

Dädesjö, 13 January 1946

Testimony received by Institute Assistant Bożysław Kurowski, LLM

transcribed

Record of Witness Testimony 116

Here stands Mr Henryk Gromadka born on 5 April 1915
in Warsaw, occupation locksmith/printer
religion Roman Catholic, parents' forenames Wojciech and Zofia
last place of residence in Poland Warsaw, ulica Marymoncka 24 m. 3 [lit. 'Apt. 3, 24 Marymoncka Street']
current place of residence Dädesjö, Sweden

who – having been cautioned as to the importance of truthful testimony as well as to the responsibility for, and consequences of, false testimony – hereby declares as follows:

I was interned at the concentration camp in Stutthof
from 30 August 1944 to 25 April 1945 as a political prisoner 'Warsaw evacuee'
bearing the number 77765 and wearing a red -coloured triangle
with the letter 'P'.

I was later interned in evacuation of the camp (at sea)
from 26 April 1945 to 2 May 1945.

Asked whether, with regard to my internment and my labour at the concentration camp, I possess any particular knowledge about how the camp was organized, how prisoners were treated, their living and working conditions, medical and pastoral care, the hygienic conditions in the camp, or any particular events concerning any aspect of camp life, I state as follows:

The testimony consists of eight handwritten pages and describes the following:

1. – 28 August 1944 on a transport of 2,500 people from Pruszków to Stutthof
 - Admission to the camp as thugs who had wanted the uprising
 - Discipline and terror in the block
 - Food rations
 - Hygiene conditions
 - Lack of water
 - Lice
 - Typhus and 200–250 fatalities per day in December 1944
 - Composition of the prisoner population in terms of numbers and nationalities
2. – Evacuation of the camp on 25 April 1945
 - On the Hel Peninsula
 - Mass shootings along the way
 - 3,000 prisoners aboard barges in the Bay of Lübeck
 - Escape of a barge from the *Thielbek*
 - Round-up in Neustadt and mass shootings in the sea
 - English bombing of the *Athen*, *Thielbek*, and *Cap Arcona* with prisoners aboard
 - 300 prisoners saved out of 1,500

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Record of eyewitness testimony from Henryk Gromadka, born on 5 April 1915 in Warsaw, locksmith/printer by occupation, of the Roman Catholic faith, son of Wojciech and Zofia, last residing in Poland in Warsaw at ulica Maymoncka 24/3, currently residing in Dädesjö

Evacuation from Warsaw to Stutthof

I was arrested in Warsaw on 28 August 1944 and then transported to Pruszków. Next I was taken to Stutthof, near Gdańsk, on a transport consisting of around 2,500 men and women. At Stutthof, we were treated like thugs from Warsaw. Showered with insults, we were greeted with a vicious beating by means of rubber-encased copper wire whips, known as '*pytas*' [Pol.]. And then we were told that this was how they welcomed thugs who had felt like having an uprising in Warsaw. A great many men were severely battered, especially in the dining room of the block. Stools were thrown at us; the *blokowy* [chief prisoner of the block, from Ger. *Blockälteste*] was lord of life and death. Conditions were very cramped in the blocks; men slept three to a bed. *Appells* [roll call assemblies, Ger.] were also held at night: we would be driven out of the blocks and had to fall into ranks instantly; anyone who failed to make it out of the block in time would be struck with wooden slats or truncheons. I remember four such *Appells* during the initial period. This system of terror and beating was implemented not only by German kapos, but also by SS men, who would shoot prisoners with their revolvers, set dogs on them, and beat them. In this way, they kept us in a state of constant dread and terror until January 1945, right up until the Bolshevik [*sic*] offensive was launched. At that point, things took a turn for the better.

The food was usually one litre of soup made from swedes or lettuce (heads of lettuce simply tossed into a pot and steamed). On very rare occasions, the soup would be lightly sprinkled with grains; the odd time, there was also

pea soup. Ingredients were cooked dirty with grit still on them and, I must emphasize, without any salt. Unpeeled potatoes, known as *Pellkartoffels* [Ger.], were tossed into the pot – mud, roots, and all – and steamed into a veritable dung-like mush. For breakfast, prisoners would receive half a litre of coffee, and the same again in the evening. The odd time, we would be given half a litre of thin soup for supper. Every day, we were given a single one-and-a-half-kilogram loaf of bread per four, five, then six, and even seven men. Finally, from mid-March to 25 April, that is, until the day of the evacuation, one and a half kilograms of bread was shared between thirty-two prisoners. Back in 1944, our suppertime bread ration would normally be accompanied by twenty grams of margarine or a single spoonful of marmalade. Apart from this, we would get forty grams of sausage twice a week at most, later once every second or even third week.

Sanitary conditions at Stutthof

The health and sanitary conditions were very bad. The water would be shut off and we wouldn't be allowed to wash ourselves; yet if anyone was dirty, it was grounds for a terrible beating. So people would wash themselves in stagnant water. In the final two months, there was no water at all for prisoners. There was water only for the [SS] mess hall, German blocks, and *Sonderlager* [camp for privileged internees, lit. 'special camp', Ger.]. The taps weren't broken – there was running water – only we weren't allowed to use it, and the taps were shut off as well as all access to them. A canal ran nearby, not even one kilometre away from the camp, and water could easily have been brought from there; yet no arrangements were ever made to do so. There were washing rooms as well as toilets in the blocks, but they weren't used in the final eight weeks, owing to the lack of water, and latrines for our use were dug near the block. Consequently, a horrible stench pervaded the camp and made its way into the blocks through the windows. Given these conditions, it is no surprise that a typhus epidemic, which had broken out as early as November 1944, raged ever more rampantly through the camp and persisted until the final

days of my internment. Nothing could be done to stop it. There was a *Revier* [infirmary, Ger.], but it didn't have enough room for everyone. Approximately 200–250 people died every day; this was between late November and mid-December. It was then that the death rate reached its peak. The prisoner population fell and the death rate was subsequently lower. For want of any kind of help or intervention, it was all down to your own body to fight off the illness and be doctor to itself. The level of lice infestation was terrible; your shirt would literally be crawling over your body. Now and again, we would clamp a hand over our armpit and ask, 'How many did I get?' And every time there would be ten to twenty lice. There was no protection from these vermin; every block was just as badly infested, so much so that I believe it was probably one of the most lice-infested camps.

For a while, I worked in what was called an *Aussenkommando* [outside labour detail, Ger.] at the Gdańsk Shipyard in Gdańsk. It was construction work: I carried bricks and carted sand in wheelbarrows. I lived there during those several weeks. Obviously, the accommodation and dietary conditions were incomparably better; nevertheless, we were still completely subject to the SS, and the civilian authorities had nothing to do with us nor any influence. There were 800 of us prisoners working there at all times. Relations between us were more peaceful as well, probably owing to the presence of the civilian population and our proximity to residential buildings.

Prisoner population and nationality

I reckon that in January 1945, prior to the evacuation, there were 25,000 prisoners, not including the outside *Kommandos*. In terms of nationalities, Poles were the most numerous; they came from all corners of Poland, almost every city. Next followed Russians, Jews, Germans, Yugoslavians, Czechs, Frenchmen, a very small number of Italians, and two Englishmen. Exactly what percentage each nationality constituted, I don't know, as the blocks were

mixed. I believe that the greatest percentage of deaths occurred among the Jews, Frenchmen, and Danes. There were Norwegians in a separate camp near ours, but they had special conditions. At first, they didn't work at all and they were treated better overall. Moreover, they had regular aid in the form of Red Cross parcels, which the Poles didn't receive. They were Norwegian policemen, numbering around 400.

Evacuation of the camp in Stutthof

The evacuation of the camp in Stutthof coincided with the launch of the Russian offensive in January 1945. It was conducted in stages and on foot. The final transports left Stutthof on 25 April 1945. We were loaded onto narrow-gauge railway wagons in Stutthof and transported to the mouth of the Vistula. I was in the second-to-last group, consisting of eighty-three Polish and Russian prisoners. We left Stutthof at 11.15 p.m. On the evening of 26 April 1945, we were loaded aboard motor boats (landing craft) and taken to the tip of the Hel Peninsula. On the morning of 27 April, we were disembarked and held in a woodland. Anyone who wandered off or betrayed any intention of doing so was shot dead. I witnessed between ten and twenty such incidents. At that time, there were around 3,000 prisoners altogether in the woods. At approximately 5 p.m. everyone began to be loaded aboard barges, larger than the motor boats that had brought us to Hel. The embarkation took place in the port. Along the way from the woods to the port, the SS gunned down prisoners who seemed frail or who walked slowly and couldn't keep up the pace. I went with the last group, which was assigned to help frail women who hadn't been shot, and with my own eyes I saw five prisoners shot dead. Moreover, along the way I saw several dozen corpses of people who had been killed the same way.

Read, signed, and accepted by H. Gromadka

B. Kurowski.

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Dädesjö, 13 January 1946

Eyewitness testimony of Henryk Gromadka, born on 5 April 1915 in Warsaw, cont'd

All of the prisoners, by now fewer than 3,000, were loaded aboard three barges while SS men told us we would be going to Denmark. We were at sea until 2 May 1945, on which day we sailed into the Bay of Lübeck. There, at 5 p.m. we dropped anchor next to a ship, the *Thielbek*. Two of our barges were anchored there. I don't know what happened to the third; somewhere along the way it had vanished. Once night had fallen, around 8 p.m. a tugboat came up to our barges and took the SS men, of whom there were several dozen. It should be mentioned that when we left Stutthof, we received half a loaf of bread, half a lump of margarine, and 150–200 grams of meat. A large number [of prisoners], however, hadn't received any of this. Throughout the journey from 25 April to 2 May, we received nothing more to eat; there wasn't even a drop of fresh water. Thus, a great many people died of exhaustion during the voyage. Practically every half hour, the bodies of the dead – and sometimes even the living – would be tossed overboard under SS orders. Around 150 to 200 prisoners died on each barge. Each barge held 800 prisoners. While we were anchored alongside the *Thielbek* (aboard which there were prisoners from Neuengamme concentration camp as well), the SS men left our barge. As they were doing so, one of them said that things didn't look good for us, that we would be sunk. We ourselves could already see what was brewing in any case. Thus, we decided to cut the ropes and make our escape. I myself cut one of the lines that tied us to the *Thielbek*, while one of the Russians

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cut the other line. The captain of the *Thielbek* and an officer saw us doing this, but they didn't say anything. It was very dark by then and we drifted away with the wind and waves. We tried to help ourselves along using planks, because there weren't any oars and the rudder was broken. In this way, at 5 a.m. on 3 May 1945 we made landfall near Neustadt. The boat ran aground, coming to a halt about thirty metres from the shore. The stronger among us then disembarked and waded ashore, while those without the strength to do the same remained aboard the barge. In these conditions everyone scattered into the woods or haystacks, hiding wherever they could. For we could sense that the front was near – all night long we could hear artillery fire. We disembarked from the barge completely unhindered and made our way up to three kilometres inland. Around 10 a.m. began a manhunt to round us up, organized by SS men, sailors, and even the civilian population. I, along with others, was captured at the seashore; I ended up in the custody of coastal artillery soldiers, who asked us who we were. We replied that we were castaways from the barge. One of the soldiers rode a bicycle to the barge, while two other soldiers slowly escorted the ~~three~~ four of us Poles in the same direction on foot. All four of us were wearing civilian clothing without crosses or camp insignia. We had taken it with us from the camp in Stutthof in preparation for any opportunity to escape; under our prison stripes we had put on civilian clothes that had been 'organized' [camp slang for 'pilfered', from Ger. *organisieren*] indirectly from the camp clothing stores. The German artillery soldiers escorting us told us that the Americans or English would be there within a few hours. We were escorted to the barge, where we noticed the SS men from our barge and other German soldiers, as well as another barge from Stutthof transporting

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prisoners, among whom were the Norwegians (the Norwegian police). They too had already made it ashore. The Norwegians and a certain number of us were taken aside (some joined the Norwegians surreptitiously), and the rest were pushed into the sea, including women, who were mostly Jewish, as well as between ten and twenty children. The SS shot at them as if hunting ducks. Over one hundred prisoners perished this way. Additionally, those who had remained aboard the barges out of weakness were also shot dead. Those who managed to flee, in my opinion, saved themselves in doing so. These executions and shooting at the barge went on for approximately half an hour right in front of us. Our group, which included the Norwegians and totalled 250–300 people, was escorted to the port in Neustadt. As we were being led away, one of the SS men said in German: ‘You cursed dogs are still going to the bottom of the sea.’ In Neustadt, sailors gave us soup in the navy barracks, and at around two o’clock we were loaded aboard the *Athen*, which, with prisoners aboard, had just sailed into Neustadt from the Bay of Lübeck in order to take us back out to sea. We embarked from the pier, twenty prisoners at a time. At some time after two o’clock, the English air force began to bomb the *Cap Arcona*, the *Deutschland*, and the *Thielbek*, which were moored in the Bay of Lübeck. They were squadrons composed of six aeroplanes each. I witnessed the bombing myself. The first to go under was the *Thielbek*, while the *Cap Arcona* burned. At that point the guns of the *Athen*, aboard which we were being loaded, opened fire at the English aeroplanes. Then responded the English artillery – tanks

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sitting approximately two kilometres from the ship, on the other side of a canal. The first shell landed in the water near the ship; the second struck the rudder; and the third shell hit a gun and wiped out the gun crew along with it. Sailors from the second gun, seeing what was going on, cast off their helmets and leapt overboard. The SS men followed suit and those on the pier also fled. The prisoners – who for the most part hadn't yet been embarked and were still on the pier – scattered as well. I also fled, taking cover behind the third block of buildings several hundred metres from the ship. And at that point I caught sight of the English tanks heading towards the pier in the port.

It was the moment of liberation. Enormous joy and enthusiasm broke out all around: scenes of caps flung up into the air, people kissing one another – I too exchanged kisses with the Norwegians. Even those who could hardly walk were leaping to their feet and running up to the tanks. Some went downright mad from the joy, because the transition had been too abrupt: one moment, they were in danger of dying on a bombed ship or pier; the next, they were saved and free. This was 3 May 1945. As of then, everyone began to go their separate ways, enjoying complete personal freedom, and on 21 July 1945 I left Lübeck for Sweden. Of the two barges that were initially anchored in the Bay of Lübeck, I reckon that approximately 300 prisoners survived, apart from the Norwegians. What happened to the third barge that had set sail from Hel with 800 prisoners aboard, I don't know; it disappeared from sight. Approximately twenty per cent of those aboard the three barges were ill with typhus. I submit the testimony above according to the best of my knowledge and in good conscience on the basis of what I have personally witnessed and experienced. Read, signed, and accepted by

[note under the line] By looking at the markings and from my knowledge of aeroplane types, I was able to recognize that it was English aeroplanes bombing the ships. [/note]

B. Kurowski

H. Gromadka
Witness

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Comments of the receiver of the testimony: The witness gives his testimony from his sickbed. He is a simple man, but sharp-witted. It is evident that the details of the evacuation have deeply embedded themselves in his memory. He recounts events decisively, without skipping back or muddling his statements. I have no reservations as to his reliability. Bożysław Kurowski