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# David Waldshan: "This is the short description of what happened"

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## Abstract

This article contains a transcription of an interview with David Waldshan of Białowieża, a Holocaust survivor, recorded by the author. Waldshan's account is a chronological testimony of his childhood in Białowieża, fate during the Holocaust, and a new life in the United States. It is preceded by an introduction, in which the author analyses the impact of her relationship with the interviewee on the content of the interview, and confronts it with archival sources as well as oral history. The text is also an analysis of the history of the Jews in Białowieża, in which the author demonstrates how the town's history and ethno-religious structure, so different from that of the broader Białystok region, shaped the specific circumstances of the local Jewish community.

## Abstrakt

Artykuł zawiera transkrypcję wywiadu nagranego przez autorkę z Davidem Waldshanem z Białowieży, ocalałym z Zagłady. Świadectwo obejmujące dzieciństwo, losy w czasie Zagłady i początki życia Davida w Stanach Zjednoczonych poprzedza wprowadzenie, w którym autorka analizuje wpływ swojej relacji z rozmówcą na treść wywiadu i konfrontuje go ze źródłami archiwalnymi oraz historią mówioną. Artykuł jest jednocześnie analizą dziejów Żydów w Białowieży, w której autorka pokazuje, jak odmienna na tle Białostocczyzny historia i struktura narodowościowo-religijna miejscowości kształtowały specyficzną sytuację lokalnej społeczności żydowskiej.

## Keywords

Holocaust, Białowieża, survivor, witness account, oral history, Second World War, interwar period, Bielsk Podlaski County, antisemitism, microhistory, Belarusian borderland

## Słowa kluczowe

Zagłada, Białowieża, ocalały, świadectwo, historia mówiona, II wojna światowa, XX-lecie międzywojenne, powiat Bielski Podlaski, antysemityzm, mikrohistoria, pogranicze polsko-białoruskie

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**A Jewish Białowieża survivor**

David Waldshan's memoir, which I recorded in 2016, is part of the extensive collection of video interviews with Holocaust survivors worldwide, containing typical elements of such accounts.[1] Simultaneously, it is a unique interview, as it is the only – to my knowledge – existing interview with a Jewish Białowieża survivor. Thus, despite the fact that it was recorded as long as 71 years after the Second World War, it constitutes a remarkably significant source for the study of the Jewish history of Białowieża.[2] This history is the subject of my doctoral dissertation, entitled *The History of the Jews in Białowieża: Between Historical Reality and Social Memory*, which I am undertaking under the supervision of Prof. Piotr Laskowski as part of my doctoral studies at the Doctoral School of Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw.[3] For the same reason, being the only Jewish account of Białowieża, and additionally a very late one, it requires a critical approach and confrontation with other sources.

The interview is an important part of my doctoral dissertation; however, it had been recorded a few years before I embarked on my academic path. It stems from my involvement in restoring the memory of Białowieża's Jewish residents, which I began systematically in 2015 as part of a scholarship I received from the Minister of Culture and National Heritage in Poland for animation activities. By 2015, I had already been living and working in Białowieża as a cultural animator for 13 years within the framework of the Jacek Kuroń Educational Foundation, which I also

1 The largest archive of interviews is the Visual History Archive of USC Shoah Foundation, which contains almost 60,000 testimonies. Significant collections of oral testimonies can also be found at The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in the Yad Vashem Archives, and the Fortunoff Archive.

2 On the genre characteristics of texts belonging to personal document literature and their specificity as a historical source, as well as on the methodological challenges that such texts bring, cf. J. Leociak, *Literatura dokumentu osobistego jako źródło badań nad Zagładą Żydów. Rekonesans metodologiczny*, "Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały," no. 1, 2005, pp. 11–31; P. Filipkowski, *Pozagładowe historie mówione: nagrania, archiwa, sposoby lektury*, "Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały," no. 9, 2013, pp. 86–115.

3 The subject of my research project is the Jewish community of Białowieża, a town whose importance is built on the preserved original Białowieża Forest, located today on the Polish–Belarusian border, with a history linked to the area now situated in Belarus. The purpose of my project is to describe, from a micro-historical perspective, the fate of the Jewish residents of Białowieża between the wars and during the Holocaust, as well as the fate of the few survivors and descendants of pre-war emigrants after the Holocaust, based on a variety of sources, an important part of which is the collection of oral histories of non-Jewish witnesses I have gathered.

co-run.[4] The culmination of this stage of work on recreating the history of the Jewish community in Białowieża, and the result of my scholarship, was the creation of a website entitled *Virtual Museum of Jewish History in Białowieża*.[5] Three days before the Virtual Museum was presented to Białowieża residents in the local Culture Centre in May 2016,[6] I located David Waldshan and exchanged initial emails with him. Six months later, the following interview was recorded.

I found David Waldshan's name back in 2014, recorded on one of the American lists of survivors.[7] However, throughout my work on the Virtual Museum website, I was unable to find any other information about David and his family,[8] nor almost any leads to him.[9] The name of his family did not appear in any of the interviews I conducted with the oldest non-Jewish residents of Białowieża, although many other Jewish names appeared, including those of survivors.[10] There is also no Waldszan name in pre-war address books and public notices from the registration of stores and workshops, in which I found other residents,[11] even though David's father, Benjamin Waldszan, as it

4 The Jacek Kuroń Educational Foundation has been operating in the Białowieża municipality since 2002. It ran an independent original educational project called "the Jan Józef Lipski Universal University in Teremiski" for adult youth from all over Poland, then for the local community of the Białowieża municipality (from preschoolers to seniors). The Foundation continues its activities on a smaller scale to this day, primarily organising events in the Teremiski Barn Theater, as well as commemorative and educational activities. For more on the activities of the Foundation and the author of this article, see: *The Nonformal University of Teremiski. Interview with Katarzyna and Paweł Winiarski*, www.designingeconomiccultures.net/ (accessed: 10.06.2024).

5 See: The Virtual Museum of the History of Jews in Białowieża, www.jewish-Białowieża.pl, and Facebook fan page, https://www.facebook.com/jewishBiałowieża (accessed: 10.06.2024).

6 See: the report on the opening of the Virtual Museum, www.jewish-Białowieża.pl/uroczystosc-otwarcia-muzeum/ (accessed: 10.05.2024).

7 At this point, it is difficult for me to determine what that list was and where I found it. It was certainly not clear whether it referred to that specific Białowieża. There are several localities in Poland bearing that name.

8 See: what I was able to find about other Białowieża survivors: http://www.jewish-Białowieża.pl/ocaleni/ (accessed: 10.06.2024).

9 I only found on a private website a short the Berman family tree, which listed a person named David Waldshan, born in Białowieża, and the names of his wife and three children. I tried looking for the children, assuming they were active in the workforce or on social media. Eventually, I wrote an email to a person listed as the son of this David to an email address of a company I found on the Internet, and a Facebook message to a person listed as a daughter. These remained unanswered. Once in the U.S., I met David Waldshan and his adult children. It turned out that my messages had not been read, but I sent them to the right people, David Waldshan's real children; The Berman Family, https://www.genealogy.com/ftm/f/e/l/Lisa-Feller/WEBSITE-0001/UHP-0072.html (accessed: 10.05.2024).

10 Collection of the interviews with non-Jewish residents of Białowieża recorded by the author between 2015 and 2019, researcher's private archive.

11 *Księga adresowa Polski dla handlu, przemysłu, rzemiosł i rolnictwa*, Warszawa 1930, pp. 88–89; *Księga adresowa Polski dla handlu, przemysłu, rzemiosł i rolnictwa*, Warszawa 1928, pp. 99–100.

later turned out, ran such a store on the high street. Similarly, there is no Waldszan name on the lists compiled after the Second World War by the municipality of Białowieża concerning Jewish-owned houses that were seized by residents during and immediately after the war, and then taken over by the Municipal National Councils and subsequently by the Polish state through the Liquidation Office as "abandoned property."[12]

Pre-war population registers, Jewish vital records, and mortgage books did not survive into the post-war era, as evidenced by certificates issued by the Białowieża municipal office for Jewish property restitution cases initiated by family members of those murdered who had emigrated from Poland before the war.[13] The same is confirmed in a certificate issued by the post-war Jewish Committee in Bielsk Podlaski in connection with the reconstruction of a birth certificate for another survivor.[14]

So how did I finally find David Waldshan? At the same time that I was working on collecting data for the Virtual Museum, Brian Marcus and June Hersh, photographers based in the United States, were doing the *Still Here* project, searching for survivors living in the US,[15] which resulted in a website (and later a book) featuring their portraits.[16] The *Still Here* website was launched a few weeks before mine, and I had discovered its existence a few days before my website was published. It included a photo of David Waldshan and his brief statement:

> I was miraculously destined by the Highest, who had some purpose in His mind, to save me from hell. That purpose is a great mystery to me. Perhaps it is that I should bear witness and honor my Polish towns of Białowieża and Prużana, where 9,200 Jews, 84 per cent of the Jewish population, perished during the four days of the liquidation of the Prużana ghetto.[17]

12 State Archives in Białystok (Archiwum Państwowe w Białymstoku, APB), sig. 4/87/0/3/36, Lists of abandoned and deserted properties in Bielsk Podlaski County, 1946–1947; sig. 4/87/0/4/101, Transfer of abandoned and deserted properties in Bielsk Podlaski County to the management of the Communal and Municipal Boards, 1946–1949; sig. 4/87/0/3/33, Register of abandoned and deserted properties in Bielsk Podlaski County, 1946; sig. 4/87/0/3/35, Register of abandoned and post-German properties in Bielsk Podlaski County; sig. 4/571/0, record group: Communal National Council in Białowieża.

13 APB, sig. 1394, Case of Aleksander Bursztejn on taking possession; sig. 4/87/0/6/864, Files on the introduction of Matylda Barchat into possession of an abandoned property in Białowieża.

14 The certificate issued by the Jewish Committee in Bielsk Podlaski on 8 February 1947 stated: "The Jewish Committee in Bielsk Podlaski hereby certifies that all civil status documents of the Jewish population of this county have been destroyed by the German occupiers. This certificate was issued to citizen Malecki Israel for presentation to the competent authorities;" APB, sig. 27/7/98, ns. 57/46.

15 They relied heavily on their personal network, which allowed them to find people like David Waldshan who had not previously filed their accounts anywhere.

16 https://stillherebook.com/ (accessed: 05.05.2024).

17 https://stillherebook.com/gallery/ (accessed: 12.05.2016). This quote is currently not available at this link.

Following my email to Brian Marcus asking him to put me in touch with David, I received an email from him within an hour, declaring his willingness to share his memories. Over the course of the first 24 hours, we exchanged several email messages, and David, at my request, even managed to write a few words to the residents of Białowieża and other audiences who attended the website presentation at the local Culture Centre. He wrote:

> Greetings to all the visitors at the Virtual Museum of the History of Jews from Białowieża.
> I would like to express my gratitude to Kasia for researching and compiling all available information regarding the history of the Jewish population of Białowieża who perished during the Second World War. This is a real memorial for the present and future generations who will know that there was a Jewish Community in a small and very famous town of Białowieża. May all of you, participants and visitors, be blessed for being so interested to know about the history and the fate of the vanished Jewish people of Białowieża.
>
> With my best wishes to all of you,
> David Waldshan – a survivor of Białowieża.[18]

I conducted the following conversation six months later in the home of David Waldshan and his wife, Sarah, in Farmington Hills, Michigan, as an audio and video recording, on 15–17 November 2016.[19]

David Waldshan was born on 28 February 1928 in Białowieża as Dawid Waldszan. At the time of his testimony, David was 88 years old. The interview was recorded in parts during my three-day stay at David's home. The edited, hour-long interview was published on my Virtual Museum's YouTube channel[20] and was also submitted to the Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and to the Yad Vashem Archives,[21] representing the only testimony from a Jew from

18 David Waldshan's email message to Katarzyna Winiarska, 13 May 2016, in the researcher's private archive, published on the Virtual Museum website, 15 May 2016, http://www.jewish-Białowieża.pl/uroczystosc-otwarcia-muzeum/ (accessed: 01.06.2024).

19 All interview materials are in the researcher's private archive. The interview was conducted as part of the "Survivor from Białowieża" author's project, funded by the Jewish Historical Institute Association in Poland and the Jacek Kuroń Educational Foundation.

20 The Virtual Museum of the History of Jews in the Białowieża YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xo9UJeCpE20 (accessed: 10.05.2024).

21 Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), sig. 13417841.

Białowieża there.[22] Edited excerpts were also published in a popular-science publication about Białowieża.[23]

In addition to the interview conducted in 2016, I also recorded a second conversation with David three years later (in 2019), on a return visit to David's home,[24] a few months after I had erected a monument dedicated to the Jews of Białowieża who perished in the Holocaust and its unveiling, at which David's closest relatives – his wife Sarah, three adult children, and some of his grandchildren – were present.[25]

David's account is a comprehensive, chronological narrative of his life, tracing his family roots in Pruzhany and Shereshov[26], his childhood in Białowieża, and the period of the Holocaust: deportation from Białowieża to the ghetto in Kobryń, transfer to the Pruzhany ghetto, deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp, transfer to the Mauthausen concentration camp, then to the Mauthausen-Gusen subcamp, followed by a Death March

22 At the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, there is a testimony of Holocaust survivor Symcha Bursztajn, a teacher from Kleszczele, which includes information about the fate of Jews in Białowieża during the war. However, Symcha Bursztajn was not a resident of Białowieża and almost certainly was not an eyewitness to the events he described there. After the war, he submitted testimonies concerning many towns across the Podlasie region (including Kleszczele, where he came from, as well as Bielsk Podlaski, Brańsk, Ciechanowiec, Drohiczyn, Hajnówka, and Orla). He could not have personally observed events in all of these places. Barbara Engelking notes that Bursztajn was a representative of the Jewish Committee in Bielsk Podlaski after the war and collected testimonies from other survivors, see: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (Jewish Historical Institute, ŻIH), sig. 301/1970, *Relacja Symchy Bursztajna*; B. Engelking, *Powiat bielski*, in B. Engelking, J. Grabowski (eds.), *Dalej jest noc... Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, vol. 1, Warszawa 2018, p. 52.

23 K. Winiarska, *Ocalony z Białowieży* in D. Borodaj (ed.), *Przypuszcza. Przewodnik po Puszczy Białowieskiej i okolicach*, Warszawa 2018, pp. 38–46, https://krajobraz.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Przypuszcza.pdf (accessed: 13.05.2024).

24 I visited David for the second time on the occasion of my visit to the USA, when I gave the presentation *Rediscovering the History of Jews of Białowieża through Oral History* at The Melikian Center: Russian, Eurasian & East European Studies, Arizona State University, Tempe, USA, 22.10.2019.

25 A total of 30 descendants of Białowieża Jewish families attended the ceremony of unveiling the memorial in Białowieża. During the ceremony, representatives of the descendants' families gave their speeches. Alaine Ashkenazi, David's daughter, spoke on behalf of the Waldshan family. See: the report of the monument unveiling: www.jewish-Białowieża.pl/4493-2/ (accessed: 01.06.2024).

26 Until the outbreak of the First World War, Białowieża was part of Grodno Governorate, Pruzhany district, with the nearest town being Shereshov (all of them now in Belarus). Both towns had large Jewish communities, from which the first Jewish families came to settle in Białowieża in the mid-19th century, cf. K. Winiarska, *The first Jewish settlements in Białowieża (half of 19th century to 1914)*, http://www.jewish-bialowieza.pl/settlements/the-first-jewish-settlements-in-bialowieza-half-of-19th-century-1914/ (accessed: 10.03.2024).

to the Gunskirchen subcamp, five years spent in Austria after liberation by American troops, and finally emigration to the United States, including his first post-war years there.[27]

Due to the sheer volume of the material, the article contains only a transcript of my first interview with David. In the introduction, I briefly refer to the second interview while analysing the first.

**Relationship between the researcher and the witness of history**

Before discussing the major themes of the interview with David Waldshan, I would like to highlight an important context for the creation of both interviews, which influenced their process, form, and content. This context is the relationship between David Waldshan, the interviewee, and me, the interviewer. From the very beginning, it was a relationship characterised by strong commitment on both sides. This was because our conversation arose not from a research plan, but from my personal activist involvement in restoring the memory of Jews in Białowieża,[28] with a significant motivation oriented not only towards the past, but also towards the future of the younger generations of Białowieża, which Ewa Domańska describes as a "rescue story".[29]

This commitment allowed me to finally find David, and simultaneously became the gateway to his openness and the trust he placed in me, for which I am extremely grateful. Although my initiative to record the survivor's account was not undertaken as an academic project at the time, I was aware of the significance of its content for research into the history of Jews in Białowieża. David was one of the few survivors from Białowieża, and most likely the only one still alive at that time, as well as the only one I managed to find not merely as a trace in an archive or a story, but as a living person with whom I could establish contact. I therefore recognised the importance of what would be said, and I hoped to confront it with the accounts of non-Jewish witnesses from Białowieża, most of whom claimed harmonious coexistence with Jews, which, given the widespread antisemitism in pre-war Poland, made me sceptical.[30] I feared that these interviewees were not revealing the whole truth, and

27 For the basic facts on the history of the Holocaust of the Jews of Białowieża, from the German occupation of the village, through the execution of men in the gravel pit, the ghettos in Kobryń and Pruzhany, to the deportation to Auschwitz, see: K. Winiarska, *German occupation*, http://www.jewish-bialowieza.pl/settlements/the-second-world-war/german-occupation/ (accessed: 20.06.2024); Sz. Datner, *Zagłada Białegostoku i Białostocczyzny. Notatki dokumentalne*, Warszawa 2023, pp. 90–95.

28 About my activities and motivations, see: the film made by Forum for Dialogue: www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-RAXNJOS5W (accessed: 15.05.2024).

29 E. Domańska, *Historia ratownicza*, "Teksty Drugie," no. 5, 2014, pp. 12–16.

30 Cf. J. Żyndul, *Zajścia antyżydowskie w Polsce w latach 1935–1937*, Warszawa 1994; K. Kijek, A. Markowski, K. Zieliński (eds.), *Pogromy Żydów na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku*, in *Studia przypadków (do 1939 roku)*, vol. 2, Warszawa 2019; A. Cała, *Żyd – wróg odwieczny? Antysemityzm w Polsce i jego źródła*, Warszawa 2012.

that their view of the pre-war period in Białowieża might be completely opposed to the Jewish perspective. However, even in the accounts of non-Jewish witnesses who claimed harmonious relations between Poles, Jews, and Belarusians, there were, not infrequently, reports of "teasing" of Jewish colleagues, of antisemitic slogans, of nationalist militias appearing in the town, and locals looting property left behind by Jews.

I was therefore particularly interested in David's account of pre-war antisemitism. Yet the commemorative context of my arrival placed me not in the position of a researcher but rather of a relative rediscovered after many years. David and his family received me with great cordiality, and I, too, felt this kinship.[31] In my notes, I recorded: "David and his wife received me like a queen." They welcomed me into their home, treating me not as a stranger but as a long-lost family member, and included me in their domestic, religious, and social life.

In 2016, then, the interview with David was not merely research material for me, one among many conversations on a subject I happened to be investigating in my academic work, but rather a rare treasure that surfaced through dialogue. My position as a researcher, shaped both by my commitment to the purpose of the interview, and by the reception I received from David and his family, was closer to that of a granddaughter who, at the last moment, discovers her family history through a newly found relative. It was her only opportunity, as the other family members were no longer alive, and the entire family history resided in the memory of this one individual, before whom she placed the camera. At the same time, David was also aware that he was providing the only extant Jewish account of Białowieża.[32]

Finding David and becoming acquainted with him, followed by our close relationship over many years, was a significant event in my life, and interviewing him represented a stage in fulfilling my self-assigned mission of restoring the memory of Jews in Białowieża. The fact of discovering a survivor who could testify to the existence of a Jewish community in Białowieża was also fundamental for the implementation of my work in the local community – it lent credence to the presence of a Jewish community in this locality, particularly for the generation that does not remember the pre-war period, given the complete erasure of Jews from local history. Moreover, through

31 On the motivation of the study, stemming from the motivation to "bring Jews into the memory of the local community" when research is combined with action, cf. A. Sułek, *Badacz i świadek drugiej generacji. O ratowaniu lokalnej pamięci zagłady Żydów*, "Więź," vol. 60, no. 4, 2017, pp. 65–74.

32 When David Waldshan first wrote to me, declaring his willingness to share his memory, he thought he was not only the last living survivor of Białowieża but, in general, the only survivor of the entire community of Białowieża. David Waldshan's email to Katarzyna Winiarska, 12.05.2016, in the author's private collection.

contact "here and now" with a living person,[33] it engaged emotions, fostered empathy, and reinforced the importance of remembering the pre-war Jewish residents of Białowieża.[34]

Moreover, for David, my arrival to record his account was more than the arrival of a researcher conducting a project. It represented the first voice from Białowieża, his hometown, to reach him since before the war. Simultaneously, it marked the moment when he decided not only to give his testimony and submit it to the archives for the first time, but also to recount his life holistically, including his experiences of the Holocaust and his childhood in Białowieża. As it transpired just before the camera was switched on, this story had not even been heard by David's wife, whom he asked to remain present during the interview so that she could hear it.[35] Sarah was therefore present throughout all the recordings, but remained a listener, not participating in the recounting of David's story.[36]

**A memoir, a narrative, a testimony**

David's story is an interview created post factum, decades after the war, and is therefore a late, or even very late, interview.[37] However, I treat it not only as a memoir or narrative, but also as a testimony.[38] Significantly, David chose to tell

33 David Waldshan did not come to Białowieża on his own, but he appeared through his words addressed directly to residents, which were read during my website presentation in front of the local audience, as well as in the form of the interview I recorded with him, which I presented twice in the local cinema after returning from the US.

34 A similar role of visualising the "here and now" was also played by the presence of Amir Berger, a descendant of the Jewish Lerenkind family of Białowieża, at the same event, who spoke from the stage to the residents by himself. Since then, such arrivals of descendants and meetings with residents have been recurring, the most widely echoed of which was a meeting with 30 descendants during a visit connected with the unveiling of a monument to Białowieża Holocaust victims in August 2019, https://kurierpodlaski.pl/artykul/pomnik-ku-pamieci-bialowieskich/737676 (accessed: 10.05.2024).

35 David Waldshan's wife, Sarah Waldshan, was born on 17 December 1944 in Siberia (Russia) to a Jewish Berman family from Kałuszyn, who survived the Second World War in exile in the USSR. The fate of the family was described by one of its descendants in a book, H. Berman, *Undying Will: A Family's Story of Survival in War-Torn Europe*, Warrior Way 2019.

36 Although she sometimes repeats my questions or agrees with David by repeating his individual words. On the difficulties of deciding whether to allow close others to participate in an interview, Adrianna Surmiak wrote that most researchers allow such participation, guided by the belief that preserving the relationship between the interviewee and the person close to them is more important than gaining additional knowledge, which may be limited in this situation; see: A. Surmiak, *Etyka badań jakościowych w praktyce. Analiza doświadczeń badaczy w badaniach z osobami podatnymi na zranienie*, Warszawa 2022, p. 116.

37 A categorisation of the accounts according to the time of the uprising was proposed by J. Leociak, *Tekst wobec Zagłady. O relacjach z getta warszawskiego*, Warszawa 1997.

38 P. Filipkowski, *Pozagładowe historie mówione: nagrania, archiwa, sposoby lektury*, "Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały," no. 9, 2013, pp. 86–115; J. Leociak, *Literatura dokumentu osobistego jako źródło badań nad Zagładą Żydów. Rekonesans metodologiczny*, "Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały," no. 1, 2005, pp. 13–31.

this story at the end of his life, after years of suppressing the period of his life in Poland and his experience of the Holocaust. Old age is a stage in which one pieces together the story of one's life, simultaneously a moment when leaving behind a narrative of one's fate for those closest becomes increasingly important. From the perspective of several decades of a successful life, it also becomes easier to confront traumatic episodes of the past.[39]

Justyna Leder indicates that, regardless of when an account of the Second World War was recorded, "[...] each time it is also an attempt to speak about the most painful experiences, which usually cannot be described directly, but which can often be pointed out, hinted at, if only through silence."[40] David employs silence not only when recounting the war period, but also when reflecting on his earlier years in Białowieża. He also signals the difficulty of narrating this entire period with a certain stillness or fuzziness, which became most apparent to me when reviewing the footage at home, once my own emotions and focus on direct contact had waned. These effects were particularly noticeable during the subsequent process of working with the material and editing the hour-long video recording of the interview. The first two parts of the interview – covering the pre-war period in Białowieża and the Holocaust – are relatively straightforward to edit from a technical perspective: the interviewee remains almost motionless, does not gesticulate, and maintains the same posture, despite the interview being conducted over several days. This portion of David's account exhibits a ready-made structure, as if it had been previously composed and precisely formulated – ready for transcription without hesitation or correction. The only noticeable variation in the material is the interviewee's change of shirt. By contrast, the second part, recounting the post-war period, presents greater challenges in editing, as David is more animated: he gesticulates, speaks with twists, humour, and variation in timbre and pitch, and sometimes even adopts performative mannerisms.[41]

Such physical reactions, observed during interviews with Holocaust survivors, are described by researchers as manifestations of embodied trauma – a concept that regards trauma not merely as a psychological experience but as something physiologically inscribed in the body. The pain of memory is revealed not only in the content of testimony but also in the manner of its conveyance. A blank facial expression and monotonous speech, a recital of what appears to be a memorised narrative without emotional display, are typical symptoms of dissociation – that is, the speaker's detachment from their emotions in order to mitigate psychological

39 P. Filipkowski, *Pozagładowe historie...*, p. 102.

40 J. Leder, *Doświadczenie zagłady z perspektywy dziecka w polskiej literaturze dokumentu osobistego*, Wrocław 2009, p. 8.

41 Sf. E. M. McMahan, *Wywiad historii mówionej jako wydarzenie interpretacyjno-komunikacyjne*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej," no. 8 (special edition), 2018, pp. 127–151.

pain.[42] Another common strategy adopted by interviewees with traumatic experiences is the avoidance of topics relating to distressing events.

In the context of research ethics involving vulnerable individuals – among whom Holocaust survivors clearly belong – scholars emphasise the risk of additional stress caused by the interview, particularly when the events are recent or are being recounted for the very first time. It is recommended that researchers be guided not only by formal principles and research objectives but also by sensitivity and empathy, refraining from probing questions that might retraumatise the interviewee. In interviews with vulnerable participants, the well-being of the interlocutor must take precedence – even at the expense of the information obtained.[43] During the interview I conducted, David's heightened tension level was clearly discernible. Combined with the fact that he was recounting his story for the first time, this raised concerns about whether I could ask about the most painful moments of his experience. I felt a strong sense of responsibility for his emotional state after the interview – particularly given his advanced age – and I myself experienced a considerable degree of tension. Consequently, I chose not to raise questions about the most difficult moments, even though, from a research perspective, such inquiries would have been highly desirable – for instance, in order to explore further the antisemitic atmosphere of the 1930s Białowieża. I consciously prioritised the well-being of my interlocutor and the delicate relationship we were only beginning to establish. As Adrianna Surmiak observes, pressing a vulnerable person for the sake of advancing one's own interests (such as obtaining research material) constitutes manipulation and is unethical, whereas refraining from such questioning represents an ethical and empathetic choice.[44]

**Silence and trauma in David's story**

The silence of Holocaust survivors concerning their traumatic experiences may stem from various causes, assume different forms, and serve a range of functions. It may manifest as an expression of trauma, rendering verbal articulation unattainable or resulting in the repression of painful experiences from conscious awareness. As the past was the source of suffering, some survivors believed that

42 R.J.C. Huntjens, M.J. Dorahy, R. van Wees-Cieraad, *Dissociation and memory fragmentation*, in F. Kennedy, H. Kennerley, D. Pearson (eds.), *Cognitive Behavioural Approaches to the Understanding and Treatment of Dissociation*, London 2018, pp. 92–103.

43 M. Bobbert, *Ethical issues in qualitative research: Trauma survivors telling their stories for research purposes*, in D. Reisinger, Ch. Mandry, S. Andresen (eds.), *Narrativity and Violence: Conceptual, Ethical and Methodological Challenges*, Bielefeld 2024, pp. 39–72; cf. A. Surmiak, *op. cit.*, pp. 109–111; J. Gałęziowski, J. Urbanek, *"Etyczny zwrot" w polskiej historii mówionej*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej," vol. 7, 2017, pp. 7–34.

44 A. Surmiak, *op. cit.*, pp. 109–111.

the only means of avoiding it was to forget, to banish the past from memory.[45] Silence may also function as a conscious strategy for coping with trauma: some individuals choose to remain silent in order to avoid retraumatisation and to concentrate on building a future and a new life.[46] It may even serve as a means of preserving dignity and of maintaining control over one's own experiences.[47]

An important function of silence for many survivors was also the intention to protect their children and grandchildren,[48] a consideration that was also significant for David. He not only refrained from telling his children about his most painful experiences during the Holocaust, but he also concealed from them the very fact that he was a survivor. His younger daughter, Alaine, recalls:

> When I was a child, I was about nine or ten years old, I found out that he was in the Holocaust. I actually found out from my neighbour – a girl who was maybe two or three years older than me, whose family knew my family. They lived across the street. And she said: "Did you know that your dad was in the Holocaust?" And I had just learned about the Holocaust. [...] I said: "No, he wasn't!" And she said: "Yes, he was." And I ran home – my dad was cutting the grass, I remember – and I said: "Dad, were you in the Holocaust?" And he said: "Yes, I was." So that's how I found out about it.

When I asked David's daughter, "That's it? He didn't tell you more?", she replied: "I mean, he was mowing the lawn, so this was kind of the moment he couldn't necessarily stop there and talk to me. But I think I've learned initially that he wasn't so open to talking about it."[49]

The sudden discovery by Alaine that her father had survived the Holocaust did not lead him to break his silence. Researchers emphasise that, contrary to the intentions

45 A. Surmiak, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

46 It is verbalised by many survivors. For example, Aviva Blum-Wachs, in conversation with Sylwia Chutnik and Natalia Judzińska, said: "I wanted to forget, it was my way of protecting myself, so that I wouldn't remember everything.", in S. Chutnik, N. Judzińska, *To się objawiało w rozmaitych uwagach. Rozmowa z Avivą Blum-Wachs*, "Autobiografia. Literatura. Kultura. Media," vol. 14, no. 1, 2020, p. 97. Similarly, the son of the survivors, Daniel, recounted in an interview with Mikołaj Grynberg: "A lot of effort was put into our home to ensure that those stories would never return. That is the instinct of survivors: to live, not to return to death.", in M. Grynberg, *Oskarżam Auschwitz. Opowieści rodzinne*, Wołowiec 2014, pp. 28–29.

47 H. Greenspan, *The Unsaid, the Incommunicable, the Unbearable, and the Irretrievable*, "The Oral History Review," vol. 41, no. 2, 2014, pp. 229–241, https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohu033 (accessed: 04.06.2025).

48 Cf. D. Laub, J. Bodenstab, *Dwadzieścia pięć lat później. Powrót do świadectw ocalałych z Holokaustu*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej," no. 8 (special edition), 2018, p. 243.

49 Interview with Alaine Ashkenazi, 30 October 2019 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

of parents seeking to protect their children from trauma, the taboo-based nature of silence may itself become a means of intergenerational transmission of trauma.[50] However, this outcome is not inevitable, as numerous protective factors can mitigate the negative effects of traumatic experiences both among survivors and within subsequent generations. Such factors include strong family relationships, social and communal ties, religious practices, as well as optimism and interpersonal competence.[51] These elements foster greater psychological resilience among survivors, enabling them not only to endure the hardships of the Holocaust but also to take proactive steps in rebuilding their lives after the war.[52] It is not my role to determine whether, and in what ways, this silence affected David's children; I can only observe that all of the protective factors mentioned above are clearly evident in the family created by David and Sarah. It is also noteworthy that David, almost immediately after liberation – while still in the displaced persons' camp in Austria – demonstrated a very proactive attitude by undertaking the task of compensating for the education he had lost during the war. He swiftly completed several years of schooling and successfully passed the Austrian final examination. He continued this commitment to education upon arrival in the United States, mastering yet another new language in order to pass the American high school examination without delay.

David began to speak to Aline about the Holocaust when, as a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl, she travelled to Poland on a school trip to visit the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp, although he confined himself to very general remarks about his fate. He hardly mentioned Białowieża at all.[53] It is understandable that David was reluctant to revive memories of the Holocaust and to recount his experiences to his children. He had undoubtedly endured traumatic events in the concentration camps, on the death march, perhaps also in the ghetto, or during his deportation to Auschwitz. However, while he spoke regularly to his children about his post-war life in the United States, he remained silent not only regarding the Holocaust but also concerning his earlier life in Białowieża.

50 A. Cacace, S. J. Summers, *Intergenerational Trauma in Phenomenological Research – A Systematic Review*, "Journal of Loss and Trauma," 2025, pp. 1–36, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/15325024.2025.2490917?needAccess=true (accessed: 19.09.2025).

51 R. B. Flannery, *Social support and psychological trauma: A methodological review*, "Journal of Traumatic Stress," vol. 3, 1990, no. 4, pp. 593–611.

52 M. P. Armour, *Meaning Making in Survivorship: Application to Holocaust Survivors*, "Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment," no. 20, 2010, pp. 440–468. Additionally, on various factors that influence how survivors cope differently with traumatic experiences; cf. K. Prot-Klinger, K. Szwajca, *Psychoterapia ocalałych z Holokaustu w Polsce po trzydziestu latach*, "Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały," no. 20, 2024, https://doi.org/10.32927/zzsim.1046 (accessed: 04.06.2025).

53 Interview with Alaine Ashkenazi, *op. cit*.

During an interview with me, he addressed this issue for the first time. In the course of his narrative, he distinctly contrasted his detailed recollections of certain aspects of domestic life – such as the process of hand-making ice cream for customers in his parents' shop – with his inability to recall a broader picture of the social world beyond the home, particularly the names of other residents of Białowieża, both non-Jewish and Jewish, apart from members of his own family. This contrast becomes notably striking when David's account of his time in Białowieża is compared with the testimonies I collected concurrently from non-Jewish residents of the town, who remembered numerous names of Jewish shopkeepers, craftsmen, schoolmates, and neighbours.[54]

David explains his failure to remember the names of his classmates in Białowieża by his lack of time to play games, as he spent most of his time studying, secularly at the public school, and religiously with his father at home and in the synagogue. However, other factors may also have contributed to this memory gap. One possible explanation is the well-documented process of repressing memories so painful that they are pushed from conscious awareness. This mechanism, commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), may have affected his recollections. A particular characteristic of individuals with PTSD is an overgeneral memory[55] whereby even deliberate attempts to recall non-traumatic experiences from that period often yield vague impressions rather than precise details.[56]

David's silence could also have been caused by the painful experiences he endured, not only during the Holocaust but also in the pre-war period in Białowieża. In such a case, his silence may have functioned as a means of controlling the past: a conscious decision not to recall painful memories while retaining only those aspects of his childhood that had brought him happiness, particularly his family life.[57] Another reason for concern was that David may have avoided sharing his experiences of antisemitism in Białowieża in order to protect our relationship – he may have wished not to upset me or feared a negative reaction if he portrayed some residents of Białowieża in an unfavourable light.[58]

54 Collection of interviews with non-Jewish residents, *op. cit.*

55 J. M. Williams [et al.], *Autobiographical Memory Specificity and Emotional Disorder*, "Psychological Bulletin," vol. 133, no. 1, 2007, pp. 123–129, //doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.133.1.122 (accessed: 04.04.2025).

56 A. Surmiak, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

57 H. Greenspan, *op. cit.*; D. Laub, J. Bodenstab, *op. cit.*

58 On the influence of the interviewer on the narrative and the content of the account, see: J. Tokarska-Bakir, *The Unrighteous Righteous and the Righteous Unrighteous*, "Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust," vol. 24, 2010, no. 1, pp. 11–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/23256249.2010.10744397 (accessed: 04.04.2025).

It is particularly noteworthy that Alaine herself understood her father's inability to recall the names of people in Białowieża as possibly stemming from trauma related to his antisemitic experiences there: "He told me earlier, maybe in my teens, that he did experience antisemitic behaviour in Białowieża. So, it showed me that he doesn't necessarily have those positive feelings. [...] Certain things he doesn't remember, like people who lived down the street. So it could be because of the trauma, he doesn't remember."[59]

**The relationships of the residents of Białowieża**

In our conversation, David portrayed his family relations with non-Jews in Białowieża on several occasions as very good and friendly: "We had very nice customers, all of them were very, very nice, very friendly," and he also highlighted positive events – including being rescued by a Polish boy when he was drowning in the river, and the assistance of a local doctor, who kept for them a carton of scented soap, which enabled Waldszan family to survive in the Pruzhany ghetto, as they exchanged it for food with the peasants.

Finally, David decided to tell me about two antisemitic events, each time prefacing the story with assurances of good relations with non-Jews in daily life. The first antisemitic incident David recounted concerned the breaking of a window in their house by a local boy, and his mother's subsequent decision to withdraw from pursuing the matter when confronted by that boy's father, despite having reported it to the Commune Office in Białowieża in advance.[60]

The rather neutrally recounted arrival of the aggressor's father at the home of David's family was, in fact, an act of intimidation. As David explained to me during our interview, his mother acted gently because she did not wish to get into any trouble. However, when David later recounted the same event to his daughter, Alaine, he employed much stronger language than he had used with me. She recalled it to me three years later as follows: "His mother didn't report it in the end because she was afraid that the family [of the aggressor] would do something horrible."[61]

59 Although in the same interview, Alaine also tried to follow David's explanation that he couldn't remember his classmates' names because he was very busy as a child, constantly studying or helping in the shop, and didn't have time to socialise. Interview with Alaine Ashkenazi, *op. cit*.

60 Breaking windows in Jewish shops, houses, and institutions was classified by Alina Cała as either "spontaneous vandalism" or "acts organised by activists." She reported that in the Białystok voivodeship, the police recorded approximately 1,000 broken windows per quarter, see: A. Cała, *Żyd – wróg odwieczny?...*, p. 358. The actual number of broken windows remains unclear, as many incidents likely went unreported.

61 Interview with Alaine Ashkenazi, *op. cit*.

Similar stories about breaking windows in Białowieża also appeared in the accounts of non-Jewish witnesses: "I remember how it was sometimes in Stoczek[62], that someone broke a window for some Jew or trashed a shop."[63] Another woman recalled a story in which an act of violence against an elderly Jew also went unreported. She remembered that, while they were playing near a bonfire by the river, a Jewish man accused them of stealing carrots from his garden. In response, one of the girls, holding a heated stick from the fire, set the man's beard on fire. Despite the humiliation, he did not go to her father to complain. Although the woman herself now judged this behaviour as inappropriate, it was evident that at the time, the children understood such actions against a Jew to be socially acceptable – they knew their parents would not punish them, and that the Jew would likely not report it either.[64]

The second antisemitic incident David shared with me was the beating of a tradesman who would bring chocolate to his father's shop every week, which was required to make the ice cream. As a result of the attack, the man lost all his teeth. Although David's description is relatively minimal, considering the force that would have been necessary to knock out a man's teeth, it is possible to appreciate the severity of the assault.

Meanwhile, Alaine added one more story about an experience of antisemitism in Białowieża that her father had told her about. It was not as aggressive as the beating of the tradesman, but it was repetitive and can be described as harassment: "It was an interesting thing, he doesn't remember people who lived down the street, but he remembers the name Kowalczuk [who] chased him.[65] Every time my father would go to the well, they [non-Jewish boys] would chase him home. They even did it to his parents. It's horrible."[66]

One woman from Białowieża also recalled that Jewish residents had to fetch water from a distant well at the end of the street, and that children would harass them by throwing frogs into their buckets.[67] A similar situation, involving the chasing of Jews

62 Stoczek is the name of the high street of Białowieża, where most Jews used to live.

63 Unpublished transcript of interview with a former resident of Białowieża, 4 December 2007 (recorded by J. Olesińska and K. Rozmus; part of Podlasie Fieldwork recorded by J. Tokarska-Bakir). I am thankful to Prof. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir for providing access to the transcript; cf. J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Raport z badań podlaskich 2007*, "Societas Communitas," no. 2, 2009, pp. 35–93.

64 Interview with Olga Szpakowicz, 15 February 2018 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

65 Alaine said: "Kowalczyk" but in the 1930 Polish Address Book, on the list of service providers from Białowieża, we can find the name "Kowalczuk" as the owner of a tearoom, see: *Księga Adresowa Polski (wraz z W. M. Gdańskiem) dla handlu, przemysłu, rzemiosł i rolnictwa*, Warszawa 1930, p. 87, https://bc.wbp.lublin.pl/dlibra/publication/15917 (accessed: 10.04.2025).

66 Interview with Alaine Ashkenazi, *op. cit.*

67 K. Winiarska, field note from Białowieża, June 2018.

away from a public path, also occurred in the nearby village of Narewka. Leon Leyson recalled a non-Jewish female neighbour who would not allow Jewish children to walk in front of her house and would chase them away, forcing them to cross the street and even throwing stones at them.[68]

Stories of such behaviour by children towards Jews were usually presented by non-Jewish interlocutors as "pranks" or "teasing" typical of childhood, rather than being recognised as acts of violence and persecution as they were to the people who experienced them.[69]

Leon Leyson also says that antisemitism was so common in Narewka that he simply got used to it, but, on the other hand, being aware of the level of anti-Jewish violence in other towns in the district, he considers it to be insignificant: "During our period of time [in Narewka] there weren't any atrocities committed, and antisemitism wasn't carried very far, other than some little incidents like chasing us away from her house."[70]

However, the mild opinion of both David Waldshan and Leon Leyson may partly stem from the fact that they were reporting on events many years after they had occurred. The other material I collected about Białowieża shows that nationalist and antisemitic mobilisation had significantly less resonance here than in other parts of the Białystok voivodeship, including the western communes of Bielsk Podlaski County.[71] This was due to a combination of several factors. One of the factors that contributed to this was the unusual spatial organisation of the Białowieża, which encouraged residents to build closer relationships that went beyond economic exchange. There was no separate Jewish quarter or distinct street in the village, as was commonly the case in many towns and cities in Poland. In Białowieża, Jewish inhabitants had houses situated between those of Christian residents (mainly Orthodox), often adjacent to each other, literally window to window.[72] They shared

68 USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (USC VHA), sig. 8916, 16 November 1995 (recorded by L. Leyson) https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/8916 (accessed: 26.05.2025); L. Leyson, *Chłopiec z listy Schindlera*, Warszawa 2014, p. 26 (Original book in English: L. Leyson, *The boy on the wooden box. How the Impossible Became Possible... on Schindler's List*, New York 2013).

69 See: P. Buszko, *Żyd Żydem. Wizerunek Żyda w kulturze ludowej podlaskich prawosławnych Białorusinów. Gmina Orla*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 45–50.

70 However, he adds that during the Tsarist era in Narewka, at the beginning of the 20th century, his parents experienced pogroms, see: USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Interview with Leon Leyson, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMyZ4LTpqWo (accessed: 19.09.2025); L. Leyson, *Chłopiec z Listy Schindlera*, p. 35.

71 Bielsk Podlaski County – hereafter referred to as Bielsk County.

72 Białowieża is a street-type village, where houses stand on very narrow plots along the street, facing it with their gable wall. The windows of houses in neighbouring yards are very close to each other.

wells standing on the border between their yards,[73] or shared the same hallway, or even a porch, when they rented flats or purchased half a house from Christian landlords.[74] The Jewish wedding of the Zyngiers' daughter took place in the Rabczuk family's (Orthodox Christian) courtyard, with the family in attendance. The Rabczuk couple was also invited to the subsequent wedding reception held in the house.[75]

Regardless of existing prejudices against "letting Jews stay as lodgers," as one resident of Białowieża termed it, the sharing of houses expanded the space and diversity of contacts with Jews and, as a result, served to build relationships between these particular families, including visiting one another's homes, participating in the preparation of *matzah* together, learning various skills from them (such as sewing on a machine or riding a bicycle), studying together,[76] and so forth. The family of one of my interlocutors even had a joint souvenir photograph with the Jewish Szewic family in their orchard, where the children used to play together. Borys Russko's family from Podolany (part of Białowieża) maintained close relations with the Jewish Lubietkin family, helping one another in important matters of life. Frejda Lubietkin arranged for a seriously ill Borys's father to visit a Jewish doctor in Białystok and lent money for the purpose. He, in turn, drove Frejda's son Judel on matchmaking trips to Pruzhany, and when Frejda died, he transported her body there for the funeral.[77] Many years later, Borys Russko commemorated Frejda in a poem dedicated to the Jews of Białowieża.[78] The Jewish hairdresser Kreszyn used to visit Zina's parents on the occasion of the pig slaughter: "Kreszyn used to bring a quarter of vodka to my father, and he'd come to eat the 'świeżynka.'"[79] A considerable number of my interlocutors (most of whom had been children before the war) also recalled assisting in lighting the stoves in Jewish homes every Shabbat.[80]

Despite those many positive examples of Jewish-Christian coexistence, residents also recalled persistent prejudices, stereotypes, and myths concerning Jews: that Jews smelled of garlic, that they hid gold, and that Jewish religious clothing

73 Interview with Jan Buszko, 12 August 2019 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

74 Interviews with Zina Buszko, Olga Smoktunowicz et. al (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

75 Interview with Jerzy Rabczuk, 14 August 2019 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

76 Interview with Zina Buszko, 24 March 2016 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

77 USHMM, sig. RG-50.4880084, Interview with Borys Russko.

78 B. Russko, *Ziemia Obiecana*, in B. Russko, *Rozgarniam Noc*, Warszawa 2005; poem available at: http://www.jewish-Białowieża.pl/poem/ (accessed: 15.05.2024).

79 *Świeżynka* is a Polish dish that consists of fried pieces of pork, often prepared after the pig is slaughtered.

80 Interview with Jerzy Rabczuk, 14 August 2019 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

and the Yiddish language were repulsive.[81] The blood libel – the belief that Jews added the blood of Christian children to *matzah*[82] – appeared in almost every account I gathered. It was usually presented as a tactic employed by elders to intimidate children, and most interviewees emphasised that they knew it was not true, as they had themselves participated in baking and eating *matzah*. They also stressed how strictly Jews observed kosher rules, ensuring that all blood was completely removed from poultry, and that they themselves would not even kill a chicken.[83] The same interviewees spoke very fondly of those Jews whom they knew better or with whom they lived. Their accounts of deportations to the ghetto were frequently marked by empathy and visible emotional engagement.[84]

In conclusion, the proximity and shared everyday space between Jews and non-Jews in Białowieża fostered relationships based on daily interactions, mutual assistance, and emotional bonds. Thus, although stereotypes and prejudice persisted and shaped attitudes towards Jews, living in the same house or in close proximity – as was common for many residents of Białowieża – fostered everyday familiarity with Jewish culture and customs, thereby reducing social distance and helping to diminish prejudice and stereotypes. As Alina Cała wrote: "Where the distance is smaller, aggression is less likely."[85]

The second key factor shaping the situation of Jews in Białowieża – compared with the Jews in the western communes of Bielsk County, and even more evidently in other counties of the Białystok voivodeship – was the socio-national structure of the locality, which reflected the position of particular resident groups within the hierarchy of domination and power. This structure significantly influenced the distribution of political and social sentiments in the interwar period. In Białowieża, the overwhelming majority of residents were Orthodox Christians who identified as Belarusian (71–87 per cent of the population), whereas in the western communes of the same

81 Collection of interviews with non-Jewish residents, *op. cit.*

82 Cf. J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Legenda o krwi. Antropologia przesądu*, Warszawa 2008; J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Cursed: A Social Portrait of the Kielce Pogrom*, Ithaca, New York 2023; J. Żyndul, *Kłamstwo krwi. Legenda mordu rytualnego na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku*, Warszawa 2011.

83 Interview with Nina Szpakowicz, 10 March 2016 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive; Interview with Olga Szpakowicz, 15 February 2018 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

84 *Ibidem*. Cf. J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Error in Measurement. On Barbara Engelking's Article 'The Bielsk County,'* in J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Jewish Fugitives in the Polish Countryside, 1939–1945. Beyond the German Holocaust Project*, Berlin 2022, pp. 339–340.

85 A. Cała, *Żyd – wróg odwieczny*, p. 204.

Bielsk County, although Belarusians constituted a considerable group, they were outnumbered by Catholic Poles.[86]

This was a result of the historical affiliation of Białowieża with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where the indigenous population consisted of Ruthenians.[87] It was only after the end of the First World War that Białowieża – formerly part of the Russian Empire following the partitions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth – became part of the newly established Polish state[88]. For the Belarusian population, the emerging Polish state signified the end of hopes for their own independence and represented yet another state structure to which they were expected to submit.

86 In the 1921 Census, of the 1,811 people in Białowieża, 71 per cent were Orthodox Christians (1,277 persons), 17 per cent Catholics (315 persons), and 8 per cent (143 persons) adherents of Judaism. I use the religious criterion because the nationality criterion is considered to have produced distorted results. 97 per cent supposedly declared Polish nationality. This is contradicted by data from the 1919 census of the Eastern Territories, in which, out of a population of 4265 inhabitants in Białowieża, 87 per cent reported Belarusian nationality, 5.4 per cent Jewish, and 7.4 per cent Polish. The 1931 Census lacks data at the level of localities; it is only available for counties, with Bielsk Podlaski County, to which Białowieża was transferred on 1 August 1922, exhibiting different religious characteristics from the original Pruzhany County. In Bielsk County (Białystok voivodeship), 51.4 per cent of the population declared the Orthodox faith, 40.5 per cent Roman Catholic, and 7.7 per cent Mosaic, whereas in Pruzhany County (Polesie voivodeship), the Orthodox faith was predominant. Such a proportion was certainly characteristic of Białowieża as well, and the numerical advantage has persisted today: according to the 2002 census, 60 per cent of Białowieża residents declared Orthodox faith; *Spis ludności na terenach administrowanych przez Zarząd Cywilny Ziem Wschodnich (grudzień 1919) z mapą*, Lwów–Warszawa 1919; *Skorowidz miejscowości Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej opracowany na podstawie wyników Pierwszego Powszechnego Spisu Ludności z dn. 30 września 1921 r. i innych źródeł urzędowych*, vol. 5, Warszawa 1924: *Województwo białostockie*, pp. 7–8, http://mbc.cyfrowemazowsze.pl/Content/14619/PDF/14619.pdf (accessed: 07.04.2025); *Drugi Powszechny Spis Ludności z dn. 9 grudnia 1931 r.*, vol. 16, Warszawa 1938: *Województwo białostockie*, vol. 20, p. 92: *Województwo poleskie*, p. 25.

87 For centuries, Białowieża was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Polish: Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie, WKL), mostly inhabited by Ruthenians/Rusyns – an East Slavic people (now Belarusians and Ukrainians), predominantly Orthodox Christians. During the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Białowieża remained within the autonomous structures of the WKL as part of the Brest-Litovsk Voivodeship, unlike the entire western part of the region, together with the Bielsk Land, which became part of the Podlasie Voivodeship under the Polish Crown, cf. A. Strumiłło (ed.), *A Book of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Towards the Traditions of European Community. A Joint Publication of Scientists and Writers from Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland*, Sejny 2008.

88 Due to administrative changes, Białowieża was transferred from Pruzhany County westward to Bielsk Podlaski County, which had a different ethno-religious composition.

Poland, despite its declarative commitment to the equal treatment of minorities,[89] pursued a mission of "strengthening the Polish national presence," implementing a policy that marginalised minority groups. In the eastern territories of the Polish Republic, the government treated the so-called "Jewish question" and "Belarusian question" as equally pressing issues.[90] From the very outset of the Polish State's existence, Belarusians faced systemic discrimination, including the brutal liquidation of the entire Belarusian school system; the closure of Orthodox churches and their transfer to the Catholic Church or local authorities (followed by church demolitions in 1938); the suppression of Belarusian organisational life; and the frequent accusations of Belarusians of anti-state activities.[91] They were effectively second-class citizens, just as Jews were rendered so through the antisemitic campaigns of national organisations. These campaigns were reinforced from the mid-1930s by the actions of the Polish state, which adopted nationalist slogans following the death of Józef Piłsudski. It is worth noting that National Party militias in Bielsk Podlaski County carried out attacks not only on Jewish shops but also disrupted meetings of the Belarusian organisation Hramada. Belarusians, persecuted by the Polish state, were thus resistant to nationalist mobilisation against Jews, being themselves a discriminated minority in the newly established Polish state.[92]

89 The minority treaty known as the Little Treaty of Versailles, signed on 28 June 1919 at Versailles by Poland and the Allied Powers, obliged the reborn Polish state to ensure full civil rights and the protection of national, religious, and ethnic minorities.

90 In 1939, the Voivode of Białystok summarised the previous years and set up postulates, also using the phrases: "expansion of the Polish element" and "Polish expansion," APB, sig. 4/47/0/3/121, Sprawozdanie wojewody białostockiego 1939. Wzmocnienie polskiego stanu posiadania; cf. J.J. Milewski, *Polska polityka narodowościowa i stosunki etniczne w województwie białostockim i wileńskim w okresie międzywojennym*, in E. Dmitrów, J. Tauber (eds.), *Stosunki etniczne podczas wojny i okupacji. Białystok i Wilno 1939–1941–1944/45*, Białystok 2011, pp. 13–33.

91 See: P. Chomik [et al.] (eds.), *Historia Białorusinów Podlasia*, Białystok 2016; J.J. Milewski, *Polska polityka narodowościowa...*, pp. 16–19; E. Mironowicz, *Białorusini i Ukraińcy w polityce obozu piłsudczykowskiego*, Białystok 2007, p. 114; Z. Kosztyła, *Wrzesień 1939 roku na Białostocczyźnie*, Białystok 1997, p. 12; A. Prymaka-Oniszk, *Kamienie musiały polecieć: Wymazywana przeszłość Podlasia*, Wołowiec 2024, pp. 118–155; A.G. Kuprjanowicz, *Dwa miesiące barbarzyństwa: maj–lipiec 1938 r.*, http://www.cerkiew1938.pl/dwa_miesiace_barbarzynstwa.html (accessed: 20.04.2025); A. Moroz, *Pamięć i (nie)pamięć: O burzeniu cerkwi prawosławnych na Chełmszczyźnie i południowym Podlasiu w 1938 roku*, "Politeja," vol. 70, 2021, no. 1, pp. 19–32.

92 Tomasz Stegner points out that sharing the same social status was one of the factors that helped to mitigate the sense of otherness, cf. T. Stegner, *Wyznania*, in J. Żarnowski, W. Mędrzecki (eds.), *Metamorfozy społeczne. Społeczeństwo międzywojenne: nowe spojrzenie*, vol. 10, Warsaw 2015, p. 194, https://rcin.org.pl/ihpan/dlibra/publication/85594/edition/66190/content (accessed: 10.04.2025); cf. J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Error in Measurement...*, p. 339; A. Żbikowski, *Pogromy i mordy ludności żydowskiej na Kresach Północno-Wschodnich w pierwszych miesiącach niemieckiej okupacji (czerwiec–lipiec 1941 roku)*, Warszawa 2000.

Building on the structural factors described above, another significant limitation on nationalist mobilisation in Białowieża was the late emergence of the Catholic Church as an institution of influence, which elsewhere in the county and voivodeship often served as a key vehicle for antisemitic propaganda.[93] This delay was directly related to the negligible presence of Polish Catholics in Białowieża prior to the First World War. It was only after the arrival of the new Polish elites in leadership positions in the State Forests in Białowieża that efforts were made to establish a Catholic parish and erect a church.[94] These initiatives, from the very outset, had a distinctly political and ideological character. The church was explicitly intended as an instrument of Polonisation and, simultaneously, as a symbolic affirmation of the alleged historical Polishness of this territory, which, following the partitions, had "returned once more to the bosom of the motherland."[95]

The first parish priest, Józef Dowgiłło, actively encouraged the faithful to join ideologically driven religious associations[96] and widely promoted Catholic publications, including "*Rycerz Niepokalanej*,"[97] a periodical permeated with antisemitic content.[98]

However, the Polish population that arrived in large numbers to Białowieża and neighbouring Hajnówka to work in the timber industry – groups that might otherwise have provided a receptive base for nationalist-Catholic propaganda – instead became actively involved in the labour movement, supported by the left-wing Polish Socialist Party (Polish: Polska Partia Socialistyczna, PPS). In 1932, the Białystok voivode reported: "In the localities of Hajnówka, Białowieża, Milejczyce, Siemiatycze and

93 On the influence of the Church on antisemitic attitudes and support for national organisations cf. A. Cała, *Żyd – wróg odwieczny?*, pp. 203, 344; J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Legenda o krwi…*

94 After Poland regained independence, the Białowieża Forest came under the administration of the newly established State Forests, and the Regional Directorate of the State Forests was established in Białowieża. The Catholic parish in Białowieża was formally established in 1926, and although the church was not yet fully finished, it was consecrated in 1934, APB, ref. No. 4/57/0/728, Dyrekcja Lasów Państwowych Okręgu Białostockiego w Białowieży (Polish: Dyrekcja Lasów Państwowych, DLP).

95 K. Łopatecki, *Kościół p.w. Św. Teresy od Dzieciątka Jezus w Białowieży – ideologiczne uzasadnienie budowy*, "Biuletyn Historii Sztuki," vol. 71, 2009, no. 3, pp. 369–389, https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.35030.32https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.35030.32 (accessed: 15.09.2024); cf. Appeal of the Church Construction Committee was published e.g. in *O kościół w Białowieży*, "Kurjer Warszawski," no. 96, 1926, p. 5.

96 The Eucharistic Crusade, the Living Rosary, four branches of the Catholic Action, the Catholic Association of Men and Women, the Third Order of St. Francis, and the Polish Youth Association, cf. P. Bajko, *Dowgwiłło Józef (1892–1964)*, Encyklopedia Puszczy Białowieskiej, www.encyklopedia.puszcza-bialowieska.eu/index.php?dzial=haslo&id=239 (accessed: 02.03.2025).

97 B. Jędrzejewska, *Budowa kościoła w Białowieży*, in B. Kosel, E. Pirożnikow (eds.), *W cieniu Puszczy Białowieskiej. Ilustrowany przewodnik po dziejach lasu, jego włodarzy i mieszkańców*, Gołuchów 2022, p. 281.

98 A. Juszczak, *Obraz Żyda na łamach 'Rycerza Niepokalanej,' 1922–1939*, "Studia Żydowskie. Almanach," vol. 5, no. 5, 2015, pp. 73–101.

Nurzec [...] the PPS is by far the strongest political force."[99] The Orthodox Church, although not free from anti-Judaic myths, at that time concentrated primarily on defending itself from Polonisation and state-imposed restrictions, rather than engaging in antisemitic agitation.[100]

In this context, the National Party (Polish: Stronnictwo Narodowe, SN), which had been systematically expanding its influence and building organisational structures across successive counties of Białystok voivodeship while spreading antisemitic ideology, struggled to gain a foothold in Bielsk county. The first organisational meetings of SN ended in failure, with very few people attending, and membership recruitment proving difficult. The party abandoned agitation in the county several times; consequently, Bielsk was the last county in the entire voivodeship to be incorporated into the SN's activities.[101] Systematic agitation, the establishment of successive local branches, and the training of cadres began to bear fruit in the western communes of the county. In Brańsk, Zambrów, and Ciechanowiec, regular and increasingly aggressive actions against Jews occurred: boycotts of shops, attacks on market stalls, the smashing of premises, assaults on passers-by, and other forms of violence against Jews.[102] Some incidents were also recorded in Bielsk itself.[103] By 1939, there were 114 local branches of the National Party in Bielsk County, placing it second in the voivodeship in terms of the number of organisational structures, following Wysokie Mazowieckie County. However, when examined at the level of the smallest administrative units, that is, communes, it becomes evident that both

99 APB, sig. 4/47/0/3/100, Starostwo Powiatowe w Hajnówce, Miesięczne sprawozdania sytuacyjne z ruchu politycznego polskiego oraz życia społeczno-politycznego mniejszości narodowych, 1938; cf. B. Nikitiuk, *Z dziejów Hajnówki i jej okolic (1915–1939)*, Białystok 2003; J.J. Milewski, *Z dziejów województwa białostockiego w okresie międzywojennym*, Białystok 1999, pp. 81–87. There were also branches of Belarusian left-wing parties: the Komunistyczna Partia Zachodniej Białorusi, KPZB (Communist Party of Western Belarus) and the Białoruska Włościańsko-Robotnicza Hromada (Belarusian Peasant-Workers Party "Hromada") operating in Białowieża, until both were banned by the state, cf. Chomik [et al.], *op. cit.*, pp. 263–270.

100 Cf. the research on the cult of Saint Gabriel in the Orthodox Church conducted by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Paweł Buszko, J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Raport z badań podlaskich...*, *op. cit.*; P. Buszko, *op. cit.*

101 APB, sig. 4/47/0/3/121, Miesięczne sprawozdanie sytuacyjne wojewody białostockiego.

102 Cf. APB, Miesięczne Sprawozdania Starosty Bielskiego and Sprawozdania Wojewody Białostockiego from the years 1935–1939, record group Urząd Wojewódzki Białostocki 1920–1939, group no. 4. Nationalist organisations employed a wide range of violent tactics: pickets in front of Jewish shops, instigating fights, assaults on Jewish passers-by, smashing market stalls, blockading universities, breaking windows in Jewish shops and houses, arson attacks on Jewish homes, desecration of cemeteries, and even bomb and firecracker attacks, cf. A. Cała, *Żyd – wróg odwieczny?*, pp. 356–358; J. Żyndul, *Zajścia antyżydowskie...*, pp. 35–55.

103 Antisemitism in Bielsk is also described by local Jews in the Yizkor Book of Bielsk Podlaski, cf. J.B. Karmon, *Samoobrona w Bielsku*, in W. Konończuk, D. Fionik (eds.), *Księga Pamięci Żydów Bielska Podlaskiego*, Bielsk Podlaski 2017, pp. 194–195.

the SN's branches and their activities were concentrated mainly in the western communes of Bielsk County, while in the eastern communes, where the Belarusian population constituted the majority, the SN failed to develop local structures. In these areas, the party operated by dispatching mobile groups of activists – referred to as *bojówki* (militias), or simply "bandits" – from neighbouring localities.

In February 1936, the Bielsk County governor reported to the voivode: "The National Party influence is beginning to penetrate even this part of Bielsk County, where until now the National Party had no local branches. On 18 January, antisemitic leaflets were distributed in the streets of Hajnówka, starting with the words 'Down with Jewish Wojteks. Beat the Jews.'"[104] This is the only mention of an antisemitic action in Hajnówka in the collection of reports from the Bielsk County governor; none concern Białowieża. This, of course, does not mean that such actions did not occur at all – as I will return to them in a moment – but their absence from the reports clearly illustrates a significantly lower number of incidents compared with the western communes. From those communes, the county governor reported numerous acts of antisemitic violence every month.[105] He also noted their escalation: "Rural youth, gripped by the slogan 'beat the Jew!' passionately propagated everywhere and at every step by the National Party, and also from the church pulpit, have fallen into a dangerous psychosis that now poses a serious threat to public order and security."[106]

The antisemitic surge and anti-Jewish incidents of the 1930s did not, however, completely bypass Białowieża. Memories persist of pre-war slogans painted on shop windows and pavements calling for a boycott, with inscriptions such as: "Don't buy from a Jew,"[107] as well as of blockades of shops:

> I didn't want to talk about what happened here before the war. There were the so-called nationalists. […] When we had to go to Prync for rolls,[108] the nationalists were standing there

104 "Jewish Wojteks" a pejorative term for Christians who maintained relations with Jews and shopped in Jewish stores; APB, sig. 4/47/0/3/91, Miesięczne sprawozdania sytuacyjne z zakresu spraw społeczno-politycznych i narodowościowych.

105 APB, Miesięczne Sprawozdania Starosty Bielskiego and Sprawozdania Wojewody Białostockiego from the years 1935–1939, record group Urząd Wojewódzki Białostocki 1920–1939, group no. 4.

106 APB, sig. 4/47/0/3/91, Miesięczne sprawozdania sytuacyjne z zakresu spraw społeczno-politycznych i narodowościowych.

107 Interview with Jan Buszko, 12 August 2019 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive; Interview with Olga Smoktunowicz (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

108 Abraham Prync is remembered by nearly all of my prewar interviewees. The bakery where David Waldshan used to bring *cholent* for Shabbat was certainly Abraham Prync's bakery, as it was located right next to their house. Abraham Prync was born on 10 April 1907 in Białowieża and died of exhaustion and typhus in 1942 in the Warsaw ghetto, to which

> and wouldn't let us in. My mother gave me 5 groszy and said: "Go to Prynca for rolls." I went, and there were boys standing and shouting: "Go away! You're not allowed to buy from a Jew, go to a Pole instead!" I came home crying. What was I supposed to do?[109]

My interlocutor, recalling the event from the perspective of a child, was unable to answer my question as to who those "nationalists" were – whether they were residents of Białowieża or rather a militia that had come in specifically for the action.

Without a doubt, the action of a militia described by Michał Szpakowicz constitutes the most drastic example of an antisemitic activity in Białowieża that I have identified:

> In [19]39, I was already fourteen years old. I remember those days and years well. And in that [19]39, things started getting tense in Białowieża around June: there were rumours of a pogrom against the Jews. [...] We, the boys, weren't too interested in it, but one time, I remember, one of the adults said that "party member" [Bel. *партыяне*] had come from the city and that they were supposedly going to beat the Jews. You could hear shouting, noise, someone ran towards the market. We boys followed the adults. And indeed: several Jews were being beaten. One of the Jews was lying on the ground, while others were kneeling and begging for mercy. A man was shouting something, waving his arms, and another was kicking him. It went on for some time until someone shouted that the police were approaching. Then those people began to scatter. The Jews got up and also fled; some hid in houses. It all looked terrifying, but we kids didn't fully understand what was happening.[110]

The "party members" who came from the city were almost certainly members of one of the National Party's militias. When David recounted the attack on the chocolate delivery man, he did not specify the identity of the aggressors, but he did employ the term "bandits." This suggests that the attackers may likewise have belonged to one of the militias described by Szpakowicz. It is also possible that the delivery man, who travelled from Białystok to the distant Białowieża (some 80 kilometres away),

he had been deported with his family for forced labour. Prync's bakery was recorded as abandoned property, cf. Archiwum Państwowe w Warszawie (State Archive in Warsaw, APW), Record group: Sąd Powiatowy w Warszawie, sig. 72/3610/0; APB, sig. 64, Wykaz piekarń Województwa Białostockiego opuszczonych i porzuconych z 7 kwietnia 1945 roku, Record Group: Okręgowy Urząd Likwidacyjny w Białymstoku, Wydział Powierniczy.

109 Interview with Jan Buszko, 12 August 2019 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive. On the picketing in front of Jewish-owned shops and the obstruction of customers seeking to shop there, cf. A. Cała, *Żyd – wróg odwieczny?*, p. 356.

110 *Белавежа ў той цяжкі час*, interview with Michał Szpakowicz, conducted by Mikołaj Bajko, "Niwa," no. 46, 16 November 1986, p. 7; cf. J. Żyndul, *Zajścia antyżydowskie...*, p. 42.

arrived on a market day – when militias typically operated – and was therefore caught in such a raid, or else attacked by locals who joined it.[111]

This was, among other things, the essence of the "sociotechnics of violence" employed by the SN. The method recommended to activists during training was: "provoke fights with Jews, primarily involving the rural population by conducting agitation at markets [...], because those arrested will mostly be Christians, which will result in the Polish population becoming embittered and adopting a hostile attitude towards the government authorities for defending the Jews."[112] Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that the beating of the chocolate delivery man was carried out independently by local residents, and that it may not, in fact, have occurred on a market day or during a militia raid at all.

In the 1930s, the State Forests also participated in promoting the boycott of Jewish shops, under the guise of supporting the development of cooperatives. In May 1935, the Foresters Family Circle – a section of the Trade Union of Foresters of the Republic of Poland – established a grocery and colonial goods shop known as the Foresters Family Shop, obliging its members and forestry workers employed in the sawmills to make their purchases exclusively there.[113] This development found resonance in a letter from Abram Lerenkind of Białowieża, written to his sister, Matilda Barchat, in Palestine, a month after the opening of the shop:

> One already feels the new winds blowing in Poland to restrict the economic activities of the Jews. [...] Also in Białowieża, a [Polish] co-operative has been organised at the State Forestry Directorate, and they intend to concentrate all trade with all possible goods at their place, and they put terrible pressure on all officials to buy only in their shops. [...] They are almost forcing the workers to take goods from the co-op because they are threatened with dismissal.[114]

There is insufficient data to determine the extent to which the cooperatives run by the State Forests or the actions of nationalist militias in Białowieża actually contributed to a decline in Jewish shop clientele. According to residents' accounts, the

111 Cf. R. Benjamin, *„Płonęli gniewem." Autobiografia młodego Żyda*, A. Szyba (ed.), Warszawa 2021; K. Kijek, Introduction, *ibid.*, pp. LXIII–LXIV.

112 Both the term "sociotechnics of violence" and the cited passage come from Kamil Kijek; cf. K. Kijek, *Zanim stał się Przytyk. Ruch narodowy a geneza zajść antyżydowskich w województwie kieleckim w latach 1931–1939*, "Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały," no. 14, 2018, pp. 55–75.

113 APB, sig. 4/57/0/6/888, Protokóły posiedzeń Zarządu Oddziału Rodziny Leśnika w Białowieży, 1935–1935, no. 9, 10.

114 Private archive of Amir Berger, a letter from Abram Lerenkind to Matilda Barchat, 19 June 1935. The role of Polish cooperatives in the economic marginalisation of Jews was also emphasised by the governor of Białystok; APB, sig. 4/47/0/3/78, Sprawozdanie sytuacyjne wojewody białostockiego za czerwiec 1934; Cf. J.B. Karmon, *Samoobrona w Bielsku*, in W. Konończuk, D. Fionik (eds.), *Księga Pamięci Żydów Bielska Podlaskiego*, Bielsk Podlaski 2017, p. 194.

opposite appears more likely. All of my interviewees emphasised that they usually shopped at Jewish shops, rather than Polish, as the Jewish ones were cheaper, permitted bargaining, and extended credit. People generally frequented the same Jewish shops run by shopkeepers they knew personally, usually those located closest to their homes – for example, at Szuster's, Prync's, Nachman's, and others.[115]

Isaac Friedberg, a survivor from Pruzhany, emphasised that, despite some nationalist agitation and the establishment of Christian shops, these developments had little impact on the Jewish community, which remained economically resilient. Comparing the situation in his town with that in other regions, he also described it as one of "relative normality." He noted: "Until the outbreak of the war, there were, with the exception of occasional hooligan speeches, no incidents between the Polish or Belarusian population and the Jews. [...] There were no militias. Nor were there any overt displays of antisemitic behaviour. [...] The appearances of individual Endeks [members sympathisers of National Democrats] in the town did not play a major role, as their influence was negligible."[116]

By the late 1930s, even in municipalities marked by the "relative normality," Jews were undoubtedly experiencing a growing sense of hostility and marginalisation. The 1939 report of the Białystok Voivode was filled with nationalist propaganda about the nature of Jews and the alleged threat they posed to the country. The Voivode stated explicitly that "Jews must be liquidated in a planned and systematic way", referring to manipulative strategies designed to remove Jews from trade, and eventually, to force them to leave the country.[117]

Despite this, the combination of structural factors that had previously distinguished Białowieża from the western parts of the county also acted as a restraint during the war. David recalled the fear his family felt in September 1939, as Polish troops and officials were leaving the village. They sat in a shuttered house, trying not to be seen. He also briefly referred to the power vacuum that followed the German advance into formerly Soviet-held areas as a period of "no man's land." He does not elaborate on this experience, and I did not press him to do so – an omission I now recognise as a limitation of the interview. However, it is likely that this fear was shaped not only by immediate uncertainty, but also by news of the lootings of Jewish homes and shops in nearby towns, and of mass killings of Jews by Poles

115 Collection of interviews with non-Jewish residents, *op. cit.*

116 Yad Vashem Archive, Testimony of Isaac Friedberg, https://documents.yadvashem.org/index.html?language=en&search=global&strSearch=Białowieża&GridItemId=3656623&TreeItemId=3557342 (accessed: 01.03.2025).

117 APB, sig. 4/47/0/3/121, *Wzmocnienie polskiego stanu posiadania* in Sprawozdanie wojewody białostockiego 1939.

in other parts of the voivodeship during that time.[118] According to my research, nonetheless, no acts of neighbourhood violence occurred in Białowieża compared to those seen in the western counties of the Białystok region in the summer of 1941.

Nevertheless, this did not preclude some residents (both Polish and Belarusian) from actively collaborating with the German occupiers or participating in the widespread seizure of Jewish property following deportation.[119] At the same time, some non-Jewish neighbours – particularly those who had closer ties with Jews or shared the same houses – demonstrated gestures of assistance. David's account of a cow that his mother gave to a neighbour during the deportation carries an ambiguous tone. It may suggest the appropriation of Jewish property by neighbours during the deportation to the ghetto, but it may also indicate that Jews entrusted their belongings to others for safekeeping, as with the soap David's mother asked a doctor to preserve. In interviews with the non-Jewish witnesses, I encountered both kinds of accounts. There are also reports of Białowieża residents providing food to their Jewish neighbours in the ghetto in Pruzhany.[120] Although no sources can confirm these specific stories from Białowieża, testimonies from other survivors of the Pruzhany ghetto contain similar memories of non-Jews providing food without payment.[121]

118 J.T. Gross, *Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Princeton 2001; A. Żbikowski, *U genezy Jedwabnego: Żydzi na Kresach Północno-Wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej: wrzesień 1939 – lipiec 1941*, Warszawa 2006, p. 271–310; A. Żbikowski, *Pogromy i mordy ludności żydowskiej w Łomżyńskiem i na Białostocczyźnie latem 1941 roku w świetle relacji ocalałych Żydów i dokumentów sądowych* in P. Machcewicz, K. Persak (eds.), *Wokół Jedwabnego*, Warszawa 2002, pp. 159–271; G. Berendt, *Żydzi i ich sąsiedzi na Polesiu w lecie 1941 r.*, in K. Kijek, A. Markowski, *Pogromy Żydów na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku*, Warszawa 2019, pp. 117–134.

119 The majority of cases of collaboration with the occupiers in Białowieża occurred between 1942 and 1944, that is, after the deportation of the Jewish population, and were directed mainly against Soviet partisans. These included participation in roundups in the forest and public executions in the centre of Białowieża. The collaboration involved both individual actions and activities carried out within formal structures such as the Belarusian Committee and the Schutzpolizei. Cf. IPN Bi 015/746; IPN Bi 403/12 vol. 1; IPN Bi 403/14 vol. 1; For information on the compilation of lists of communists, and, later, Jews who were subsequently executed by the Germans, see: USHMM, sig. RG-50.4880051, Interview with Włodzimierz Dackiewicz, 11 October 1998, on the seizure of Jewish property by residents in Białowieża, see: Collection of interviews with non-Jewish witnesses, *op. cit.*; in Poland see: J. Grabowski, D. Libionka (eds.), *Klucze i kasa. O mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych, 1939–1950*, Warszawa 2014.

120 Instytut Pamięci Narodowej w Białymstoku [Institute of National Remembrance in Białystok, IPN Bi], sig. 1/1946, Statement of Jadwiga Kilis; Collection of interviews with non-Jewish witnesses, *op. cit.*

121 Yad Vashem Archive, Testimony of Izhak Zutta, item Id: 3747550, https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/documents/3747550 (accessed: 10.03.2025); Testimony of Yeta Grotzki, item Id: 3562691, https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/documents/3562691 (accessed: 10.03.2025).

David did not return to Poland, even temporarily, following the end of the war. After spending a few years in Austria[122], he migrated permanently to the United States.[123] Although he visited Europe on several occasions later in life, he never returned either to Białowieża itself or to Poland. However, he refrained from speaking directly about his negative attitude towards Poland. When I inquired David about his sense of identity during my second visit to his home, he spoke only of American and Israeli identity and remained entirely silent on the question of whether or not he felt any connection to Polishness. He said:

> I feel, since being liberated by the Americans and given the opportunity to come here to establish myself, so I feel greatly indebted to the United States. On another hand, I'm also Jewish and I feel very strongly about Israel, the survival of Israel. After 2000 years, we were persecuted all over; we had different pogroms. During the war, there were 6 million people. Some Jews and I. That's why we come to different get-togethers, we like to hear speakers or celebrations. At first, we started singing the American national anthem: "O say can you see..." [*singing*], and then we also started singing the Israeli anthem: "*Kol 'od balevav...*" [*singing*]. It's an example. So actually, we are dual citizens, so to speak. On the one hand, American, and also Jewish.[124]

When I asked him directly why he had never returned to Poland, he replied:

> Because there was nobody left. I had no one to come back to. If I had some relatives, chances are, I would have stayed in Białowieża or some other cities. I knew that my family was no longer there, so I would be the only person, the only Jewish person living in Białowieża. It's the only reason. [...] So, I feel any connection. [...] I went to France because I have a cousin, and then to England, because my brother-in-law had a nephew in Manchester, England. So, he's part of my wife's family. So, these were two countries. But to go to Poland, especially to Białowieża and other places, I had nobody, no family.[125]

In his response, he answered a deeper question than the one I had posed: that of the motivations underlying his decisions regarding his post-liberation life, reflecting a pattern typical of survivors liberated from the camps, who chose never to return to their places of birth in Poland. Beyond emotional factors, such as those cited by David, a key element influencing survivors' decisions in the DP camps not

122 He was liberated on 4 May 1945 by U.S. troops in Gunskirchen, a sub-camp of the Mauthausen forced labour camp in Austria.

123 David Waldshan left Austria for the USA on 31 October 1950, in Arolsen Archives, Tracing and documentation, sig. 6.3.3.2. case no. 736.252 for Waldshan David, born 28.02.1928.

124 Interview with David Waldshan, 17 November 2016 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

125 *Ibidem*.

to return to Poland was the antisemitic violence experienced by Jews who did go back to their hometowns (which David does not mention, presumably to avoid causing offence). Although after his liberation from the Gunskirchen camp, David had no direct information about the situation in Białowieża, he was certainly aware of events unfolding elsewhere in Poland.[126] News of beatings, assaults, murders of Jews, as well as the seizure of Jewish homes, workshops, and shops by Poles, and particularly the Kielce pogrom of 4 July 1946—which precipitated a mass wave of Jewish emigration from Poland – reached the DP camps very rapidly.[127]

These reports reaching the DP camps influenced not only survivors' decisions regarding their future, but also the process of forming a new identity: "Polish Jews were becoming Jews from Poland and finally simply Jews beginning a new life outside their country of birth."[128] This shift in identity was likely part of David's experience as well, although it is unclear whether his starting point had been that of a "Polish Jew", considering the histories of Białowieża and of Pruzhany and Shereshov, from where his parents originated.

Knowledge of the relatively favourable situation in Białowieża specifically would almost certainly not have altered David's decision to emigrate to the United States, as this decision was primarily shaped by the awareness that his closest family had perished. Nevertheless, the local context in Białowieża at that time is worthy of note.

In Bielsk County, the postwar pattern of antisemitic violence mirrored the prewar geography of hostility, being most intense in the western communes and almost absent in the eastern ones.[129] It should be noted, however, that in the smallest eastern localities, only a few individuals returned. To Białowieża, only one surviving Jew returned from the camp – Israel Malecki. His story demonstrates that it was not

126 On the subject of postwar antisemitic violence, see: J.T. Gross, *Strach. Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie. Historia moralnej zapaści*, Kraków 2008; A. Skibińska, *Powroty ocalałych i stosunek do nich społeczeństwa polskiego*, in M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, F. Tych (eds.), *Następstwa zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2010*, Lublin 2011, pp. 39–70; A. Żbikowski, *Morderstwa popełniane na Żydach w pierwszych latach po wojnie*, in M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, F. Tych (eds.), *Następstwa zagłady…*, pp. 71–94; J. Kwiek, *Nie chcemy Żydów u siebie. Przejawy wrogości wobec Żydów w latach 1944–1947*, Warszawa 2021.

127 K. Person, *Dipisi. Żydzi polscy w amerykańskiej i brytyjskiej strefach okupacyjnych Niemiec, 1945–1948*, Warszawa 2019, p. 96, 81. On the subject of the Kielce pogrom, see: J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Pod klątwą. Społeczny portret pogromu kieleckiego*, vol. 1–2, Warszawa 2018.

128 K. Person, *Jak polscy Żydzi przestawali być polskimi Żydami*, in A. Bikont, K. Kijek (eds.), *1945. Nie koniec, nie początek. Katalog wystawy. Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN*, Warszawa 2025, s. 206.

129 According to Julian Kwiek's estimates, between 27 July 1944 and the end of 1947, between 1,074 and 1,121 Jews were murdered in postwar Poland. Localities in the western part of Bielsk County appear repeatedly on this list, while Białowieża is not mentioned, cf. J. Kwiek, *op. cit.*, pp. 225–539. About the community of Holocaust survivors in Białystok region, see: J. Sadowska, *Epilog historii białostockich Żydów – okres powojenny*, in D. Boćkowski, E. Rogalewska, J. Sadowska, *Kres świata białostockich Żydów*, Białystok 1994, pp. 55–107.

only possible to abstain from violence but also to act with human solidarity. The emaciated Malecki was taken in by his former tailor master, Kuprjanow, a Baptist, who provided him with both shelter and employment. Testimonies from numerous non-Jewish interlocutors, who remembered Malecki's return and his amicable relations with residents during his several-month stay, were recently corroborated by survivor Lea de Navarro-Zajac.[130]

The story of Malecki, who ultimately decided to emigrate to Israel, demonstrates that in postwar decision-making, closely tied to the question of identity, the presence of a locally supportive atmosphere was not decisive. It could not outweigh the trauma of losing one's closest relatives, the collapse of the world as it had been known, the sense of isolation, and the widespread hostility towards Jews in postwar Poland.

**David's postwar years**

A key factor in David's decision to emigrate was his desire to build his life in accordance with the plans he had made before the war – plans in which education and the ambition of attending the gymnasium in Pruzhany played a central role. Throwing himself into intensive studies while still in Austria – where he quickly caught up on his schooling and passed his matriculation exams – David made education the principal axis around which he would construct his life. This path became both a guarantee of a better life in the United States and a means of maintaining a connection with his lost family. David's father, Benjamin Waldszan, came from a family of rabbis and teachers from Shereshov. He was also a teacher, but, as it was difficult to earn a living from this profession, the young couple – following their relatives' advice – moved to Białowieża, probably around 1924,[131] and established a grocery store on the high street of Białowieża as their main source of livelihood. Benjamin, however, continued to serve as a teacher in the Białowieża Jewish community and as a secretary. In the absence of Rabbi Kopel Kagan in Białowieża, he oversaw the affairs of the community and managed correspondence with the Yeshiva Committee.[132] I located this correspondence – a letter written by Benjamin Waldszan –

130 Phone interview with Lea de Novera Zajac, 29 January 2025 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive. Lea Novera Zajac is the niece of Israel Malecki's postwar wife, Sara Szpilewska, a Holocaust survivor from Hajnówka. Lea has lived in Argentina since 1947. She gave the interview in Polish.

131 Benjamin's father (David's grandfather), Abraham Aron Waldszan, was a rabbi in Shereshov and then in Olkieniki (now in Lithuania). Isaac Waldszan, Benjamin's brother, was also a rabbi; another brother, Joel Waldszan, was a teacher and later the head of a school in Shereshov, and Benjamin's two sisters married rabbis.

132 The Council of Yeshivot (Vaad Hayeshivot) in Vilnius was established in 1924 to support yeshivas in the eastern provinces of Poland.

a few days after my second visit to David in the YIVO archives in New York. At the time, this collection had not yet been digitised; I was able to examine it in person courtesy of YIVO.[133]

David attributed his failure to recall the names of his classmates in Białowieża to the fact that he spent most of his time studying, attending secular lessons at the public school, and receiving religious instruction from his father at home and in the synagogue. After passing his high school diploma in Salzburg in May 1949 and emigrating to the United States, he mastered English in six months, completed high school, and passed the American baccalaureate. He worked while continuing his education, eventually graduating with a degree in industrial engineering.

**Conclusions**

David not only refrained from returning to Poland but also permanently severed his active use of the Polish language, although he continued to understand it. While recounting his childhood in Białowieża, he spoke with impeccable Polish pronunciation, incorporating Polish words and phrases – he used more than thirty of them during the interview and made only two minor errors. In an off-the-record conversation, he further demonstrated his multilingualism to one of his daughters by writing down the same sentence in four languages, including Polish.[134] Additionally, when the English version of my *The Virtual Museum of the History of Jews in Białowieża* website was released – two weeks later than the Polish version – he read its contents in Polish.

When I visited David again three years after our first interview, I asked why he had agreed to speak to me in 2016, despite having previously refused to discuss his wartime experiences. He explained that, at the time, he felt it was important to share whatever he could remember. One motivating factor was the hope that I might be able to inform him about the events in Białowieża during the war, as he believed he was the sole survivor. He did not know then that, on 10 August 1941, seventy-seven Jewish men aged sixteen to forty-five – separated from the rest during the deportation to the ghetto – had been executed in the Gravel Pit. Learning this from me proved to be a pivotal moment: "Thanks to this information, I was able to

133 The collection *Council of Yeshivot* concerning Białowieża consists of 20 letters from the period 1926–1934 sent by the Rabbi of Białowieża, Kopel Kagan, to Vaad Hayeshivot. These letters concern the transfer of donations for yeshivots, collected among members of the Białowieża Jewish community, as well as the reports of the Białowieża rabbi of his journeys to other towns in the region. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Records of the Vaad Hayeshivot, Vilna, Poland, RG 25, folder 24.

134 The sentence "We're having dinner at the table," David wrote down in Polish, Yiddish, Russian, and German, November 2016. Photo with a written sentence in the author's personal collection.

tell my children what transpired during the war, which was something I had never known. You enabled me not only to tell my children but also my grandchildren, and now they know what happened to the Jewish people in Białowieża."[135]

For David, gaining new knowledge about his own experiences was essential. He pursued this in daily life by reading Holocaust literature and maintaining close ties with a community of fellow survivors, many of whom were active at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills. From this perspective, meeting someone researching the history of the Jews in Białowieża was naturally appealing. Nonetheless, I believe this engagement involved more than a simple exchange – testimony for information – as evidenced by the close relationship between us. My presence may have provided a form of solace, helping him achieve a degree of closure regarding a painful chapter tied to his birthplace. Barbara Engelking has described such encounters as a "specific opportunity" – the presence of someone who asks questions and listens attentively to survivors' wartime stories.[136] The fact that I was not merely a researcher, but someone from Białowieża actively involved in restoring Jewish memory there, rendered this "opportunity" all the more significant.

For David, the act of testifying was also a form of acceptance – a way of making sense of the turning points in his life. Many scholars have emphasised this aspect of Holocaust testimony.[137] Providing his account to someone from Białowieża was, in itself, a symbolic return to his birthplace and a reconciliation with it – not only as the site of trauma, but also of childhood joy: skating on the frozen pond, sledding, swimming, watching the forest and the bison, and learning to make ice cream with his father.

David Waldshan passed away on 25 March 2023, at the age of 95.[138] In accordance with his wish to ensure that atrocities such as the Holocaust never recur, his son, Ben, and Ben's wife, Liz, established the David Waldshan Educational Endowment Fund at Florida Atlantic University. Honouring this legacy, the fund supports Holocaust and human rights education for educators in South Florida, intending to combat hatred and prejudice.[139]

135 Interview with David Waldshan, 28 October 2019 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

136 B. Engelking, *Zagłada i Pamięć. Doświadczenie Holokaustu i jego konsekwencje opisane na podstawie relacji autobiograficznych*, Warszawa 1994, s. 294.

137 Cf. J. Leociak, *Polscy Żydzi – strategie autobiograficzne*, "Kwartalnik Historii Żydów," no. 4, 2001, pp. 607–621; P. Filipkowski, *Historia mówiona jako hermeneutyka losu. Doświadczenie przedtekstowe*, "Teksty Drugie," vol. 1, 2018, pp. 40–60; J. Leder, *op. cit.*

138 https://www.hebrewmemorial.org/obituaries/David-Waldshan/#!/TributeWall (accessed: 19.09.2025).

139 Florida Atlantic University, *David Waldshan Educational Endowment Fund at the Center for Holocaust and Human Rights Education*, https://www.fau.edu/artsandletters/pjhr/news/

I recorded David Waldshan's account across several sessions during three of my five days in his home. In addition to documenting his life story, we spent time with his family and friends, visited various locations – including a visit to the local Holocaust Museum[140], which was particularly significant – and examined albums and books relating to the Holocaust. It was not only I who ensured adequate recording conditions; David himself was meticulous in securing sufficiently long and quiet periods for recording each day amid the flurry of activities. The interview constitutes a continuous biographical account, spanning from the interviewee's birth to the time of recording. On subsequent days, we began with brief follow-up questions before resuming the narrative at the point we had paused previously.

Below, I present a chronological record of the main narrative. I employ square brackets with three dots to indicate omissions throughout the account and to clarify sections that may be unclear to the reader. It is worth noting that in the sections concerning life in Białowieża and the period of the war and the Holocaust, very few abbreviations are used, and only short passages are omitted. In contrast, in the sections covering the post-war period in Austria and the early years following emigration to the United States, abbreviations are more frequent and longer passages have been removed. This reflects two considerations. First, greater emphasis is placed on the pre-war and Holocaust periods, both for their relevance to the research topic and due to the scarcity of other accounts from Białowieża Jewish survivors, as well as the gradual passing of the pre-war generation of witnesses. Second, David's account of the pre-war and Holocaust periods is concise and economical, whereas his post-war recollections in Austria and during the initial years in the United States are more elaborate, rich with details, anecdotes, and dialogues. The period of stabilisation itself – essentially the longest phase of his life, encompassing work, family formation, and everyday routines – was summarised by David in a few informative sentences, leaving this portion of his life private.

waldshan-educational-endowment-pjhr/ (accessed: 04.06.2025).

140 The Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills, see: https://www.holocaustcenter.org/exhibitions/ (accessed: 19.09.2025).

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## The account of David Waldshan[141]

*David, let us start from the beginning. What is your name? Where were you born? What was your family like?*
My name is David Waldshan, and I was born in Białowieża, 28 February 1928. My parents' names were Benjamin Waldszan and Taibl or Tanya Waldszan.[142] I had two sisters, my older sister was Hinda, she was 4 years older than I was, and Mindel, she was 2 years older than me.[143] And the two were born in Białowieża. And I am sure that my mother arrived there from Pruzhana[144] and my father from Shereshov,[145] which is [much] more far from Pruzhana. We had a store, a confectioner's store which was called: *Sklep słodycze i owoce,*[146] and also other staff, such as nuts and grocery things, and food.

*Could you describe what your father was like?*
Originally, my father, Benjamin Waldshan, came from Shereshov. He was a teacher in the beginning. And he had to commute to other places, because Białowieża did

141 Interview with David Waldshan, born in Białowieża on 28 February 1928, 15–17 November 2016 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.
142 In Poland, the family used the name *Waldszan*; in the United States, David used the English rendering of the Polish sound "sz" as "sh". In this text, I use the English version of his name; for the family who have never left Poland, I retained the original forms.
143 The only known sources of information about Tanya Waldszan and David's sisters, Hinda and Mindel Waldszan, are his memoir and a family photograph held in the private archive of David Waldshan.
144 The town known in Yiddish as **פרוזשענע**, in Polish as *Prużana,* and commonly in English as *Pruzhany*, was consistently pronounced by David as *Pruzhana*, with the sound "a" at the end reflecting the Polish pronunciation. In his account, I retained his version, *Pruzhana*, while also using *Pruzhany*, which is more common in the English-language literature. Pruzhany, located 45 km east of Białowieża, was incorporated into the Russian Empire during the partition of Poland (1795–1915) and served as the county town for Białowieża in the Grodno Governorate. After the First World War, the entire region became part of Poland. Due to administrative changes, Białowieża was removed from Pruzhany County and placed under Bielsk Podlaski, Białystok Voivodeship, while Pruzhany was in Polesie Voivodeship. Relations between Pruzhany and Białowieża remained strong, as many families from Białowieża had relatives in Pruzhany. In the interwar period in Poland, Jews constituted 60 per cent of Pruzhany's population of 5,000 and held an overwhelming majority in the local government. Today, Pruzhany is located in Brest Province, Belarus.
145 The town known in Yiddish as **שערשעוו**, in Polish as *Szereszów*, in Belarusian as *Шарашова*, and Russian as *Шерёшево,* as well as having several English versions, is rendered here as *Shereshov,* reflecting the Polish pronunciation used by David. Shereshov lies 35 km east of Białowieża, in Pruzhany County, and half of its inhabitants were Jews.
146 *Sklep Słodycze i Owoce* – (trans. from Polish) Sweets and Fruits Store.

not have very many children, so therefore he had to travel to other places. It most likely was Bielsk Podlaski[147] and other neighbouring towns. And apparently, it was too difficult for him to travel to different places. But thanks to my mother's family, who resided in Pruzhana, they helped us to establish ourselves in Białowieża. In fact, they were the ones who suggested we move to Białowieża, to have a better living in Białowieża. And it would not be too difficult for my father to commute to different places and stay away from my family.

*Do you remember what he looked like?*
He was a little taller than I was, probably about 168 cm, and lately he was a little gray. Because years ago, it was not unusual for a 45-year-old man to be almost gray, totally gray. I don't know why. The fact remains that he was a good man. In fact, because he was grey, it was the reason why he was not selected when Białowieża was liquidated. He looked older than 45. And that's how he stayed alive.[148]

But otherwise, he was a very nice, kind person, hard-working person. Now the reason I say hard-working, because in our store, we used to make our own *lodys*[149] – our ice-creams. He got up early in the morning, we had a *lodownia*[150] built not far from our store, and farmers or peasants used to supply us with ice. We kept the ice in the *lodownia* covered with sawdust, to preserve it for all year round. The ice was obtained from the river Narewka, I remember, which is the flow of Białowieża. Early in the morning, we got up and started the day with ice-creams. In fact, many times I helped my father make ice-creams, even though I was very busy with my homework at school. My mother prepared all the ingredients the day before. By ingredients, I mean, she used to boil milk and add chocolate, add sugar and vanilla, and mix it, making sure everything was good. It was not an easy job, but we made a nice living. So, this way we had ice-creams in the morning and very nice customers, all of them were very, very nice, very friendly. This lasted until September 1st, 1939.

147 Bielsk Podlaski, located 50 km west of Białowieża, belonged to Bielski Podlaski County during the interwar period, with Jews constituting 38 percent of the town's population.

148 On 10 August 1941, in a former gravel pit, the Germans executed 77 Jewish men from Białowieża aged 16–45. The younger and older ones were taken to the ghetto. Cf. USHMM, sig. RG-48.004M, Polizeiregiment Mitte. Pol. Bat. 322. Kompanie Tagebuch. 9 June 1941 – 26 March 1942. David learned of the execution from me several months prior to the recording. He wondered why his father had not been executed and concluded that his father's grey hair, which made him appear older, may have spared him.

149 *Lody* (trans. from Polish) – ice cream. David used the Polish word *lody* but incorrectly added the "s" typical of English plural formation.

150 *Lodownia* (trans. from Polish) – an icehouse is typically a brick cellar or a separate building where ice, extracted in winter from ponds, lakes, and rivers in sheets and blocks, was stored and insulated with straw, sawdust, moss, or rushes.

*Was your father also a teacher in Białowieża?*
No, he just..., as far as I remember, he was teaching me, but he gave up teaching altogether.[151] I would say this must have been in the year 1927, 1926 maybe, even before I was born, because my mother's family helped us establish ourselves, could have been financially, could have been selling us different products. There was one person, his name was Shlocharman.[152] He had a big truck, and he used to deliver different products [...], the chocolate, for example, we used to get from Białystok. [...] So, we had a travelling salesman who used to come to us once a week and bring the chocolate.

*Did your mother help in this shop and prepare this ice cream?*
No, she would not. Her job was finished by preparing all the ingredients for the ice cream. My father was the one to make the ice cream. There were two stainless steel containers. So, we would place it in the ice, and we would rotate it on both sides until it would become semi-solid. Then I would take a spatula and mix it, and again, turn three minutes, again mix it, until it became solid. And, of course, we had ice cream cones, and the kids, whoever, you know, even adults would come to us. This is one of the products that we had – ice cream, chocolate, candies, and fruit, of course, nuts.

*So, what about your mother? What was she doing? Did she work in the store?*
Oh, yeah, in the store, definitely. She was the salesperson. She also took care of us, of the kids, three of us, made sure that we do our homework. And we were very busy doing our homework. That's why, as for socializing with other kids, it was out of the question. Maybe we went to the synagogue on a Saturday, we saw only two kids, and that's it, because we were very busy. First of all, we were busy with *szkoła powszechna*[153] with Polish language [...] but also Yiddish and Hebrew. We had

151 Perhaps by the 1930s, which David refers to, his father was no longer a teacher; however, he was certainly a teacher in Białowieża in 1927. In the YIVO Archive collection of the Council of Yeshivot concerning Białowieża, there is a letter from Rabbi Kopel Kagan, dated 15 February 1927, reporting that he gave PLN 20 to the teacher Benjamin Waldszan for a Gemara class, in YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Records of the Vaad Hayeshivot, Vilna, Poland, RG 25, folder 24.

152 The Shlocharman (Polish: *Szlocharman*) family, who lived in Białowieża, was mentioned to me by Michał Rubel, although he did not recall a shopkeeper, but a shoemaker: "On Zaułek Street, on the corner [lived] Shlocharman. He was a shoemaker. He had four sons: the oldest was called Mejsza, then Welwel, Kacap [it's not a Jewish name but a derogatory term used in Podlasie, usually in reference to Belarusians, but sometimes more broadly to people who have come from Russia], and Abram. They had a cow and planted potatoes," Interview with Michał Rubel, 26 June 2016 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

153 *Szkoła powszechna* (trans. from Polish) – primary school, literally common school. Following Poland's regaining independence, the March 1921 constitution introduced compulsory schooling and free access to primary education. All children went to primary schools, regardless of nationality or religion.

to learn the grammar, the structure of sentences, and therefore, we did not have a way of assimilating the remaining few Jewish children. All of us were very, very busy, and the only games I remember was playing the *polanta*,[154] kicking the can. Whoever kicked the can was the winner of the game. But otherwise, our attention was focused mainly on education. In the Polish school, at a young age, fourth, fifth grade, the teachers were very strict, and very good, excellent. I remember on one occasion, one of the teachers said that I was neglecting, [Polish] *"lekceważy,"* my studies. So, my mother found out about it, and she said: "From now on, you have to learn. Don't forget to do your homework." And she was reminding me all the time, and the same teacher complimented me! She said: "Oh, this boy is very good now. It's a good thing you warned him." I remember at a young age, we already worked on the compositions, [Polish] *streszczenie*, and *wypracowanie*.[155] I remember even the grammar, we had to memorize like *rzeczownik, czasownik, przymiotek*,[156] all at a young age. You would think Białowieża was a small town, but it had excellent education. I remember we had to decline the verbs, nouns: *kto, co? kogo, czego? komu, czemu? kto, co? o kim, o czym?*[157] at a young age. Very good education. Then, of course, we had to learn Hebrew. All these three things: Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew just really kept me busy as a young boy.

*Was it your father to teach you Hebrew and Yiddish?*
Yes, father taught me. My father, incidentally, came from an extended family of educators. His father, my grandfather, was a rabbi in Shereshov, and then he moved to a place by the name of Olkieniki. His name was Avraham Haron; in English, it would be Abraham Aaron Waldszan.[158] My father had a brother who was also a rabbi. His name was Yitzhak. And he had another brother whose name was Joel Waldszan. He was a teacher in Shereshov and [was] then promoted to the principal

154 *Polanta* – the correct Polish name of the game is *palanta*, it's a traditional Polish team game using a wooden stick and ball, dating back to the Middle Ages and very popular in interwar Poland. See: https://grawpalanta.pl/historia-gry/ (accessed: 20.06.2024).

155 *Streszczenie i wypracowanie* (trans. from Polish) – abstract and essay.

156 *Rzeczownik, czasownik, przymiotek* (trans. from Polish) – noun, verb, adjective. David twisted the word adjective slightly; it should be *przymiotnik*.

157 *Kto, co? kogo, czego? komu, czemu? kto, co? o kim, o czym?* (trans. from Polish) – supporting questions on the declension of nouns by cases in Polish. David mentions 5 cases, making a mistake only in the fourth one: it should be *kogo? co?*

158 Abraham Waldszan is listed as rabbi and founder of the Private Jewish School in Olkieniki in LCVA, sig. 173 1 481, *Inspektorat Kuratorjum okręgu szkolnego w Wilnie*. He is also mentioned by Yaffa Eliach that, who notes that, led in the front row of a column of deported Jews from Olkiennik chased by the Germans, he, together with other rabbis, intoned the viddui (a song traditionally recited on the deathbed), Y. Eliach, *Popular Jewish Religious Responses* in S. Carmy, R. S. Hirt (ed.), *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, 1999, p. 318.

of the school.[159] And of course, my father was a teacher too, and I remember we had a little library [...], a room full of books – Hebrew books, Yiddish books, Polish books.[160] He knew all of these things. So, therefore, he taught me. And there was another teacher who used to come from Pruzhana, my second cousin. His brother was born in Pruzhana, and he was hidden out during the liquidation of the ghetto in a bunker, and then he got in touch with some farmers who saved his life and his wife's life.[161] He survived the war, and he died in New York about four years ago at the age of 102. In fact, he was the one to ask questions because he came to Białowieża from time to time. I asked him: "Why would my family, the Waldshans, come to Białowieża? Why?" So, he told me that my grandfather, on my mother's side, had a small shop, a little factory, which used to produce turpentine, [Polish] *terpentyna*.[162] And he got in touch with some farmers and peasants in Białowieża. He used to do it with them because, in order to make turpentine, you get it in the roots of trees. And since Białowieża had a lot of trees, they extracted, took out the stumps from the trees, and shipped them to Pruzhana. So, he had some acquaintances in Białowieża. So, maybe, he said, he was almost sure that my grandfather suggested that we move to Białowieża to make a better living than in Pruzhana or Shereshov, and my parents took his advice. Another uncle, who was on my mother's

159 Moishe Kantorovich, *Survivors of Shereshov*, wrote about the Waldszan family in Shereshov, devoting space mainly to Joel Waldszan, his Hebrew teacher at Yavne Hebrew School in Shereshov, who had a major influence on Kantorovich's interest in Zionism. The author of the memoirs notes that Joel Waldszan became vice-principal of the school and then principal. He also mentions members of Joel Waldszan's family – his wife and two sons, Yaakov and David. David Waldszan, Joel's son, was a year younger than David Waldshan from Białowieża; they were cousins, as Kantorowicz confirms. David (the cousin) survived the Holocaust and moved to the United States as well, M. Kantorowitz *From my mother's bequest*, in L. Watson (ed.), *The Shershev compendium*, Rochester, New York 2006, pp. 38–42, 54, 67, 138, 635, 749, https://dn790008.ca.archive.org/0/items/nybc318143/nybc318143.pdf (accessed: 20.06.2024).

160 In the supplementary question session, David described the appearance of the entire house in more detail: "The house consisted of just a small kitchen and one room that my father and I slept in this one room. In the same room was a little library where my father collected different books. And another room was my mother and two sisters; it was a little stove, and outside we had the *lodownia* where we kept the ice. And the shop, which was attached, was an extension of the house." In Interview with David Waldshan, supplementary session, 17 November 2016 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive.

161 This concerns Moishe Judevicz, see: M. Yudevitsh, R. Kaplan, *Bunkers and partisans* [extracted from a letter sent to Malke Glembotzky, written after the liberation in Kobrin, 1 January 1946], in J. Friedlaender (ed.), *Memorial Book of Pruz'any and its Vicinity (Bereze, Malech, Pruzhany, Shershev, Seltz, and Lineve). Chronicle of Six Communities that Perished in the Holocaust*, Tel Aviv 1983, https://www.pruzh.org/yzkor_pruzhany/bunker_partisans.htm (accessed: 10.06.2024).

162 Hershel Judevicz: his photograph is in the private archive of David Waldshan.

side, she was a dentist in Pruzhana. Her name was Lena Judevich.[163] Lena Judevich and her husband, Salomon Judevich, were well-known in Pruzhana, very charitable people; in fact, they were the pillars of the city.[164] They were the ones instrumental in establishing a small camp for poor children near Pruzhana. They two helped us the way my older cousin said. Because I don't remember. [...]

*Where did your father teach you, at home, or in a synagogue?*
At home. In the synagogue, it was only on Saturday. Every Saturday, it was a cardinal rule in our house. After dinner, which in Białowieża used to be in the afternoon, we had a very light snack in the evening, and then we went back to *shul*, to the synagogue, and he was the one to teach me how to read from the Bible, and also Tanakh, and the Prophets.[165] Here again, everything done at a young age. And then, in addition to that, in his spare time, after the store was closed, he also taught me Hebrew. Because [of] Yiddish, I could hear everybody speaking Yiddish there, Yiddish and Polish.[166] But Hebrew was something that, one time, as you know, Hebrew was considered to be a holy or sacred language, but already in the 1920s, it was already taught in different schools. As a matter of fact, in 1939, thanks to my aunt and uncle in Pruzhana, I was supposed to move, myself only, to Pruzhana in order to attend a Hebrew school by the name of Yavne School.[167] [...] But because of the outbreak of the war in September 1939, all my dreams were shattered.

163 Morris Sorid (Moshe Yudewicz) wrote about Lena Najdus Judevich: "Lena was an intellectual and wise. She was a loyal Zionist from her youth and helped her husband in his national and Hebrew activities. She always helped the poor and returned the treatment fee they paid for dentistry. Due to her love of Israel, she was called "the mother of the Pruzana Jews,⌧ in M. Sorrid, *Pruzana Survivors in The United States* in J. Friedlaender (ed.), *Memorial Book of Pruz'any and its Vicinity...*

164 There are some photographs of Lena and Salomon Judevicz in the private archives of David Waldshan.

165 Tanakh is the abbreviation for the three parts of the Hebrew Bible: Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

166 David also had to hear Belarusian on the street; the majority of the inhabitants of Białowieża were Orthodox Christians of Ruthenian identity, speaking a local variety of Belarusian. In a document issued in the displaced person (DP) camp, after the Second World War, David listed White Russian among the languages he knew, in Arolsen Archives, Tracing and documentation case no. 736.252 for Waldshan David, born 28.02.1928, Statistical Card, September 1950.

167 This refers to the A.D. Gordon Hebrew Gymnasium in Pruzhany, 78 Pacevicha Street, founded in 1926, www.pruzh.org/yzkor_pruzhany/focal_points.htm (accessed: 20.06.2024).

*Do you remember your friends from school class, from* szkoła powszechna *in Białowieża? Jewish or Polish?*
No, I don't remember their names. One name I remember was a girl by the name of Rikl. But we never played together. Strictly, it was not socializing at our age; I was young, 11 years old. All we did was just learn and learn again and study, do our homework, and help with our parents, like myself. Whenever I had a chance, I helped my father to make the ice cream, and my sisters helped to cook. It was not a socializing place, not at all. [...] I don't recall anyone. I don't remember their names anymore. [...]

*What was the relationship between Jews and other residents of Białowieża?*
During that day, we were in a store, and we established a very good relationship with all the other ones. I remember just one incident that one of the boys damaged our windows, big window that we had. And we knew exactly who the boy was. So we reported this to the authorities, to the *Gmina*, and said that somebody did it.[168] So the father of the boy came to our office with the boy and asked my mother, I was standing there – at that time, I was no more than nine years old, and "Was this my son [who] damaged your window?" So, my mother was very diplomatic, very tactful. She didn't want to... So, she retracted, meaning to change her [mind]: "No, I don't think it was him." And she didn't want to raise any... She had no problems, no retribution. She was afraid just by saying, by pinpointing that this was the boy. So, this is one incident.

Of course, there was another incident, but otherwise we were [in the] very good, very good relationship with all other... Except for this case, there was another incident, I remember. When I was 10 years old, there was a traveling salesman whose name was Gedalia. He brought the chocolate from Białystok. So, there were several boys, like hooligans, bandits, whatever they called them. They attacked him, knocked off his teeth, and took away his suitcase, [Polish] *walizkę*, full of chocolate and candies, and this and that. These are the two incidents. Otherwise, we got along very well. In fact, one of the Polish boys, who was older than I was, he saved me from drowning in Narevka.[169] I didn't know how to swim well, and I almost drowned totally. So, he pulled me out. Thanks to him, I'm alive. Otherwise, we got along very, very well. In fact, later on... fast forward. Later on, with the liquidated Białowieża... It was one month prior to liquidation. There was a very friendly

168 *Gmina* (trans. from Polish) – commune.
169 Narevka – river flowing through Białowieża.

man. They called him the Doctor.[170] He was a doctor. […] My parents saw the handwriting on the wall; they knew that sooner or later, there was a way to liquidate because they [had] already heard from the neighbouring towns, they were taken away.[171] My parents had two cartons with perfumed soap. So, my mother asked the doctor: "Can you please hide it for us? And in case of an emergency, if possible, if you are so kind enough to keep it for us, we will take it." And guess what? He did keep the soap for us! And later on, one of my cousins, who was a *kierownik* [ – manager] of an electrical station at the beginning of Pruzhana ghetto, was requested by the Germans to go to Białowieża […].[172] And we asked him if possible, and it was a very risky thing for him, to get in touch with the doctor. It endangered his life, a very dangerous environment. And he brought the soap to us. And for a little bar of soap, one could get a loaf of bread, butter, eggs. Each box had as many as 10 and 10 little bars, 20. So this helped us survive in the Pruzhana Ghetto.

The reason I'm saying that there were two incidents, bad ones, and others were very good, very friendly people. But liquidated Białowieża, one of the best customers of ours, she saw us being gathered, assembled in a place. And she was crying bitter tears. So, my mother asked her: "What's the matter? Why are you crying?" She said: "They just took away my husband." And my mother said: "You know, we have a cow in the backyard. Take the cow," "No, I'm no longer interested in cows. I'm interested in my husband. And I know what happened to my husband." Otherwise, we had very, very good customers. Very friendly people.

*David, what languages did your family speak? Between yourselves and with neighbours?*
What did we speak? Polish, Yiddish, and a little Hebrew, too. Hebrew among us. The lullaby songs were mostly Polish and mainly in Yiddish too. Yiddish songs and Polish.

170 The doctor mentioned by Waldshan was Marjan Ławrynowicz, who served as a physician in Białowieża between 1922 and 1943. He was held in high esteem among the inhabitants of Białowieża; Cf. *Urzędowy spis: lekarzy, lekarzy dentystów, farmaceutów, felczerów, pielęgniarek, położnych, uprawnionych i samodzielnych techników dentystycznych oraz wykazy: aptek, szpitali, ubezpieczalni społecz., ośrodków zdrowia, przychodni samodzielnych oraz centrali i filii Państwowej Szkoły Higieny*, 1939, Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej, Warszawa, s.135; Entry: Ławrynowicz Marjan, in P. Bajko (ed.), *Encyklopedia Puszczy Białowieskiej*, https://www.encyklopedia.puszcza-bialowieska.eu/index.php?dzial=haslo&id=684 (accsessed: 19.09.2025).

171 On 6 August 1941, three days before the deportation of the Jews of Białowieża, the Germans displaced the Jews of Hajnówka, a town 17 km from Białowieża, by forcing Jewish men to march along the road connecting the two towns. Along the way, German policemen mistreated the men in cruel ways, including chasing them on their knees and beating them, resulting in 24 deaths, cf. W. Monkiewicz, *Zagłada skupisk żydowskich w regionie białostockim w latach 1939–1941*, "Studia Podlaskie," vol. 2, 1989, pp. 336–354.

172 *Kierownik* (trans. from Polish) – head of something or someone (usually an organised group of people).

*And Belarusian?*
Belarusian not so much. Not so much because I would say that those years it was mainly Polish, spoken in the Polish language [...].[173] And then Russian.

At the age of 11, when the Russians came to us, everything was in the Russian language.[174] They resettled. The Russian teachers came to us. Right in October, in fact, one month after the occupation, we already started everything in the Russian language. And the very first things I learned was "*Ленин сказал: нада учиться, учиться и ещё раз учиться. Религия - опиум для народа*"[175] – religion is the opium of the people. You know, all their [in Polish] *przysłowia*, all their proverbs, their sayings: "*Кто не работает, тот не кушает*". [...] Polish language, no longer, Russian language, everything. And being young, 11, 12 years, it didn't take too long. In one year, all kids in school, in my class, spoke Russian, of necessity. Because when the Russians came to Białowieża, you could see posters all over, "You have to send the kids to school." But you know what happened? Whoever was against them was considered an enemy and sent to Siberia. Not against them, even though you had the slightest business, anything that was not related to labor was considered to be an enemy of the Russian state at that time, of the Bolsheviks. You had to be, you know, one of the labourers. And the fact remains that if we had stayed another few months, we would be in Siberia now. Granted, in Siberia, a lot of people survived. It was very bad in Siberia – location point, no family, you know. [...]

*Do you remember the Jewish tradition your family celebrated at home?*
Yes. We were not extremely religious. Very few people had beards. Most of them, I would say orthodox. It's more than modern, but they were orthodox people. There was one synagogue in Białowieża, and for Shabbat every Saturday we went to the synagogue. And in holidays, definitely. I don't remember if any women would come on Saturday, but during the holidays, they showed up. And we did have traditional dinners like every Friday. And it was kosher; we had kosher food all the time. [...] We ate so-called *czolent*, meaning like potatoes and beans, and let it cook overnight, but not in our house, it was a special place, a bakery, where they kept [it]. We took this before Shabbat on Friday.

173 In the interwar period, Polish became the official language and the language of education. However, the main vernacular for the majority of inhabitants in this area remained the local variety of Belarusian. Cf. footnote no 23.
174 David is referring to the 1939 Soviet occupation.
175 "Lenin said: We must learn, learn, and learn again. Religion is the opium of the people." – trans. from Russian.

*Was this bakery close to your house?*
Yes, not far. On the other side of the street, we used to walk.[176] So we would prepare [on] Friday, maybe about three or four o'clock, take it over to the bakery, and they would put it in their oven, not only our cholent, [but] also others. Somehow, they did know which [was] which. They must have put a label that belongs to us, and not in another house.

*And did your family ask Polish children to make a fire during the Shabbat at your house?*[177]
No, we did not. No, this was strictly forbidden too, so we did not have any hot meals on Shabbat.[178] […] We just had cold things like borscht, for example, and *szczaw*,[179] you know, except for the hot *czolent* that we picked up at the bakery. And of course, we had *challah*, and that's the only good meal that we had during the week.

*Could you describe the synagogue a little bit?*
Well, it was a walking distance, not far from us, and only once a week that I went in the synagogue. There were quite a few people there. We had our designated area where we were sitting. It was no nonsense there; we were just praying. It's not like chatting, or telling jokes, or conversing, [or] telling what happened during the week.[180] In the synagogue, [it] was strictly praying, our attention was centered around prayers. Nothing else. Prayers. It was serious people at that time.

The building was a wooden synagogue. And it must have been a balcony, because the women were upstairs. And during Yom Kippur, I remember that my mother kept food for us children.[181] It was forbidden to eat after a certain age. We would fast after 13. I was under 13, so she would bring food with her. Like a piece of chicken, a piece of *challah*, and other stuff. And I remember it was a balcony there for the women. Because in an Orthodox *shul*, or synagogue, there was a separation between men and women. They used to call them the *mekhitza*.[182] So the women were sitting in a different area. Now, in our synagogue that I belong to, there's not a *mekhitza*. We sit together. […]

176 "Who does not work – does not eat." – trans. from Russian.
177 The closest bakery, located just across the street, was Abraham Prync's bakery.
178 Several non-Jewish residents of Białowieża told me about their role as shabesgoy in Jewish homes.
179 To light the oven.
180 David is referring to the sorrel soup, which was very popular in Poland.
181 All these activities that David mentions often took place in synagogues.
182 Yom Kippur – one of the most important holidays in the Jewish year, cf. https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/yom-kippur-history-and-overview (accessed: 19.09.2025).

*And do you remember the rabbi of Białowieża?*
No, this, I do not remember. For a young boy like I was in those days, there was no distinction between a rabbi and another man with a beard. When Russia occupied Poland after signing the so-called non-aggression pact with Germany, the synagogue was almost closed. Very few, very few people went... I think it was closed completely, because Russia was against religion. „Religion was an enemy of the people".[183] [...]

*Do you remember the forest? Did you go to the forest? The* puszcza?[184]
The *puszcza*! Yes. From time to time, we would go to the park and look at the *żubry*, which was an endangered species, you know.[185] [I also remember] the *polowanias*.[186] Well, speaking of *polowania,* only a year or two before the Second World War, there were prime ministers, foreign ministers, even from Germany, I believe it was

183 Mekhitza (hebr. **הציחמ** – "separation") – the wall in a synagogue that spatially separates the main (men's) prayer hall from the women's section, cf. https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-mekhitza (accessed: 19.09.2025).

184 During the Soviet occupation, when all private craft businesses were closed, the synagogue in Białowieża was converted into a tailoring cooperative where all tailors from Białowieża were required to work there. Interview with Włodzimierz Dackiewicz, 9 June 2015 (recorded by K. Winiarska), researcher's private archive. For more about the synagogue, see: K. Winiarska, *The synagogue in Białowieża*, http://www.jewish-Białowieża.pl/the-synagogue/ (accessed:10.06.2024).

185 The Białowieża Forest, in the middle of which Białowieża is situated, is the only primeval forest in Europe. It's dense, wild, with many magnificent trees, including dead trees piled on top of each other, which makes for unusual scenery. In Polish, there is a separate word for this kind of forest: *puszcza*. My question about "forest" was not initially understood by David, so I used the Polish word *puszcza*, which immediately focused him on the heart of the question.

186 *Żubry* (trans. from Polish) – European bison (*Bison bonasus*). During the Second World War, as a result of German looting and, shortly afterwards, as a result of poaching by the local population, all the bison in the Białowieża Forest were exterminated by 1919. Restoration began in 1929, bringing a few specimens from European breeding to the Zwierzyniec breeding reserve, built on the road from Hajnówka to Białowieża. From a small viewing stand there, the first imported bison could be observed in a small enclosure. When David refers to "park", he likely means this location. The bison population in the Białowieża reserve in 1939 was 16. Cf. https://bpn.gov.pl/zubr-puszcz-imperator (accessed: 19.09.2025).

Göring[187] and Goebbels,[188] and Ribbentrop[189] or some other high-ranking officials came to Poland for *polowania.* And of course, on the following day, you could see what they did, how many different kinds of animals they killed. Now we know that the same people a year later would attack Poland. The same. They knew about it. They had already developed a plan. I know there were times when in Poland, there was Józef Piłsudski.[190] To us, he was one of the greatest persons – Piłsudski. It was a very good time. Later on, when Edward Rydz-Śmigły[191] became the head or the Marshal, things changed in Poland a lot. It was not the same Poland when Rydz-Śmigły came to power. But otherwise, it was a good country, and I mean the mere fact that Poland had over three million Jewish people. What does this tell you? It tells you that Poland, at one time, was very friendly to the Jewish people. Not even

187 *Polowanias* (trans. from Polish) – hunting. David made a plural form from the Polish word *polowania,* which was already plural. He is referring to the representative hunting organised by the President of Poland in the Białowieża Forest during the interwar period.

188 Hermann Göring, Prime Minister of Prussia and one of the principal architects of Hitler's Third Reich, was the second most powerful man in Nazi Germany and one of the main figures responsible for implementing genocidal policies against Jews. Before the Second World War, Göring visited Białowieża several times for hunting at the invitation of Polish President Mościcki between 1935 and 1938. In February 1939, Heinrich Himmler, one of the top Nazi leaders, arrived in Białowieża for a hunting trip in Göring's place. At the beginning of the German occupation of Białowieża in June 1941, at Göring's request, the Białowieża Forest was incorporated into the Reich State Hunting Area, placed under the direct authority of the Reich central government. After the war, Göring, sentenced to death by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, committed suicide before the execution. Cf.: APB, ref. no 1-D-1187-1; https://www.encyklopedia.puszcza-bialowieska.eu/index.php?dzial=haslo&id=848 (accessed: 19.09.2025); P.W. Blood, *Birds of Prey – Hitler's Luftwaffe, Ordinary Soldiers, and the Holocaust in Poland*, Stuttgart 2021.

189 Joseph Goebbels was a leading member of the Nazi Party and served as Reich Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment from 1933 to 1945. A close associate of Adolf Hitler, he was known for his radical antisemitism and played a central role in promoting anti-Jewish propaganda. He actively supported the exclusion, persecution, and final extermination of Jews during the Holocaust. Goebbels died by suicide in May 1945.

190 Joseph von Ribbentrop (1893–1946), Germany's Foreign Minister from 1938 to 1945, played a central role in Nazi foreign policy and the Holocaust. He was deeply involved in negotiating the German–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact (Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact), which enabled the invasion of Poland in 1939. Ribbentrop was responsible for the deportation of Jewish populations from countries under German control to extermination camps. He was sentenced to death by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg and executed on October 16, 1946.

191 Józef Piłsudski – politician, independence activist, Chief of State of Poland (1918–1922), Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army (1918), First Marshal of Poland (1920), Prime Minister of Poland (1926–1928, 1930). Jews saw Piłsudski as a defender of Jewish rights and as a politician who would guarantee equality for all citizens, without manifestations of antisemitism or discrimination. Piłsudski died in May 1935. The Jews participated in crowds at his funeral or in ceremonies organised by other towns. Such a ceremony was also held in Białowieża. Cf. J. Żyndul, *Żydzi i Piłsudski. Wybór źródeł do historii stosunków polsko-żydowskich w okresie międzywojennym*, Warszawa 2021.

England, not even France, or even Russia had as many Jewish people as Poland. Poland was very friendly to the Jewish people; it's an undeniable fact. So now, unfortunately, because over 90 per cent [were] wiped out, so there is very little, not too many Jewish people are in Poland now.[192] So that's why it's very important to be able to tell what happened during the war and before the war. [...]

1 September 1939 was the beginning of the Second World War. As you know, Germany attacked Poland that day, and the next two weeks in Białowieża, the place where we lived, we saw the Polish army passing through Białowieża, because Białowieża was surrounded by lots of woods, forests, [and] they tried to escape from the oncoming Germans.[193] The shutters of our house were closed; it was dark, just to make sure that no one would see us. A short time afterwards, maybe 10 days later, we saw the Russian soldiers arriving in Białowieża.[194] And then, we also noticed that there were signs posted in several locations that the parents must send their children to school.

So, that's a time when we started our education under the Russians. The teachers were resettled from Russia to come to Białowieża, and we started learning only in the Russian language, and the Polish language was no longer spoken at school.[195] However, after school, we still were able to speak Polish and Yiddish, of course, and life during the year and a half, during the Russian occupation, was not so good; however, compared to those people who lived in the western part of Poland and were occupied by Germany, it was much better. There was no comparison, because by that time, we already knew what was going on in the western part, like the area of Warsaw and other places. [...]

The living conditions in Białowieża during the Russian occupation it was not bad, really; no one starved. Of course, there were no luxury items. Our store, which was

192 Edward Rydz-Śmigły, Inspector General of the Armed Forces and Marshal of Poland following the death of Józef Piłsudski in 1935, served as Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces during the September Campaign of 1939. Under his rule, Polish state policy departed from Piłsudski's principle of equality for all citizens and shifted toward nationalism, antisemitism, and a radicalisation of public life. The Camp of National Unity (OZN), established at his initiative, adopted National Democratic slogans, promoted antisemitic state policy, and supported radical nationalist circles, which led to an escalation of violence against Jews in Poland.

193 Jewish national-ethnic identification was declared by 17,156 people in Poland during the last national census in 2021, https://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechne/nsp-2021/nsp-2021-wyniki-ostateczne/stan-i-struktura-demograficzno-spoleczna-i-ekonomiczna-ludnosci-polski-w-swietle-wynikow-nsp-2021,6,2.html, (accessed: 19.09.2025).

194 See: K. Winiarska, *War outbreak*, http://www.jewish-bialowieza.pl/settlements/the-second-world-war/beginning-of-war/ (accessed: 19.09.2025).

195 About Soviet occupation in Białowieża, see: K. Winiarska, *Soviet occupation*, http://www.jewish-Białowieża.pl/settlements/the-second-world-war/soviet-occupation/ (accessed: 19.09.2025).

still in existence for a short time, but my father, I remember, it must have been in 1940, was summoned to go to court in a larger city. I'm not sure the name of the city, but he was considered a businessman, and at that time, it was like being a bourgeois, an exploiter.[196] And at that time, we were fortunate to find out that there was a fine of 1.000 Rubles. But we could see the handwriting on the wall that sooner or later, we would be sent to Siberia.[197] So our store was closed. We were no longer able to sell any goods; besides, there was nothing available anymore. Of course, we were still going to school, [and] the system of education was very strict. We had to memorize even poems by heart, for example: "*Скажи мне, дядя, ведь не даром, Москва спаленная пожаром*" and all kinds of slogans; there was a lot of propaganda.[198] As far as the Jewish population, they used to call us *Евреи*. Because the [Polish] word *Żyd* at that time was not used anymore.[199] And the synagogue was already closed. We were no longer going to the synagogue. Life was, as I say, bearable. It was no comparison to what it was before the war, but then, in 1941, on the 22nd of June, 1941, Germany attacked Russia.

In the first week, we noticed that the Russian tanks, which were stationed near Białowieża, they were running away from the advancing German army. The first 10 days, there was a so-called no man's land. It was neither the Russians nor the Germans in that area. But it didn't take too long; several days later, we could see the Germans arriving in Białowieża.[200] Shortly afterwards, all the Jews had to wear yellow patches to identify them. We were taken to work. Like my father, for example, who had to chop wood for the Germans. They were stationed not far from our

196 Belarusian and Jewish children were required to attend a Russian school, but Polish children were permitted to attend a Polish school created by a Catholic priest, where Russian was only one of the subjects taught, in O. Szurkowska, *Dzieje białowieskiej rodziny*, Białowieża 2001; USHMM, sig. RG-50.488.0051, *Oral history interview with Włodzimierz Dackiewicz*, https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn510368 (accessed: 19.09.2025).

197 *буржуй* (trans. from Russian) – contemptuously, a member of the bourgeoisie, understood in Marxist terms as the class of possessors and exploiters.

198 In the second year of Soviet occupation, in February 1940, 437 representatives of the Polish forestry administration, officials and members of their families were deported deep into the USSR to Siberia, in W. Konończuk (ed.), *Sztuka przetrwania, deportacje sowieckie z powiatu bielskiego 1940–1941: relacje zesłańców*, Warszawa 2020. I have not been able to establish whether, or how many, Jews from Białowieża were deported to Siberia. However, the families of the wealthier Jewish shopkeepers from Bielsk Podlaski (the county town for Białowieża) were certainly deported to Siberia. Cf. M. Itzhaki, *Rodzina Barchatów. Kupcy tekstylni z Bielska*, in W. Konończuk, D. Fionik (ed.), *Księga Pamięci Żydów Bielska Podlaskiego*, Bielsk Podlaski 2017, pp. 482–490.

199 Waldshan recites in Russian the beginning of a poem, *Borodino,* by Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov*:* "Tell me, uncle, is it not for nothing that Moscow burned with fire?".

200 *Евреи* (Rus.), *Żyd* (Pol.) – a Jew.

house. I think it was approaching toward the palace in that area. And there were several occasions, even though I was still a young boy, I also helped my father chop wood for them.[201]

The synagogue was closed, and the store was closed. But we still had a cow for the time being. My parents must have purchased this cow during the Russian occupation. I don't know how they were able to buy a cow at the time, but the fact remains, they did have a cow. Then, in August, I believe it was the first or the second week of August, the total Jewish community was assembled in one place. We were chased out of our homes. They told us to take with us the little belongings they were able to carry with us, like a small suitcase and various other things. We were assembled in one place, and we were loaded up on trucks and taken to Kobryń.[202] […] And we left everything behind.[203] In Kobryń, we stayed for about six weeks or so. And then, the Judenrat got in, told us that whoever had relatives in Pruzhana would be able to go to Pruzhana. And I don't know who gave the Judenrat permission, but they must have gotten permission to try to be resettled to Pruzhana. My mother at that time had two brothers in Pruzhana. One of them was Szlomo or Salomon Judewicz,[204] and the second brother was Aaron Judewicz. And at that time, the ghetto was formed in Pruzhana.[205] During the ghetto years, each of us had to be occupied. I had to do that even myself, as a young boy, I had to work in a place in a carpentry shop in Pruzhana. It was formerly a Yavne school, which was converted into a carpentry shop.[206] The living conditions were not good, of course.

201 The German army marched into Białowieża on 27 June 1941, so it was five days, not ten as David said. Soon, Białowieża became part of the *Bezirk Białystok* and was incorporated into East Prussia. Erich Koch, the president of East Prussia, was appointed head of the civil administration of the Bezirk Białystok. Bezirk Białystok was divided into seven large districts, with administration units known as *Amtskommissariats*. One of them was in Białowieża.

202 See: K. Winiarska, *German occupation*, http://www.jewish-Białowieża.pl/settlements/the-second-world-war/german-occupation/ (accessed: 19.09.2025).

203 Kobryń (Pol.) – Kobryn (Eng.), a city in the Brest Oblast, 46 km east of Brest-Litovsk, today in Belarus. Before World War II, when it was part of Poland, over 66 percent of its population was Jewish. During the German occupation, from September 1941, Kobryn was part of the Reichskommissariat "Ukraine." Cf. K. Winiarska, Holocaust, http://www.jewish-Białowieża.pl/settlements/the-second-world-war/holocaust/ (accessed: 19.09.2025).

204 Deportation of Jewish people from Białowieża occurred on 9 August 1941. See more: *ibidem*.

205 Shlomo, Salomon Judevich, born 1888 in Pruzhany, a merchant, was the brother of David Waldshan's mother and the husband of Lena Naidus Judevich, whom David also mentioned several times in his testimony. In the Yizkor Book of Pruzhany, there is a memorial plaque dedicated to Salomon Judevich placed by Lena, who was in the United States in 1939 when war broke out, M. W. Bernstein (ed.), *Memorial Book of Five Destroyed Communities (Pruzhany, Belarus)*, Buenos Aires 1958, pp. 765–825, https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pruzhany/Pruzhany.html (accessed: 01.08.2025).

206 See: K. Reichelt, L. Crago, M. Dean, *Prużana,* in *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos 1933–1945*, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, vol. 2, 2009, pp. 939–942.

But there was no starvation; we did not. The Judenrat made sure that most of us were provided with potatoes and other stuff. Compared to other towns and cities that were wiped out totally, there were massacres all over; Pruzhana did not suffer as much as the other towns.[207]

As I already mentioned, before the Germans arrived in Białowieża, my parents had two cartons of soap, and there was a Polish doctor who kept two cartons of soap for us. During the war, my cousin was able to get the soap back from the doctor. That enabled us to barter with some peasants and farmers in the ghetto. Thanks to Aron Judewicz, who already had some contacts with the outsiders [...], he probably got bread and butter, and eggs in exchange for the soap.[208] This is an incident I would like to remember and be really thankful to the doctor who did save the soap for us.

This lasted until January 28th, 1943. At which time, we were told to get out of our homes to assemble in a certain place. And it took several streets of the Jewish people and around 2,500 people. And we were taken all the way to Linovo.[209] It was a train station from Pruzhana. Because Pruzhana did not have this train station. So, a day prior to that, all the peasants and farmers were ordered to bring the sleds because of the wintertime. There must have been at least, I would estimate, about maybe 400 or 500 sleds. To be able to take 2,500 Jewish people from Pruzhana. It was known as the first transport of the Jewish people from Pruzhana. We were taken to the Linovo station, and from there it took us all the way to Auschwitz.[210] The following day, the second transport, the same thing. They chased them out of the house. And another 2,500 Jewish people were assembled. And again, taken to Auschwitz. There were four transports. There were over 10,000 something. Everything is documented. Jewish people from Pruzhana were taken to Auschwitz.[211]

We were told to take only whatever we could carry with us, such as a small suitcase, with some food. Nothing else. And we did not know where we were taken to. [The first] stop was Birkenau, which was not far from Auschwitz. It's a place where there were selections, and gas chambers, and a crematorium. In order to accommodate 2,500 people, it was a long, long train with wagons. And each wagon

207 See footnote no. 26.

208 Different accounts of the hunger in the Pruzhany ghetto have survived, but most of them confirm David's testimony. Zalman Urievich writes that people of Pruzhany did not suffer from hunger in the ghetto because the Judenrat provided food for the workers, the sick in hospitals, children in kindergartens, the homeless, and also obtained food from contraband, in https://www.pruzh.org/yzkor_pruzhany/guettos_camp.htm (accessed: 19.09.2025); Abraham Breski wrote even "Nobody suffered hunger," in https://www.pruzh.org/yzkor_pruzhany/final_summary.htm (accessed: 19.09.2025).

209 Second brother of David's mother.

210 Jews were transported 12 km by sledge from Pruzhany to Orańczyce station, near the town of Linovo.

211 Linovo was the name of the town, while the station was called Orańczyce.

had as many as 100 to 130 people. We were packed in like sardines, and we were taken to Birkenau. When we arrived in Birkenau, they opened up the doors of the cattle wagons, and then there was a selection. There were SS men and kapos who selected us. Those people who seemed to be useful to the German government were on the one side, younger people, between the ages of maybe 18 to 40, 45. It so happened that I was wearing at that time two heavy coats. Thanks to my uncle, Salomon Judewicz. Prior to that, before we were taken to Auschwitz, he said: "Just in case there comes a time that there you will need these coats because of the weather. We don't know the circumstances". So, at that time, I was wearing two heavy coats with me, so because of that, it appeared as if I was an older boy, like 18 or 19.[212] So when we left the train, we were separated. It was a turmoil, what a chaos. People were saying: "Go here, go there!" And during the time, what I did, I noticed some younger people do not realise what it meant. Somehow, I just attached myself to the younger group. And apparently, the SS-men did not notice it. So, I attached myself to that younger group and survived, temporarily. Because later on, there was another selection.

So out of the total number of nearly 10,000 Jews, I don't remember exactly the date, no more than 1,500 to 1,700 were stayed alive, were selected for all four transports combined.[213] But later on, as I stated in Birkenau, a lot of people died in Birkenau. They could not withstand the cold weather, lack of food. As an example, my two cousins, one of them was 23 years old, and 21, they lasted no more than two or three weeks, and they died. Not only with hunger, but with beatings. For no reason, the kapos or the SS men would start hitting people right and left, and we were really at the mercy of the kapos and the SS.

We stayed in Birkenau for about four to five weeks. It was a so-called quarantine. And there was a selection again, and we were standing in line, and one of the SS-men was using one of the pull horns, announcing: "All of you who are under 16 years of age should step out!" We were standing in line, and my uncle, Salomon Judewicz, was standing with me in line, and he whispered to me in Yiddish: "אד ייטש' – Stay here, do not walk out." So, I was standing there. Later, I found out there were some young boys under the age of 16 who stepped out, hoping that they were going to be treated; they were sent to the gas chamber, and they were killed. So, thanks to my uncle, he saved my life.[214]

212 A total of 9,161 people were carried in four transports from Pruzhany to Auschwitz. Of these, 1,675 people survived selection and were detained in the camp, while the remaining 7,486 were executed immediately in the gas chambers, in State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau & International Tracing Service (ed.), *Death Books from Auschwitz Remnats, Reports*, Munich, New Providence, London, Paris: K.G. Saur, 1995; M. W. Bernstein (ed.), *Memorial Book of Five Destroyed Communities*...

213 David was, in fact, 15 years old at the time.

214 See footnote no. 74.

It was a few weeks later, before we even arrived [at] the main camp in Auschwitz, that my uncle passed away. How did he die? This, I don't know. Was it starvation? Because he didn't give us any food, very little food. Or beatings? But he was no longer alive. So, the only remaining relatives that I had in Auschwitz were my cousin's husband, who was an electrician.[215] And because he was an electrician, from time to time, he had better treatment. They gave him an extra portion of bread, a little soup, and from time to time, he would also bring me a portion of extra bread. […]

*I'm not sure if I understand this correctly. Were you separated from other family members during the train journey? Your parents and sisters were no longer with you during the selection?*
Yes. As we were taken to the train station, my father and I were in the same wagon, and my mother and two sisters were in a different wagon. So, it lasted about, I would say, about a day and a half. I believe we arrived in Auschwitz, in Birkenau, on the 30th of January in 1943. We were separated. During the separation, I no longer saw my father because my father was sent right away because we were surrounded by SS men, kapos, and dogs. And with all kinds of cursing, concussing: "*Verfluchte Jude*! *Raus*! *Raus*! *Raus*!".[216] It was a turmoil. So those people were immediately sent to the gas chamber, the same evening, the same time. And we were taken to a different place where we waited maybe four or five hours. Then we, those people who were chosen to stay alive, were taken to a place where we had tattooed our arms, like myself. I have got a number. Each of us who was saved to stay alive got a number. It was arranged in alphabetical order. There were prisoners themselves, like myself, who were given the task of tattooing the numbers. And there was another person who kept track of the numbers. Because my last name started with a W, Waldszan, I was one of the last ones who was given the number that I have on my arm here.

*What is the number?*
Right. Let's see, the number is… 98 135.[217] It was my number. […] And then we were taken to a group shower. Disinfected us, make sure, smeared us with a disinfectant, all of us, and we were taken to a barrack.

215 In all surviving documents from Auschwitz in which David Waldshan is recorded, a false date of birth was entered, making him appear two years older.
216 His name was Jakob Barbel, from Pruzhany, born 10 November 1908 in Pruzhany. He was transferred from Auschwitz to Dachau on 28 January 1945 and survived. See: USHMM, sig. RG-67.034M, 228. Bg., Dachau Concentration Camp Records.
217 "Damn Jew! Out! Out! Out!" – trans. from German.

Before that, they asked us, I mean, among the survivors: "Who of you are carpenters? Who of you are shoemakers? Who of you [are] tailors?" [...] So, when I heard the word "carpenters," I attached myself to the carpenter group, because I worked in the ghetto in a carpenter shop. So, because of that, the working conditions, compared to other people, were much better, because it was indoors.

But those people who did not have a trade, they had to work outside, digging ditches and this. Those people, due to the bad weather conditions, especially wintertime, snow and sleet, and rain later on, and being under the constant supervision of the kapos, who, as you know, were among the prisoners themselves. But most of them were criminals, even in Germany. They were criminals in Germany, and they were taken to the camp. Of course, there were some exceptionally good kapos, not many.

I worked in a carpentry place, where we made frames for doors, windows, for the German government, so, luckily, even though the food was very bad, [...] a piece of bread in the morning, a little coffee, and the coffee was not a real coffee, it was made out of sodas or something like that. In the evening, as I came back from work, we had soup, a little bit of water, and here again.[218] I don't know how I survived on that kind of food. But still, because of the fact that I worked inside, it helped a lot. [...] I was not a real carpenter; I was a helper. I was carrying wood and just helping the real carpenters. [...]

And there were again selections like three, four months after my arrival. I got an order, all of us, to undress ourselves. It was a German doctor, surrounded by two other ones, and they were looking at each of us, checking the tongue, and whoever looked not in good shape stepped out. Step out, get out. And those people, they used to call them "*Muselmann*," those people who were unfit to be useful to the German government.[219] They were taken to the gas chamber. [...]

*What were the relations between prisoners in Auschwitz like?*

In Auschwitz, each of us was, it's a different world. We were not communicating too much because there was so much stress on each of us. Each of us was like

218 On the list of prisoners under this number, the surname Waldszan is erroneously noted as "Walczon," in M. Prokopowicz (ed.), S. Mączka (comp.), *Żydzi polscy w KL Auschwitz: wykazy imienne = Polish Jews in KL Auschwitz: name lists*, Warszawa 2004, p. 167; The Surgery Book in Auschwitz also recorded "Walczon," but the register of prisoners transferred to the Mathausen Gusen Camp recorded the name correctly "Waldszan," in Auschwitz Archives, D-Amu-3/9/8 no. 149719, vol. 8, p. 95.

219 David worked in a carpentry workshop, Deutsche Ausrüstungwerke (DAW) – an armaments company in the National Socialist German Reich, operated by the SS and based in Berlin. The Deutsche Ausrüstungswerke ran several companies in the Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz concentration camps, where prisoners were used for forced labour.

a walking zombie. There was little communication because everybody, the main thing was to think about food to survive. However, being among the Pruzhaners, they had a little "committee," so to speak, in quotation marks. Five of them, somehow, they managed to get a few extra rations, and they distributed [them] clandestinely so that no one would notice it. In fact, I got a couple of rations myself because they considered me a Pruzhaner thanks to the fact that my cousin, who was a master electrician, he was the one to bring it to me. But otherwise, if there were very close friends in Pruzhana, they still would be able to talk to each other, reminiscing about what happened in the past, expressing their hope that it would survive. But myself, since I was from Białowieża, so actually I didn't know any from Pruzhana. To me, the people from Pruzhana were like strangers. [...] There was no social life in Auschwitz. We were prisoners. And my attention was focused on one thing: how to survive and not to do things to aggravate the kapos, because we were at the mercy of the kapos and the Germans. Other people from Pruzhana who knew each other, there was a bond between them. They remembered their parents, brothers, and sisters who were no longer alive, which we discovered didn't take too long. Within a month or so, we knew right away what [had] happened to our families. We saw the smoke coming out of the chimneys.

*So, you knew what happened to them.*

Yes. I heard people saying: "*Tobie, bracie – cmentarz*! *Komin*!"[220] [...] One incident I would like to mention. It was a young man, maybe a year or two years older than I was, who was also miraculously saved. During the selection, I noticed that he was taken out of the line, meaning that he was going to go to the gas chamber. But there was another man among those who were supposed to be selected. He befriended the kapo because he came up with an idea on how to make wooden barrels for the Germans. So, the kapo noticed that he's a master cabinetmaker. So, he was using the so-called influence to save this young man, because he was also from Pruzhana. And he knew, because we knew it already at that time, there was no longer a secret. They knew that all those people who were taken out were going to the gas chamber. So that man told the kapo: "Please, can you take this boy out of here and put him in this line?" Even though he himself was slated to be selected. And somehow that saved his life. But the unfortunate part of it is that somebody else had to be selected to replace him. Because they needed, at that time, a certain number of people to be killed. The crematory was working 24 hours a day. So, somebody else was selected to save the boy.[221]

220 "To you, brother, the graveyard! Chimney!" – trans. from Polish.

221 Milton Steinberg – born 12 October 1929 in Pruzhany, survivor. David stated that he visited Steinberg in Florida around 2000. See: USC Shoah Foundation Institute, Visual History Archive of Holocaust oral testimonies, Oral history of Milton Steinberg, no. 5494.

I spent time in Auschwitz until almost the end of January 1945. That was the time as the Russian army was approaching toward Auschwitz. So, Auschwitz was evacuated, and [...] they sent us to different locations. [...] I was among the group of people sent to another camp in Austria. They called this Mauthausen.[222] Not only was Mauthausen a concentration camp, but it was [also] a camp that very few people would survive. [...] Mauthausen was a terrible camp. I say terrible, even worse than Auschwitz. [...] In Mauthausen, we stayed in quarantine for a few weeks, and we were sent to work in another camp. They sent us to work in a camp, the name Gusen II in Austria. We were working on underground tunnels, digging out, even though the Germans knew that the war was coming to an end, and yet they were trying to build airplanes in that tunnel that was dug out.[223] From Gusen II, we were sent to another camp, it was the very last camp, by the name of Gunskirchen, a few miles from Gusen II.[224] We stayed there seven or eight days, [in] very bad conditions, [and] did not work anymore. May 5th, 1945, all of the guards guarding the camp escaped; they left. And what did we see? An American soldier arriving at Gunskirchen and liberating us.[225] May 5th, 1945, was a liberation day for us.

Each of us looked like a skeleton. We did not have any food anymore, [...] people can hardly walk – if the war was to last another two or three days, chances are nobody would be alive because it was the last two days of starvation. [...] When the American soldiers arrived, pretty soon they started giving us food, throwing all kinds of packages. People started eating a lot, and it was very bad, because an empty stomach, if you don't have any food before, and all of a sudden, you start gorging yourself, eating a lot, so they literally killed themselves by overeating. I do not know how I was able to restrain myself; I just ate very little. It was an instinct.

The very first thing, they took all of those survivors to a place not far away, and all of a sudden, you saw the Austrian people trying to help us. The same people who were formerly Nazis, collaborating with the Germans, now taking care of us. They took us to a rehabilitation place. You could see some doctors and nurses surrounding us, checking everybody out: "Rest, stay in bed!" So, I stayed in the rehab

222 David Waldszan is recorded on the transport lists of prisoners transferred from the KL Auschwitz to KL Mauthausen-Gusen under the number 411, with the occupation recorded as "carpenter," in the Auschwitz Archive, sig. D-Amu-3/9/8 no. 149719, vol. 8, p. 95.

223 The prisoners in Gusen II were forced to work on constructing an underground factory for the company Messerschmitt. See more: www.mauthausen-guides.at/en/subcamp/concentration-camp-gusen-ii (accessed: 19.09.2025).

224 Gunskirchen was a subcamp of the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria, located 58 km from Gusen. See more: https://www.mauthausen-guides.at/en/subcamp/satellite-camp-gunskirchen#main (accessed: 19.09.2025).

225 The camp at Gunskirchen was liberated by the 71st Infantry Division on 4 May 1945, cf: https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/timeline-event/holocaust/1942-1945/liberation-of-gunskirchen (accessed: 19.09.2025).

place for a few weeks. Then they took us to another rehab place, until we came back to our normal condition. Not quite, because after the war, each of us weighed very little. We looked like skeletons. But then, little by little, we started eating and resting, no longer under the supervision of the Germans. I stayed there for a few months, and when I recovered, they again sent us to different places. One group of people was taken to Vienna, another to Linz, and myself and a few other people, were chosen to be taken to the small town of Goisern in Austria.[226] It was a private home, an Austrian elderly family. They paid for a room for myself and another boy. Two of us were in one room. [...]

In Goisern, I was supported eventually by The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Joint[227], at that time, I might add, that the displaced persons were supported by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, UNRRA,[228] different organizations to rehabilitate the DP – displaced persons.[229] [...]

One day, a woman representative from the Joint came to a small town, and we, between 20 young people like myself, had a meeting, and she said: "Who of you [has] friends, relatives in the United States, in America?" I raised my hand, because I knew at that time that my aunt, Lena Judevicz from Pruzhana, came here in 1939 to New York to visit her two brothers and also to see the World's Fair, which [took place there] in 1939.[230] [...] She left with the intention to come back, but then the war broke out. [...] So I raised my hand, and two other ones. So, the women from Joint asked us: "Would you like to go to school?" I said: "Maybe. What school do you have?" Goisern did not have a high school; it was like Białowieża, a small town. "Well, we can send you to a bigger city, like Linz, or even Vienna." So, I said: "What school would that be?" She said, "Well, it's a German school." I said: "It would be

226 Goisern (now Bad Goisern), town in Gmunden County, Austria. David lived at Goisern 97.

227 The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, also known as the Joint or JDC, is a Jewish aid organisation established in 1914 to support Jewish communities worldwide. After the Second World War, in the displaced people (DP) camps, the JDC provided emergency aid and met the educational and cultural needs by supplying typewriters, books, Torah scrolls, and ritual articles. See: https://archives.jdc.org/topic-guides/jdc-in-the-displaced-persons-dp-camps-1945-1957/ (accessed: 19.09.2025).

228 United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration UNRRA – an international organisation established in 1943 in Washington, DC, to assist areas liberated in Europe and Asia after the Second World War.

229 Displaced person (DP) – a term used after the Second World War to refer to refugees from central Europe and prisoners liberated from Nazi camps, including Jews. DP's camps were established in Germany, Austria, and Italy. See more: https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/displaced-persons (accessed: 19.09.2025).

230 The New York World's Fair was held from 30 April 1939 to October 1940, with the theme *The World of Tomorrow*. In the Polish pavilion, one of the objects on display was a photograph of a European bison from the Białowieża Forest, cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1939_New_York_World%27s_Fair (accessed: 01.06.2024).

impossible for me to compete, to keep up with the German students, with the Austrian students, because they did not suffer anything. Their education continued all the time, even though there was a war going on." So, she said: "What languages do you speak?" I said: "Well, I speak Polish, Yiddish, even Russian." „Oh, you speak Russian? [...] There is a secondary school that was opened by the authorization of the American authorities in Salzburg, Austria, and it's a regular secondary school, gymnasium." So, I said to her: "Well, but I lost a lot of education for the last six years. I had absolutely no education." "Well, don't worry. I have a list with me, and the list shows certain teachers who need to get a job. [...] I can see there is a professor who came here from Yugoslavia. He might be a good teacher for you. [...] And we have another professor who is an Austrian – I believe Kling was his name – and they are going to be your private teachers to help you in order to be able to attend the school. How does it sound to you?" I said: "Well, maybe this will help me to continue with my education."

[...] The Austrian professor [...] had a doctor's degree in science, physics, chemistry, [and] many [other] degrees. A very nice man, made a wonderful impression. [...] The Russian teacher, Professor Gondarov, told me that after the First World War, [he] escaped to Yugoslavia because he was working for the tsar before the revolution, so he was afraid that the communists would persecute him. So, in Yugoslavia, he became a professor. [...] And they taught me. The Austrian professor taught me [for] about four or five months, and he would come to my place, a rented place, supported by the Joint (the Joint paid for my tuition and room and board). And I expected him to come here to my place on a certain day, and he didn't show up. [...] And then I received a letter from his wife:

> Dear Mr Waldshan,
>
> (I became a mister, no longer a young boy, they called me a mister, in German it meant "very esteemed Mr Waldshan." Can you imagine the title at the head of the letter? A young boy!).
>
> My husband did not come to your place for several days. The reason is that he was arrested by the American authorities. I can assure you that my husband did not commit any crimes. Please, intervene on his behalf, so that he may continue teaching you again. Please. I hope to hear from you soon. Thank you in advance.

And her name was signed. It was Mrs Kling. Needless to say, when I received this letter, I did not respond. I did not answer. Because I figured I knew the Americans were very lenient after the war. They never arrested German soldiers. They did not arrest the officers. But for them, for the Americans to arrest an Austrian

professor, it was unbelievable to me. He must have done something wrong. So, because of that, I did not respond. I never heard from him again. […]

So, the Russian professor continued teaching me all the other subjects. He did a pretty good job. […] And then instead of me going to the school, the Russian professor suggested: "You know what? You don't have to go to Salzburg anymore. I am going to prepare you for the exams, but make sure you learn a lot." And that's what I did. I did it almost every day, day in and day out. And I had a different side, whatever he told me to do, whether it was math or physics, or Latin. […] And it was in May of 1949; I got a letter to report to Salzburg for my final exams. […] And guess what? Two, three weeks later, I got a diploma from them! […] Not the highest in the class, not the lowest, but I did finish! Not bad grades. Signed by the six faculty members. So, I headed to my secondary school in Austria.

When this representative of the Joint asked if we had any relatives, I raised my hand and I said: "Yes, I have one relative, whose name was Lena Judevicz and who, I believe, lives in New York." […] About two weeks later, I received a telegram from my aunt. It happened that the representative of the Joint, notified somebody in New York, who put in an advertisement in the Jewish newspaper. Those years, right after the liberation, many people were searching for other people. So my name appeared in this Jewish newspaper, and one of Lena's neighbours saw my name: "David Waldshan is searching for Lena Najdus Judevicz." So, she ran to my aunt's apartment in New York: "Lena! Lena! I have good news! There's somebody looking for you! A person by the name of David Waldshan!", "What?! David Waldshan?! He is my nephew!" […] Right away, she sent a telegram, and since that time, I remember her constant correspondence.

We came to the United States in January in 1950. It was January 3rd, I believe. We arrived, it was 10 days by boat.[231] We arrived in New Orleans, Louisiana, not in New York. […] They were processing my application. I heard: "I can see that you were supposed to go to Los Angeles, but your destination will be a city by the name of Worcester, Massachusetts. It's very close to Boston." Since at that time I didn't know the difference, it was fine by me.

When I arrived in the United States, the first three months I was supported by the Joint and Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS).[232] Then, during these three

231 The Petition for Naturalization filed by David on 20 November 1953 in Detroit, USA, shows that he actually arrived in the United States in New Orleans in January 1950, as he recalled, but not on the 3rd; the correct date is 29 January 1950, in Michigan, Eastern and Western Districts, Naturalization Records, 1837–1993, database, FamilySearch, David Waldshan, fold. No 102995578.

232 HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) is a Jewish international social and charitable organisation that provides material and legal assistance to Jewish emigrants from Central and Eastern Europe in the United States.

months, I had to go to school for immigrants to learn the English language. [...] So, after three months, I got a job at a mattress company, and it was very dusty. I had to wear a special mask, so I just quit the job. [...] I went to the unemployment office, and they asked me what was my favourite subject in school, and I said I liked chemistry very much. So, they found a pharmaceutical company [...] producing acetylsalicylic acid tablets. [...] Fast forward.

Then I came to Detroit, because at that time it was by far the most prosperous city in the United States. At that time, it was known as the city or the arsenal of democracy. So, when I arrived there, I got a job within two days. No problem! In the meantime, it occurred to me that in order to get another job, I should enroll in a school, not a university yet, but in a special school, where they would teach me something fast, so I wouldn't have to spend much time to be able to get another job. And it was one incident that shaped my life altogether. One day, I walked into a food market. I wanted to get some apples and pears. It was a small place. [...] I walked in, [and] there was only one customer, an old lady; she must have been close to 90 years old. She came to me, a total stranger, and she said to me: "Young man, where are you from? Do you live here?" Some people would have ignored her. What's her business in asking me where I came from? What was I doing there? She continued: "What do you do for a living here?" I thought this woman must have been nuts, but I answered all of her questions. [...] And she said: "The reason I asked all these questions is because I have a landsman (meaning she had somebody who came here in the 1920s, I think it was from Poland also) and his son has a big factory here. I can call him to tell him, maybe, he can find a job for you." I had explained to her what kind of job I had. I don't know why I was so patient; other people probably would have ignored her. What kind of a woman was she? Why would she come up to a total stranger and ask him questions? And guess what? The same old woman called her landsman, who later called his son, who was the owner of the place where they designed machines, all kinds of machines, drill presses, punch presses, everything. So, on the following day [...] I came for the interview with the owner of the place, the machine construction company. He was a salesman, everything in one person. The owner, the chief designer, everything else. So, I got the interview with him, and he said: "Young man, I will give myself a chance to excel yourself here. You will start from the very beginning." So, I accepted the job right away [...] The designer showed me what to do, and I was working in the Drafting Department [...] in drafting, *kreślarz* in Polish.

Fast forward again. Then I said to myself: "This would probably not be enough for me. It will take a long time to become a designer." There's a difference between a drafter and a designer. So, I enrolled in a university. In the meantime, I finished private school, and then I went to the university. I took up certain courses, drafting,

design, part of engineering, this kind of stuff. And I got a job at General Motors, where I worked until my retirement.

In the meantime, I have to go back. In 1966, I met my future wife, and we were married the same year. We have three children, by the names of: Tammi, the oldest one, Benjamin, the second oldest, and Alaine. And I have six grandchildren. This is the short description of what happened. Until now.

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**Summary**
The article contains a transcript of an interview with David Waldshan, a survivor from Białowieża, a village on the Polish–Belarusian border, recorded by the author in 2016 in the United States. The recording is part of her research on the Jewish microhistory of Białowieża, which the author is investigating as part of her doctoral thesis. In the introduction, the author draws attention to the importance of the special relationship with the interviewee, which was established as a result of her many years of work on restoring the memory of Jews in Białowieża, and the risk this poses to the content of the interview (especially on the subject of antisemitism), while also drawing attention to the ethical dilemmas she faced during the interview. The author also raises the issue of identity and the choice of life path of the Holocaust survivor, as well as his strategy of silence/speaking about traumatic experiences. David Waldshan's account is a chronological presentation of his life from his childhood in Białowieża through the Soviet and German occupations, his stay in the ghetto, his survival in Nazi camps, his time in a camp for displaced persons, and his new life in the United States after the war. By comparing the survivor's account with other historical sources and using a microhistorical perspective, the article shows how historical conditions and the shape of the national and religious structure of the town influenced the resistance of the inhabitants of the eastern communes of Bielsk Podlaski county to antisemitic mobilisation and the relatively better situation of Jews in Białowieża compared to that of Jews in the western part of the same county before the Second World War, during the Holocaust and in the early post-war period. At the same time, the author points out that limited acts of antisemitism in this town do not mean that it was free of physical or symbolic violence at all.

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