that death march we walked together, and we stayed together until the end.