

## JAN PRATKOWSKI

Warsaw, 6 November 1946. Investigative Judge Halina Wereńko, delegated to District Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes, interviewed the person named below as a witness. Having been advised of the criminal liability for making false declarations and the obligation to speak the truth, the witness testified as follows:

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Name and surname	Jan Pratkowski
Parents' names	Henryk, Klementyna <i>née</i> Studzińska
Date of birth	16 May 1913, Kapuściany, Jampol district
Occupation	referendary in the Ministry of State Treasury
Education	Master's Degree in Law
Place of residence	Warszawa, Elsterska Street 12, flat 5
Religious affiliation	Roman Catholic

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I was arrested by the Gestapo on 9 May 1943 in Lwów on suspicion of belonging to an independence organization. After two days of interrogations, combined with the methods embraced by the Gestapo, that is, beating with a rubber baton and punching with fists, I was placed in a single, strictly isolated cell, no. 20, in the *Sicherheitspolizei* prison on Łąckiego Street in Lwów. After one and a half months of confinement I was moved to a general cell, the *Krankenzelle*, due to poor health.

The prison on Łąckiego Street was one of the worst because of the extremely poor food rationing and unparalleled overpopulation. There would be around 50 prisoners in a cell meant for five to six people, so there wasn't enough room to lie down and we had to spend the night standing in shifts. A psychopathic SS man, Alfons Martens, was the biggest

fear among the prisoners. He tortured, beat, and personally executed them both in public executions and in the prison's basements.

On 26 February 1944, in a transport of 86 prisoners, I was moved to the concentration camp in Gross-Rosen. After a journey that lasted about 48 hours, in an overloaded closed wagon, constantly watched by armed SS men who stayed in the central, door-width area of the wagon, we arrived at the Gross-Rosen station on 29 February in the morning. Having been rushed out of the train, lined up in fives and led by SS man Drozdowski, we walked all the way to the camp which was about six kilometers distance. In front of the camp gate, our group was stopped. Two SS men and two seniors, Ebner and Kaizer, popped out of a nearby barrack and started to bash us with whips. That's how the process of welcoming the so-called *zugangs* – newcomer prisoners – began, accompanied by permanent beating, kicking, and the "sport". In the camp lingo, "sport" was the name for especially exhausting exercises, like get down, get up, frog, *rollen* – flip-flops, squats with bricks or against a stool. After having been bathed and deprived of all our belongings, we were all shaved. The blunt razors and brutality of the barbers were extremely unpleasant. A barber named Bolek, no. 111, punched my late comrade Łaniewski because he had a long beard. The barber thought he was a Jew. Next, we were dressed in the prison uniforms: really battered civilian clothes with a red cross on the back and red stripes on the sleeves and trousers, and we were given plates with a prisoner number and wooden clogs. While still being beaten and kicked by SS men Drozdowski and Hanke and by the senior functionary prisoners, we walked from the bath to block 9. Here, almost two days of "lecturing" of newcomers about the "camp regulations" began. All that time, with small breaks, we were doing the sport, while one of the *sztubowys* – a Russian POW known as Iwan, who got promoted to functionary instead of getting executed – struck solid blows with a pickaxe handle at the prisoners who'd gotten tired and weak. Already on the first day, one from our group, nicknamed "Czort", I don't know his surname, died. Everybody from my transport received numbers from 18,620 to 18,710. I had the number 18,664. When we were in block 9, we were given pieces of white cloth with a red triangle, a letter marking nationality, and the number, manufactured in the camp's offices. Our transport received only the red triangles, I saw black ones on other prisoners. I learned that the black numbers were assigned to work in the quarries. The decision was made by the camp's authorities based on the Gestapo's opinion.

In the evening of the second day, we were divided into houses. I was placed in the group of house "B", free from the nightmare of the brute Iwan. On the third day, we stood in front of the so-called medical commission. The doctors in the commission were two SS men, whose surnames I don't know. Order was kept by *kapo* Georg Pril. After a naked procession in front of the SS men, we were qualified for the workgroups accordingly to our physical condition. Later it turned out that the weak and exhausted ones were assigned to heavy labor. For a couple of days, we were engaged in chores within the camp. We were ordered to clean plates drenched in acid, hydrochloric I suppose. We were cleaning them with sand in the frost, barehanded. After finishing, we showed the plates to the *sztubowy*, who would beat us for being faulty.

Beating for the slightest offense was a common practice, like for serving a bowl of soup in a wrong way, entering the block wearing clogs, etc. My friend Zagórski was horribly beaten by a German senior for accidentally spilling some of the soup from the cauldron, which he did because he slipped, and that was something we all did, not being used to wearing the wooden clogs. After five or six days, I was assigned to the working section *Kanalbau* (canal construction), whose *kapo* was Schalej, a professional German thief who knocked down prisoners with single strong punches. My work consisted mainly in carrying heavy wooden beams or three boards at once, sometimes drawing water from a dirty canal with a bucket. Due to being weakened after a long time in prison and overwhelming work, I started to swell from the legs up to the chest, face and hands. On the fifth day of my work in the *Kanalbau* I couldn't walk, being totally exhausted, and it was only thanks to my colleagues supporting me that I was able to get back to the camp. I owe it to my colleagues, and especially Dr. Mianowski, that I managed to get into the *rewir* [infirmary], where – thanks to the help of the doctor and food rations – I started getting better. After I was released from the *rewir*, they appointed me to the *Weberei* – the weaving mill – where I stayed until the camp's evacuation.

During my stay in Gross-Rosen, the camp was already quite developed. The living and working barracks had lights, running water, WC, beds, pallets, baths, etc. A major burden for prisoners was the fact that the functions were usually held by German prisoners: expert criminals (green triangle), antisocial (black triangle), or sometimes homosexuals (pink triangle). Poles holding a function were a rarity, and if they got one, it was because they had been promoted for snitching and mistreating the fellow inmates. And so the system of mallet and truncheon prevailed. We were beaten in the block and at work. On the other

hand, the regulations of the concentration camp – prepared with great attention to details, with a truly German scrupulousness, and executed remorselessly by the bandits – had one goal: to physically and morally destroy the prisoner. Poor rationing, hard work in the quarries and permanent beatings were one reason for the very high mortality that reached 90 per cent of the inmates brought in transports. Out of a 1942 transport consisting of 500 prisoners from Auschwitz, only twenty-something remained by the middle of 1944, and only two by the end of the year. In the middle of 1944, having reached over 50 thousand numbers, it was decided to fill the huge gaps in numeration by giving the numbers of the deceased to the *zugangs*.

I acquired all this information by talking with the prisoners employed in the camp's offices, including the survivors Władysław Paniak (address unknown) and Tadeusz Mroziejewicz (residing in Bytom, Krakowska Street 44, flat 6).

Further information on the transport mentioned above could be provide by Prof. Waksmundzki and Prof. Gładysz, the author of the publication *Powrót z piekła* [Returning from Hell]. In the middle of 1944, a Yugoslavian prisoner preparing the numbers showed me the list of the numbers freed up by the deceased. From the first 5 thousand prisoners, there weren't more than 500 remaining, including the German prisoners. The higher the number, the higher the amount of living prisoners. The amount of numbers recovered was around 30 thousand. So this number should be taken as the number of casualties up until mid-1944. Having this data, we can estimate the general number of prisoners that went through Gross-Rosen camp. In February 1945, the newly appointed numbers were starting from 96,000, so with the 30,000 of the recovered numbers added, the overall would be 120,000.

There were executions on the camp's premises in the crematory, performed on prisoners brought by cars, unnumbered. The transports usually came at night and were top secret. Based on the observations made by the night guards and suppositions of the prisoners, the victims of the executions were Gestapo prisoners from Wrocław, Poles, and Russian POWs.

I don't know the exact dates or the number of those executed.

Below I will describe the relations I observed in the *rewir*, in block 7, and in the weaving mill. The *rewir's kapo* was Georg Pril, an expert thief responsible for deaths of many prisoners. I witnessed the patients' admittance conducted by him. He was extremely violent towards

the exhausted, sick “muslims”, whom he beat with a baton or a rubber truncheon, kicked and tortured horribly, in order to drive them out of the admission room and therefore make it impossible to become infirmary patients. In March and mid-April 1944, during my stay in the *rewir*, the so-called *Sortirung* took place – appointing the seriously ill, wrecked patients for the crematory and killing them with injections. From *rewir 2* they selected around 40 patients; the choice was made by Pril and accepted by an SDG SS man. The sick were taken to *rewir 3*, and then the news came that they had been killed. The next time, around 20 severely ill and weak patients were selected from *rewir 2* and moved to *rewir 3*, from where all the gathered patients were supposed to be moved to another camp (more details about that camp could be given by father Rzymełka, residing in Warsaw by the Holy Cross Church).

There were no gas chambers in the camp, the selected prisoners were killed with injections. Senior prisoners were telling me that the *Sortirung* was more common before my arrival.

I remember the following functionary prisoners of block 7 who were particularly sadistic: the *sztubowi* – Peter Bieńkowski, a German of Russian descent, and Marian Soja, who were liable to punch an inmate in the face and stomach, strike 25-50 blows with a pickaxe handle or a baton, and then place them under a cold shower. After such a torture, the prisoner would almost always die. Bieńkowski was 28 years old, medium-height, with a very stocky build, had a boxer’s face – flat nose, grey eyes, blond hair. Marian Soja is probably dead now. The block senior was Paweł Morgała and he had Mieczysław Bębenek, Roman Pela and Wala as his helpers. All of them were beating the prisoners. Bębenek was around 24 years old, he was a short, sturdy guy with a plain face and blond hair, born in Silesia. Pela – about 19 years old, short, blond, plain face. Wala – around 25 years old, dark hair, medium-height, characterized by the lack of front teeth.

In the weaving mill we were making belts for rifles, sleighs, etc. from old rags. The hygienic conditions were horrible, the dust and the work quotas had immediate health consequences, especially in form of tuberculosis. The weaving mill was meant as a *komando* for the convalescents, the “muslims” and the handicapped. Outstanding for their notable sadism and beating of prisoners were: *kapo* Jan Reinhold – about 45 years old, medium-height, sturdy build, with unnaturally long hands and a strongly developed lower jaw, bald – and his deputy, a Pole, Zbigniew Sieradzki – a renegade, born in Tarnów, about 24 years old, brown hair, bald, with a plain face, medium-height, fit; *Vorarbeiter* Hose, a Gypsy – about 28 years

old, a medium-height, dark-haired man with a cat's face; *kapo* of the *Schusterein*, and later of the weaving mill, Roman Wieschala – around 42 years old, blond-haired, well-built and medium-height, with a scar on his face and stiff fingers on his hands. In the final period, the *kapo* in the weaving mill [was] Marian Soja, who made himself a special iron pickaxe and beat the prisoners for unfilled work quotas with it. All of the persecutors mentioned above were practicing homosexuals, exploiting the young prisoners. The worktime in the weaving mill lasted from the morning roll call until the evening roll call, with a break for a meal and the roll call at noon. Piles of old shoes next to the mill, picked from trash and collections in Germany, were brought to be processed.

At the beginning of my work in the weaving mill around four hundred prisoners were employed, working one shift. Gradually the number increased until it reached a thousand prisoners working two shifts in 1944. Mortality was high, almost every day a couple of inmates died, I can't give the precise numbers, though. Overall mortality within the camp grew after the Warsaw Uprising broke out in August 1944, when Poles were dispossessed of the right to receive parcels from their families as a repressive measure.

The weaving block was situated right next to the crematory, and several times I saw transports of prisoners – sometimes a couple of people, sometimes a few dozen – walk from the *Schreibstube* to the crematory. I heard the screams of the dying people. I remember that in April 1944, 48 inmates were sent into the crematory. Many of the executed came from the Gestapo transports from Radom.

I should mention the name of Tadeusz Grabowski, a hostage from Radom who was killed in the crematory in September 1944, within two weeks of the three-month period that he was assured by the Gestapo he would be released after.

During my stay in the camp, I witnessed five public executions by hanging, always for an assault or the murder of a *kapo* or an SS man.

The prisoners who were caught in an escape attempt were subject to harassment and public humiliation. An escapee – beaten, dressed in a fool's cap, wearing a plaque that said "*Ich bin wieder da*", and carrying a snare that he had to drum on while the orchestra accompanied him with the childish melody *Alles Vöglein sind schön da* – was marching in front of the gathered inmates. Then he received a flogging and went to the penal block. I remember two such cases.

In the period between September 1944 and mid-January 1945, the conditions in the camp improved slightly, in the sense that there was less beating. From December 1944, however, due to the evacuation of external *komandos* into the camp, the living conditions worsened tragically. Exceptional overpopulation (35 thousand prisoners), starvation (3/4 liter of soup a day and 120 grams of bread), and another wave of sadistic beatings caused a sharp rise in mortality, especially in the unfinished living barracks in the new part of the camp where the newcomers were quartered. The *kapos* were murdering prisoners just to get hold of their miserable rations. Through the windows of the weaving mill, I saw massacred corpses being carried from the new camp into the crematory. There was a daily influx of 60-80 bodies there. The crematory wasn't able to burn all of them in time. The bodies lay in piles, and – according to prisoners' accounts – they were taken away by cars at night. In the face of the approaching Eastern front, the camp's evacuation process started in the first days of February 1945. The first transports included the mildly ill, the convalescents, along with priests (fathers Rzymełka and Szymański, among others). The subsequent transports were sent on foot. One of them, consisting of 4 thousand prisoners, set out led by the block senior Sistemicha, known for torturing prisoners. I left Gross-Rosen on 10 February 1945 in the last group comprising of 2.5 thousand inmates. The only people left in the camp were the severely ill in the infirmary (about a thousand), and a special group of around 30 of the most dangerous German criminals, including Reinhold and Sieradzki, whose mission remained unknown to us. Maybe they were left to liquidate the patients and the camp's facilities. After we left the camp, we were loaded onto open coal wagons – 100-200 people each – and given a can of food and two loaves of bread. The transport was going through Striegan, Hirschberg, Dresden to Plauen, where the train was divided into two. The part I found myself in went to Leitmaritz (Litomierzyce). The trip took two days and three nights, with a massive snowstorm on the last night. In the wagon next to ours, according to my colleagues who were there, *kapo* Maks Weiss (tall, slim, bald, with a depressed forehead), knifed 40 prisoners single-handedly, throwing out their bodies to gain more space for him and his colleagues. Upon our arrival in Litomierzyce, the prisoners who weren't able to walk were murdered by the SS with a shot in the head. A group of prisoners from the last wagon was left behind to clean up the corpses. A certain Tedorowicz from that group (I don't know his current address) estimated the number of corpses at 100.

On the way from Litomierzyce station to the camp, the SS men killed more than a dozen prisoners who weren't able to walk.

On 9 May 1945 I was released from the Litomierzyce camp by the SS men due to the War's ending and the Soviet army approaching.

The prisoners who could testify on the conditions in the Litomierzyce camp are: Zbigniew Tomaszewski (residing in Warsaw, Styki Street 10), engineer Malik (residing in Katowice), and Dr. Sztaba (residing in Sosnowiec).

The report was read out.