



## JAN ZAWADA

Response to a questionnaire dated 5 April 1948

Ref. No. 25/48

At 8.30 a.m. on Sunday 29 July 1944 a Soviet army unit launched a surprise assault on the military camp located on the premises of the Childcare Center in Struga. The German troops fled in great panic, leaving everything to the attackers. The Germans, however, did not give up and already on the same day, at around 3.00 p.m., tried to storm both Struga and the Childcare Center. Over three days, their attacks grew in ferocity. Unfortunately, on the third day of fighting, on Tuesday at 5.30 p.m., the Germans recaptured Struga. We were terrified to see them burst onto the premises of the Childcare Center. Amid shouts and threats, they immediately started to round up the elderly, both men and women, in the courtyard. The Center was saved from a mass execution – or at the very least decimation – by a new battle that was started by Soviet tanks. Having withdrawn eastwards, the Soviet armor commenced murderous fighting which lasted well into the night.

At dawn we were ordered to evacuate immediately and leave for Warsaw. There was a panic in the house. Boys started to gather in front of the warehouse in order to take something with them, as they had been instructed. Suddenly, a German appeared and, under the pretext that one of those gathered had shot at the Germans, threw a hand grenade into the group. Frightened, the boys dispersed and were forced to march off empty-handed, while the few who did not manage to run away were wounded. Fortunately, their injuries were not fatal.

The group comprised 146 people, including 112 boys, three priests and five carers, and Stanisław Kwieciński, a craftsman cobbler, from the Center's personnel; 12 sisters were the female staff. In addition, there were seven women and six men who were at the premises of the Center at the time.

The surnames of the priests were: Jan Zawada – administrator, Andrzej Płoszaj – his deputy, Wiktor Grzenia. Carers: Edward Kosztyła, Jan Brzozowski, Józef Cisek, Stanisław Chudak, Wacław Markowski, Stanisław Kwieciński.



Along the route from Kierbedzia Bridge to Krakowskie Przedmieście Street we saw two or three dead civilians. Fighting was raging in the vicinity of the Cathedral and Kanonia Street. We ran across the bridge through a hail of bullets. No one from our group was wounded.

We reached the seminary before 8.00 a.m. on 1 August, and left the building on 8 August 1944 at 9.00 p.m..

The latter evacuation was brought about by the Germans.

Circumstances: In the early morning of 8 August, we noticed that the Germans were working in a frenzy, and crowds of civilians started to come in from the streets – large and small – and gather in front of the seminary. It turned out that these were the residents of the district from Karowa Street to Kierbedzia Bridge. All of them had been evacuated and gathered in the vicinity of the seminary. These people had left their homes with nothing, for they had been told that they would undergo an inspection and soon return. The Germans pillaged their property and set the entire district on fire, so that around 11.00 a.m. everything was ablaze. After more or less two hours, the Germans announced that the men would go separately from the women and children. There was pandemonium, crying and a great commotion. Some time later a different instruction was received, namely that everyone – both men and women – would be led out of the city to a safe location in groups.

And indeed, at 10.00 a.m. they started marching off groups numbering 200 to 300 people, but not – as it transpired – to freedom; the men, in the main, were executed, while the rest was sent to the camps. It was announced that everyone had to leave.

Then, through the agency of the head of the seminary, we learned that nothing untoward would happen to us, and that since we were an orphanage from outside the city we would be led out of Warsaw as a separate group to a safe haven. We waited in readiness until late evening and finally, at around 9.00 p.m., three or four Germans came for us. They assured me personally that everything had been taken care of and that they would escort us safely out of the city. The march proceeded peacefully. Our group remained unchanged in number.

It was very dark, so it was difficult to get one's bearings, but even a cursory look around sufficed to take in the pitiful condition of the city. The glow of fires, visible everywhere, had



a dispiriting impact. Exercising caution, for stray bullets and shrapnel were flying through the air, we reached the assembly point at Ossolińskich Street. They knew about us there, for upon hearing "Struga" the duty officer declared that he knew who we were. He ordered us to wait. Other people were present, too. A small group of men was joined to our column and we were marched off. We proceeded through a square – the so-called Piłsudskiego Square – and near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, finally entering the Saski Garden. When leaving the garden in the direction of the Iron Gate, we were stopped by a group of other soldiers. Their appearance and behavior informed us that something bad was about to happen. They started to segregate us, starting with the eldest children. Seeing this, I walked up to them and explained that ours was a provincial center and that we had received assurances from the German authorities that no harm would befall us. But this only served to enrage the Germans, and one of them in particular – he grabbed me by the collar and pushed me forcefully away. I did not back down, however, and intended to walk up to the German who was leading us and determine what was going on, and ask about the assurances that we had been given. Suddenly, the same brigand who had manhandled me jumped in my direction, hit me on the head twice, unholstered his revolver and took aim.

I just managed to turn my back against him, so as not to see him fire; I then heard a shot and received a bullet wound to the back of my neck. At first I did not know whether the shot was fatal: however, I had enough wits about me to understand that I must play dead. Thus, I collapsed to the ground and lay motionless as a log. This saved me, for the German thought that I was indeed dead and did not fire again. Since I was lying, I was unable to observe what went on, especially as I lost consciousness for some time. When I came round, I cautiously lifted my head and saw the German close by, with his back to me and the people standing in a line near me. I quickly got up and squeezed in between them. Someone gave me a scarf, which I wrapped around my head, and a second, larger scarf that I draped over myself. Thus I was led among them out of the city, and then to the Pruszków camp together with the remaining group of boys and sisters.

After my ordeal, both of my assistants – Father Andrzej Płoszaj and Father Wiktor Grzenia – were murdered in the Saski Garden. I also know that one of the men was killed.

The execution was conducted as follows: first the men and older boys were separated and taken some 40 to 50 steps away from the others. There they were harassed, beaten



and kicked, and then some were murdered with the use of revolvers, with the victims receiving three or four shots each.

Two carers from our group were eyewitnesses; they had their heads smashed, but in the confusion they managed to flee and join up with the group of women. Those who were not murdered in the Saski Garden were taken by the Germans the next day to Pruszków, and there the people who did not manage to escape were executed on the evening of 9 August.

This was witnessed by Stanisław Maciejewski, a captain of the Polish Army, currently on active military service (he is stationed in Łódź). It was he who told me this. As a matter of fact, he himself escaped at the last moment and thus avoided death. Three of our carers perished there: Edward Kosztyła, Jan Brzozowski, Józef Cisek. Furthermore, two members of staff who did not leave the Center in Struga during the evacuation, instead wanting to remain and see what would happen, were also killed. They were thrown out [of the Center] and, while walking away, murdered by the Germans. These were Janusz Franciszek and Kazimierz Wilusz.

I do not know further details about the Germans who occupied Struga or those who were active in the Saski Garden, for everything happened so quickly – and in complete darkness in the Saski Garden – that it was very difficult to learn anything about them.

However, none of the boys had been killed, for the older ones, who were taken to the camp in Pruszków, took a risk and made use of the confusion to break through to our group.

The execution in the Saski Garden took place on 8 August 1944 at 10.30 p.m.; in Pruszków on the evening of 9 August; and in Struga on 1 August at 1.00 p.m..

These are the most important things that I know and remember from those tragic times.

I myself did not observe any other executions in the Saski Garden, but I do not know whether others witnessed such events.

Father Jan Zawada