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Rzeczpospolita Polska  
Ministerstwo  
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**PATRIA  
NOSTRA**



**The interview with Stanisław Zalewski - KL Auschwitz and Mauthausen (Gusen I, Gusen II) former prisoner, the president of the Polish Association of the Former Political Hitlerian Prisons and Concentration Camps Prisoners to the needs of "International Dialogue of Present-day Ways to Memorialize the Truth About German Genocide in the Territory of the Occupied Poland" project and within "Participation of the Witness of the History in the Project" point.**

**Patria Nostris:** Mrs Stanisław, because of the pandemic your plans to meet with the Touro College in Berlin, where you were supposed to tell about your experience from extermination camps and come to the students why the historical truth is so important in the context of who was a victim and who was an executioner during the II World War failed...

**Stanisław Zalewski:** I hope that the meeting will happen, I have a lot to tell to those young people. However, what is the most important at the moment is health. Nevertheless, I am very pleased that youth want to listen about such tough issues. I know from my own experience, that they like when everything is chronologically presented and the path "how it happened" is clearly showed.

**Patria Nostris:** Let's start with a standard question. There is a war, the capital is being occupied and young Stanisław Zalewski is living there...

**Stanisław Zalewski:** In 1940 I stopped education because of the hard material situation of my family. My brother offered me to recommend me to work at the car workshop in Street where he was working. I got hired. Soon after it the workshop was captured by Wermacht. We were repairing German army cars. After the ghetto was created, the place was on its territory. I had a special pass "ausweis" what is an identity document in which it was stated that I was working for the army of the Reich. I was a bit privileged because of that in case of "catching". In the streets of the ghetto I saw skinny people, literally the skin and bones, people who were not able to stand up after falling. Sometimes, the crowd was so big that it was hard to move. At the same time there were hanging posters advertising artistic shows,

the restaurants and cafés were working and it was possible to eat something there. There were some Jews hired in our car workshop. They asked us to bring them some food from the Aryan side. One day I asked them where the money they pay for the delivery come from. "They don't take money but everything what is shining" they responded. Unfortunately, my help in delivering food was limited by means of controls. When I was working there, the station of so called "navy blue" police was outside the ghetto and there German gendarme was standing, inside Jewish police officer. Everyone was checking us but the gendarme was more conscientious. I would approached when the functionary was busy checking his documents and then I was not controlled in details.

**Patria Nostris:** Did you see how Germans behaved towards Jews?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** In the workshop we were repairing cars and preparing new vehicles to work in hard atmospherical conditions and to fire the engines in low temperatures. On day a compressor which we were using to pump tyres broke. The soldier went out from the workshop and stopped a Jew and ordered him to pump truck tyres by hands. When he fell down because of tiredness the soldier stopped being interested in him and called out the next person from the ghetto. I also saw two young SS soldiers, whose car was in our workshop, stopping a Jew with a long beard. They take a lighter form a pocked, fired the beard and ordered him to run away quickly.

**Patria Nostris:** What were the circumstances of your arrest?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** Together with my friends we created a ring and named it "Four with the Letter 'S'" - there were three men named Stasiak and one Stefan. We got involved in a conspiracy operation of the Military Fight Association. We got an allocation to so called "small sabotage" group. We were operating outside the ghetto. We were painting inscriptions on uninhabited houses and also the symbol of "Fighting Poland" - the anchor. In the evening of 12th September 1943 I went to the aggregation to mill stones factory in the Warsaw Praga district where the father of one of my friends was the economic boss. We had a hideout there in the basement. In the morning, Stefan and me went to the action near the place where I was living at Olszowa Street. We were paintings on the walls of the building where in the past was the National Draft Office. It was a place rarely visited by people so we were not in a hurry when suddenly the German gendarmerie patrol occurred. They ordered us to rise our hands and we got arrested. They took belts form our trousers and lead us to the station at Szeroka Street. next we were taken to the building where before the war National Railways Management had its legal address, at present it is in front of the department store. Then, we were taken to Gestapo building at Szucha Avenue by a truck in the company of four sentries and put behind the bars. We were sitting there the whole night. In the morning, an old man speaking very well in Polish, paged us to a hearing. The hearing rooms were upstairs and prison cells on the ground floor. On the way, they implied me that if I told them how it was in real I would go home. I must admit that I believed him but when I entered the hearing room illusions left me. In front of me there

was a table and the SS officer at it. I stood at the table having two guards on my sides who were holding batons. The hearing started: name, surname, address, and we came to the painting. When the officer did not like my answer he waved his hand and the soldier standing on my left side started beating me. When he waved his second hand the one standing on my right side was beating me. Stefan was questioned before me. After having been arrested we sat up what we would say. I do not know if they believed us or just had something more important to do but we were just hardly beaten and put into the cells. I was covered in bruises but I was not enduringly injured. Late in the afternoon together with other prisoners we were driven to Pawiak. One day we were taken at Szucha Avenue again and the hearing repeated. Pawiak was an omen of an extermination camp...

**Patria Nostris:** When and in what circumstances were you transported to KL Auschwitz?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** After three weeks in the prison at Pawiak we were being transported towards an unknown direction. On October 5th 1943 the prisoners were gathered in a big room and we were searched. Then we were packed to the cars and transported to the railway station, what I got to know later it was in Gdańsk. We were literally forced to the wagons which had only two small windows. There was such a crowd that once somebody wanted to sit the rest of the passengers had to move to the walls. When the person who was sitting stood up the next one could take the place. We were sitting in the wagons an hour or two. The train moved. Passing the stations we realized that we were moving into Cracow direction. We were not given any food and our physiological needs were met in the corner of the wagon. At one of the stations we were brought some water in the cauldrons but it was not enough for everyone. Late in the night we reached Oświęcim. Some people from our wagon died and some of them were so exhausted that could barely move. Those who could move went out from the wagons themselves and the death were put out. The night was cloudy. We were positioned in the long columns of five. We had SS men with dogs on our sides. Then we were directed to the camp. Once someone leaned out the dogs would attack. That was our way to the gate with the inscription above it which said "*Arbeit macht frei*". It was clear then that we were in the notorious extermination camp Auschwitz. We were put into a barracks which were prepared for prisoners.

**Patria Nostris:** What was the procedure of taking into the camp?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** First, all the personal information were written down. I was surprised that functional prisoners in the entering barrack were Jews. Our transport was tattooed in an unusual place, namely on the inside part of the left arm. Some human transports were tattooed this way back then. In the National Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum I did not get the answer. Those prisoners documents were probably taken from the camp. In my opinion the people who were able to work with military equipment production were tattooed that way because most of those who came with me knew something about the mechanics. After being tattooed our hair was cut. Then we were disinfected and given striped clothes. We got shirts, drawers, trousers and jackets. We were also given hiking boots but there were

no caps. I had my own shoes. One of the functional prisoners offered me to exchange my shoes for a loaf of bread. I disagreed. "What will I wear after leaving the camp?" - I said. He looked at me suggestively and went away. I remembered the look for a long time...

**Patria Nostris:** Was there any moment back then which you especially memorized?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** One day our barrack was closed and we were not allowed to leave it for the whole day. In the feminine part of the camp we saw women who were ordered to take all their clothes and stay naked. They were put into the cars like some kind of a commodity. Charging covers were closed and they were taken to incinerator. There was a soldier driving a motorbike behind them. If one of the women jumped out he would shoot her.

**Patria Nostris:** How long were you in Auschwitz? Where did you go after?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** One month. During the time we were used to extend the camp. At the beginning we were recharging wagons with the building materials. I had to lift 50 kilos cement bags in a hurry. Those who fell down because of the exhaustion and were not able to stand up were killed. At the beginning of November we were gathered in one barrack. At dawn we were put in animal wagons. Nowadays, when the prisoner transport to the camps is described the expression "bovine" is being used but to be precise those were commodity wagons with small windows through which the air was barely getting in. The wagon in which we were transported had big not covered ventilation holes, the floor was covered with hay and we could sit because of the relatively small number of prisoners.

**Patria Nostris:** Was that the transport from which the prisoners escaped?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** There were two SS sentries. They sat at the door and did not pay attention to us. After some time the train stopped at the railway spur. Through the window we saw that we were in Vienna. The train was standing there relatively long. The sentry service changed. When the train set off SS men started counting the prisoners. It occurred that there were two prisoners missing and the planks in the corner of the wagon were loose. The investigation started, especially among those who were standing the closest to the place. They selected some people who were allegedly helping in the escape and they were beaten hard. One of the prisoners was hung on the hook which was in the wagon with a belt. The belt was breaking several times but in the end the prisoner was hung. Two other prisoners were beaten so hard that they lost their consciousness. After reaching Mauthausen the prisoners went out from the wagon. Those three who were dead were taken out and put on the side. There was no person who did not have any stains of blood after what happened in the wagon. We were stood in a column and took to the camp. The escape a mystery to me till this day. Before entering the wagon we were searched so how could the prisoners whip the planks off once they did not have any tools? How could they run away having only the striped clothes?

**Patria Nostris:** What was happening after you arrived in the camp?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** We were showered once again and put into a barrack from which we could go out only for appeals. Then we were hired to carry stones from the quarry in Gusen to the place where their size and shape was changed. The prisoners were walking in an array. Next to them SS men and prisoners' functionaries were standing with long sticks. Once they noticed that someone was carrying too small a stone they were beating him and then the person could not be able to stand up. Then the person was pushed down the gorge. The prisoners wanting to protect themselves from such a situation thought over a technique to mislead the warders. Flat but having a big surface stone had to be chosen, then walking next to the warders the stone had to be put on the back in such a position that its ground was directed towards the soldiers. The prisoners intentionally were bending their knees to show how heavy the stone was. It lasted more than two weeks. In that time many prisoners died and only the strongest ones remained alive. Next I was assigned to Messerschmitt Sonderkommandos. At the beginning we were transporting machines and devices from the railway platform in Gusen to a hall. Those were devices and parts to the machines dedicated for a montage. After placing the machines by mechanics I was assigned to a production group in a gallery, it means in a corridor which was hollowed in the slope of a mountain. There were produced some components. We did not know what were they produced for back then. Those were probably elements for Messerschmitt planes or V2 rockets.

**Patria Nostris:** How a typical day in Gusen I camp looked like?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** It depended on the place where you worked. In Messerschmitt group we were working 10 hours a day. We got up at 5 o'clock in the morning, our beds had to be done neatly - at the beginning we were sleeping alone - then we had a morning appeal and breakfast consisted of a bowl of coffee without sugar with a small addition, gathering, dividing into working groups and moving out of the camp. We were walking in files directly. At the gate an SS man would count the prisoners in a group run by a prisoner functionary. When it comes to a dinner it was differently but it was delivered to our working places or we would come back to our barrack for a meal. The dishes were supposed to be eaten very quickly, sometimes not all of us finished it. Then we went to work again and came back to the camp late in the afternoon. We were counted again, redressing, if you had something for a change, washing and an appeal. In Gusen there were appeals for all prisoners at the appeal square. After it we were given a supper and then we had a free time till the bell rang. After hearing it everyone had to go to sleep. Fortunately, I was in a barrack where SS men and prisoners' functionaries' excesses were taking place. I got to know from my colleagues that in the evenings SS men could enter the barracks and catch the prisoners who were noted by a prisoners' functionary for not working hard enough or taking a cap off incorrectly.

**Patria Nostris:** Were different nationalities prisoners in Gusen I?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** There were only Polish people in our barrack. In others there were Italian, Spanish and French people. They were located together if there was enough space.

Some of the prisoners had only beds in a barrack but did not spend there too much time. For example, the kitchen was taken by the French who were general Franco opponents. The meals were prepared for the whole camp so the prisoners would work there from the early morning to the late afternoon or even night. They would enter the barrack to take their clothes. When it comes to my work in a production group, to which I was assigned to after transportation group was dissolved, I was the only Pole there. There were working Italian, French and some Germans. We created our language to communicate. Some of the tools were named in Polish, some in French and so on. The bond between prisoners was created there, once someone has something to eat it was shared with others.

**Patria Nostria:** Do you remember any celebrations in the camp?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** I remember that at Christmas in 1943 in Gusen I a warder expelled us out of the barrack to have a shower in the free air. After the shower we were given clothes and then I have a white stain in my memory. Later, I got to know from the literature that the prisoners who were living in the barrack next to ours were preparing a Nativity play. This is the first situation which I did not remember. Due to the fact that there were not enough food to create energy, the organism was using its reserves and many deficits created in the organs. In my case, as I got to know later from the doctor, the areas responsible for storing the memories were "attacked". Some of the events I remember very well and others are from me just white stains. Not everyone knows about it and say that this is a forgettery.

**Patria Nostria:** Did you have any contact with a hospital camp called in Polish "rewir" in Gusen? That was a sinister place arousing anxiety just with its name...

**Stanisław Zalewski:** Yes. I had a wound in my right hand which was getting bigger and oozing. Dressing it with some sheets or parts of a cement bag did not bring any results. I started limping, then I could barely walk. I had a choice - stay in a barrack and expose myself to the death or go to "rewir" from which people did not go out alive. I decided to go to the hospital. I had to write my name on the list. A prisoners functionary checked if I really needed to be in the hospital. Before entering the place we were undressed and stayed naked. Then we were painted numbers on our chests. After entering the room every prisoner was checked by a prisoners functionary. He asked us our surnames and names. When I started to speak in Polish I heard a question asked in my mother tongue. "Where are you from?". "From Warsaw" - I responded. "Do you know where are Targowa and Ząbkowska Streets?" - asked after the stranger. I confirmed. "There was my parents bakery" - the prisoner said. "I know because my parents send me there for cookies" - I answered. I was given a camp bed and was sleeping alone on the floor. I was also given clothes. Other prisoners were lying naked two on each level of a camp bed which had three or four levels. Moreover, I was given full meals and a prisoners functionary let the doctors and the prisoners take care of me. They had paper bandages and I was also given some medications.

**Patria Nostria:** Did you find a friendly soul in that Varsovian?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** I have a dilemma here. My bed was next to the fire. At night a prisoners functionary would sit next to that fire. the prisoners who could finally go to the toilet at night went holding the edges of beds. When he noticed a prisoner who did like that he approached him and was beating his head with a stick. he had two helpers who would quickly take a miserable person to the toilet and once he was still alive they hung him on the door handle. When it was there it repeated many times. I pretended to be asleep and was even snoring. I do not know what would have happened once the man noticed that I saw what he was doing. When I felt better I told him that I wanted to come back to my barrack. "Sit here, you have full meals, clothes, when you will come back to the barrack you would have to work." - he said. At the end he just waved his hand. In 1946 I was walking along Vistula where before the war was a recreational centre. I noticed surprised that in one of volleyball teams there is a man who looked like the prisoners functionary I mentioned. I did not know what to do. I decided to went away for a moment and gather my thoughts. When I came back and wanted to verify if that was him the man was gone. Maybe that was better because I would have a dilemma what to do - taking under consideration justice because he was killing people or be grateful because he saved my life. This moral problem is with me till this day. Young people who listen to my memories say that I should be grateful, adults say that I should make a choice.

**Patria Nostria:** And what was the procedure of taking into Gusen II?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** I was relocated to Gusen II in a half of August 1944. We met Varsovians who were transported to the camp. They told us what was the course of the Warsaw Uprising. We were not upborned by the story we were told. In Gusen I being one of the Messerschmitt factory worker I was accommodated in a brick-built building number 6. After coming back from work and the appeal there was one hour left when the prisoners could meet and talk on the corridors. In Gusen II I felt as if I moved from a solid hotel to a cottage. Wooden buildings, crowd because there were more and more people needed to military production. In my barrack there were two level camp beds and two prisoners was sleeping on one bed. The sanitary conditions were incomparably worse and the system itself and a working day organization more oppressive than in Gusen I. We were woken up at 5 o'clock in the morning, then the appeal, breakfast and an assembly. Two or three hours before work we would sit in a narrow-gauge train. The sides of the wagons were 1,5 meter high or maybe more. There were so many prisoners put into those wagons that we could not move. A train completed this way was moving very slowly and soldiers with dogs were walking along it. A travel from the place we were working in from the camp lasted almost an hour, the working time was extended even to twelve hours in the last months of the war. This is why we did not have too much time for our needs. In a comparison to Gusen I food rations were smaller, probably by the prisoners functionaries. One day,

getting down from my bed I noticed that my companion was still in his bed. I told him to wake up for the appeal. Unfortunately, he died at night and I was so tired that I did not notice it. The prisoners who were not physically strong enough would die. I think that sending prisoners from Gusen I to Gusen II was on purpose because there the selection happened itself. Even a little slip was punished with lashes. The prisoner was put on a special sawhorse and beaten. The prisoners called Gusen I a threshold of the hell, Gusen II its bottom. There were people who used to say that they would rather have been in Auschwitz.

**Patria Nostris:** How do you remember the liberation?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** We were working in the tunnels till the 2nd May 1945 where fuselages for Messerschmitt jets were being produced. We noticed that during the night of 2 to 3 May, German camp authorities and the people who were controlling the production ran away. On the towers instead of SS warders there were standing old men from the Austrian army. They were persuading the prisoners to run away from the camp because the war was over. However, the prisoners did not want to believe it. When SS men were running away they took from the storages all they thought was useful. This is why there was almost nothing to eat in the camp. On the 5th May American military trucks came. The joy was ubiquitous. The prisoners started to sing their national anthems. The soldiers demilitarize the men who were standing on the towers, threw the weapons on a pile, poured it with gasoline and fired. They took the warders and left the camp. The day of reckoning started in the camp. The prisoners who felt up to do something started to stifle the fire. In my opinion Americans fired it so sloppily on purpose. Some of the prisoners took the weapons and left the camp territory. After some time the rest of the prisoners looked as if some king of a ghost entered them and gave them force to do something and boosted them psychically and physically - they had force for retribution. Prisoners functionaries, capos and prisoners who were working with executioners and the rest of those who was abusing prisoners. They were killed with whatever the prisoners have on them - a club, plank, stone. Their bodies were hanging on the wires or were lying on the square. Those who managed ran away quickly. Patrols who were chasing them were created, however not all of them were found. From the camp literature I got to know that back then several dozen of the prisoners functionaries were killed. In the meantime the prisoners who left the camp started to come back. They were bringing everything what was edible and like they were saying they got it from the neighboring people who would remember the day for a long time. They had bread, fruit, vegetables, living animals like goats or poultry. In the evening the camp looked like a medieval village. Burning bonfires and the prisoners sitting around them. It was disastrous. When I went out in the morning I saw that in the places where the prisoners were sitting there were only dead people. From the nightmare which the camp was they were the victims of the surfeit. It was a shock for them. I live just because there was one old man who warned me: "Eat but not too much and slowly". But how to tell it a prisoner who was eating barely nothing for many days? From my group everyone was alive. This is how the first day of freedom looked like. After a few days we started to think what to do. For two or three days there was no one

in the camp with help. The prisoners tried to organize something themselves and support each other.

**Patria Nostris:** How was the return way to the country?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** We heard the auditions, I think from Poland, anyway in Polish. Poles were called to come back to Poland in those auditions. They were saying that thousands of German captives were working to declutter the capital. Americans offered the cars to transport us so we benefited. On the border of the American zone Soviet administration took us. There, we were also accommodated in a repatriation camp. All of the men who could work were forced to work. I was working repairing routes and streets. My friends from Warsaw and I were not happy of that. We put backpacks and went in the border direction. After leaving the city we met a Pole who warned us that the sides of the routes are mined. He suggested travelling by railways, however not through sleepers but through tracks. We reached the nearest station this way. there was a commodity wagon which was directed to Poland. We sat wherever there was a place and we were travelling this way for several dozen of kilometers. the train did not go any further. the coal was missing and the commodities which were brought were supposed to be unpacked there. We were travelling on foot till we reached Drezno. Suburbs were dead, ruins, no birds. After coming back to Poland I got to know that it was the result of American bombing. In one of the towns a father with his little daughter and one man joined us. There was a bridge near us but there were standing warders on it. Finally, after paying a boatman we sailed across Odra by a boat. reaching the second bank we saw Soviet warders. I think that the boatman was cooperating with them. I panicked and threw commando knife into Odra. Later, I regretted having done that. We were taken to a special room, some kind of a prison. Russian were hearing us. In one of the localities we were given some food. We arrived in Legnica where we could eat something and get better clothes. In the place where we were the information about us were written down, I got a document which confirmed that I was coming back "from Germany from Oświęcim camp". The prisoners exchange was working then. they suggested me to say that I was in Auschwitz, not Gusen. I agreed. After coming back to Warsaw it occurred that all Auschwitz prisoners got higher allowance.

**Patria Nostris:** What happened with the "S" letter friends?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** The friend with which I was arrested died in Gusen because of the exhaustion. Second, committed a suicide after the war ended. Second Staszek who participated in uprising in Prague district in Warsaw and I were alive. I met him after a few months. He told me that he came back from the forest. " I will tell you just one thing, Stachu, this is not what we were fighting for" - he summed up.

**Patria Nostris:** You often repeat a very important word for Polish people - memory. We cannot forget about harms, but can we condone them?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** I believe in God. But I have a problem. In *Our Father* prayer there is a part: "and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". Being a former extermination camp prisoner can I forgive sins those who were killing people with premeditation? Does forgiving means forgetting about injuries and remedy? War is war, armed people are killing each other. Here vulnerable people are killed with premeditation. But it is said that humans are created Goodlike...

**Patria Nostria:** What is your message to Touro Collage students?

**Stanisław Zalewski:** The youngest prisoners are 75 now, others are 80-90 years old. With time our memory about the past is becoming more pale and our community will disappear in some years. I would like to leave a message that each war starts violence on both sides. the stronger one dictates the law, sometimes very brutal. The violence destroys the moral border between good and bad. Arises subjective revenge activities which not always run to a given aim. This is why reconciliation between nations and people, who were put on the opposite sides, without forgiving and the historical truth is like a bridge without a handrail - you can go through but not without worries. This is a task and a moral duty for all governments and those who will be in charge in the future. They should run the activities which will help and let all the nations of the world leave in a common respect. All the people are equal - there are no better and worse ones. We experienced it ourselves when we were the prisoners of the extermination camps.