

Transcript of the *Shoah* Interview with Yehuda Lerner  
Translation by Caitlin N. Kelly - Volunteer – Visitor Services – October 2008

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Lerner 1

Lanzmann: Good, Francine, you tell Lerner to start to relate his story, as he wants to retell it... I think that what he has to say starts in July '42 in Warsaw, but if he wants to start earlier, he can, apparently.

Lerner: Yes, all starts on July 22, 1942, at the moment when they make us leave the Warsaw ghetto; they gather us at the \_\_\_\_\_ Platz and they tell us that they are going to send some of us off, they do not know where yet; at this moment, I am still with my parents, with my family, but very quickly we are separated, they send me to one side, my parents and my family to the other, and from that moment I am alone. They tell us that in some days they would send us into a work camp, and effectively, after these few days still spent in Warsaw, we leave for Russia.

L: Listen, ... so July 22 '42, this is the first of the big deportations of the population of Jews for Treblinka?

LR: It is the first big action of this kind.

L: And this is the first day?

LR: Yes, and it is this first day that they stopped us.

L: Good, because that lasted from July 22, 1942 until October 1942 ... And those, that's after really the first day, they had been among the first to be rounded up ... Can he describe \_\_\_\_\_ Platz, how it was?

LR: In fact, it is the place where they were assembling all the Jews, and at this place were the railcars, the freight cars, the freight cars for goods, into which they ushered all the Jews

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LR: that they wanted to deport, and there were evidently a lot of Germans.

L: What age was he?

LR: 16 years, just 16 years.

L: 16 years; and the members of his family who had been assembled with him at the \_\_\_\_\_ Platz, who were they?

LR: My mother, my father, my brother and my sister, and I had another brother but he was already in a camp.

L: Does he remember life in the ghetto, before July 22, 1942?

LR: I remember, I remember well.

L: What does he have to say?

LR: The situation was terrible, the people were dying of hunger, there was nothing. Each day, dozens of people were dying in the street, of hunger.

L: Does he remember that the Germans, in order to make the Jews come voluntarily, at the beginning anyway, to the Station, told to those who would come that they would have three loaves of bread per family?

LR: This, I myself do not remember; us, they arrested us in the very interior of our house, these are the Germans who came with the Jewish police.

L: Was it violent, the round-up at the \_\_\_\_\_ Platz?

LR: Yes, there were blows, and everything, but myself, in any case, I did not really see everything, since I was immediately put aside, and taken from the \_\_\_\_\_ Platz, in order to take me away while my parents stayed longer and they had, I knew thereafter, been deported to Treblinka,

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LR: then I have never seen them again.

L: ... and gassed there. But, he had been selected with who, who were the people that they had selected for this... this special transport, on July 22, 1942?

LR: He says that among the Germans, it was the SD who took the...

L: I am not asking who selected, but who are the Jews that had been selected, they chose what kind of Jews?

LR: The people able to work.

L: From young people; how many were there?

LR: Very numerous, some thousands, of young people...

L: So okay, that he recounts...

LR: We were immediately taken into the \_\_\_\_\_ Platz in order to be taken to the Tribunal, finally the place where before the was there was located a Polish Tribunal and we stayed there some days, we received each day a morsel of bread and something to drink and after some days we were then placed into the freight cars to transport us, they said, to a work camp.

L: But this was in the ghetto, or outside the ghetto”

LR: Outside the ghetto.

L: Outside the ghetto; and new arrivals were brought every day?

LR: Yes; yes, it seems, they needed a certain number of young people that they brought in... in order to transport them,

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LR: this is probably what they waited for over several days.

L: So, the next...

LR: ...

## Lerner 2

LR: And so, it is there that everything started; for nearly a week, we traveled in these freight cars; each day we were given a little water through the door. After we were placed in the freight cars, they distributed to us a loaf of bread each, and soon we arrived in Belorussia and we were unloaded for work, the place where we arrived was located near an old airport.

L: What was it called?

LR: The name of the place, I do not remember exactly, in any case it was an airfield and we were working in construction, we were constructing buildings; the conditions were very hard, very little to eat, the Germans on the spot fired on the Jews, without reason, and in particular the pilots when they returned in the evening, got drunk and amused themselves by shooting, firing on the Jews, in the head in general.

L: This was a military airport?

LR: Yes, military.

L: And this, this is the first place where he had been, after having left Warsaw?

LR: Yes, yes, the first place.

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L: And so?

LR: When I had seen how bad the situation was, each day dozens of young people dying, either of hunger or because they had been ... they had been shot in the head, I told myself that I absolutely needed to leave that place, I had a friend to whom I said, let's escape, whatever happens, it will be better than to die here from hunger. We had been near the barbed wire and I told myself, even if one dies here near the barbed wire, there too it would be better.

L: But one question, were you marked, ... how were they dressed, did they wear the yellow star?

LR: Yes, we had civilian clothes but which had a number, a number on a red and white background, a personal number.

L: Does he remember after how long he decided to escape, he effectively escaped?

LR: After two months; around two months, when I saw that so many men died of hunger or because they were shot, it is at this moment that I decided that our situation could not have been worse, I did not know very well indeed what our situation was, but I proposed to my friend to leave, to flee rather than to die here.

L: Was he afraid, in the camp?

LR: Of course I was afraid, I was terribly afraid; I remember one day when we two to each were to carry these large stones, one day a friend who was behind me fell dead, someone had shot him in the back; one could die at any moment in the camp, dozens of people died uniquely because of the bullets of the elite ambushers who shot you in the back. Without talking about the dozens

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LR: of others who died of hunger. Each day one buried dozens of people in this camp, it was of truly terrible conditions.

L: And why were they shot in the back, why were they killed when they were needed to work?

LR: It was... it was a game for the Germans, it was truly... first they were drunk and then they were amused, they were amused to be behind you, to point the barrel at your temple and to try to make you blink[?], it was a game, they were drunk.

L: So then he escapes...

LR: Yes, we had... we had fled, my friend and I, we waited one afternoon when all the world returned, and we stayed hidden until the evening, and the evening came, we had passed the barbed wire barrier by tearing up our clothes a little, and we then entered the fields and we walked in these fields.

L: There was... how was this country, there were the forests, there were... and they planned to go where, did they speak... the people there spoke what language?

LR: The people spoke Russian. We walked for two days entirely in the fields without meeting anyone, after two days, we encountered the Russian peasants, whom we asked for something to eat; during the first two days, there were things that we found in the fields that we were content to eat. And so this third day the Russians gave us something to eat, we then continued during the days to walk in the fields.

L: In which direction?

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LR: I do not know, I do know not at all in which direction we were going, how could I know where we were going? The essential thing, it was to leave, to depart, to quit this camp and to hike, to go, and to try to do something, we knew not what to do, and after some days the Germans recaptured us, the Germans, you know, with the black helmet and the brand of the Sonderkommando, Sonderdienst.

L: No, it is not Sonderdienst, it is Siechereindienst...

LR: You know, these soldiers with the helmet, who had in the middle of the helmet the emblem of a human skull... The Germans took us and for our luck, they made us climb into a truck, they took us into another camp. Yes, because the Jews in the second camp told us, How is it possible that the Germans took you without shooting you on the spot? It was probably our luck. Because over there, it was very simple, either one was hanging on or one was shot all of a sudden. And, I know not, probably, it was my luck, our luck.

### Lerner 3

L: What was the trade of your father?

LR: He was a baker, but we had a store.

L: And your mother worked also?

LR: Yes, in the store.

L: He was religious, your father?

LR: Yes.

L: Observant?

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LR: Yes, until 1938, he even had a beard, but in '38 anti-Semitism became such that the Poles would catch the Jews who had a beard, they would drag them by the beard, they would tear it out, finally my father was afraid at that moment then to keep his beard, he shaved it, but until '38 he had one and he was pious, yes.

L: And he kept his bakery during the period in the ghetto?

LR: No, the trade of my father was baker, but it was already very long that he did not work in his own store, he was working in a bakery, and we had a store. [?]

L: And before... before the entrance of the Germans into Warsaw, and before the establishment of the ghetto, what kind of school did he attend?

LR: In a Polish school, where there were at the time Jews and Poles, a mixed school, we were together.

L: It was not a Hebrew school?

LR: There was a Hebrew school, but myself I went to school like everyone, to a communal school like the others, but I also went to \_\_\_\_\_.

L: He lived where in Warsaw? Before the war?

LR: On Zolna.

L: Zolna, this was when the ghetto was established, Zolna was a street of the ghetto, no, it was made part of the ghetto?

LR: ....

L: But before the war, he was also living on Zolna?

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LR: At the same place.

L: So he always lived in the Jewish quarter?

LR: This quarter was then to have been integrated into the ghetto.

L: It is so; and does he speak Polish?

LR: Of course I speak Polish.

L: Without an accent?

LR: Today of course I don't speak as well as at that time, it is 40 years, but...

L: No, when I say without accent, did he speak with a Yiddish accent?

LR: This, I can not very well tell you, okay, I think well that I... finally I spoke Polish quite fluently, by the way I continue to speak Polish today.

L: He speaks Yiddish as well?

LR: Yes.

L: Fluently?

LR: But at school one learned in Polish, all was in Polish, the classes.

L: And Russian, he learned as well?

LR: No, Russian, I did not learn it, but I learned a little Russian when I was in Russia.

L: So, how did he speak to the Belorussian peasants when he escaped, in order to ask them to eat?

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LR: We spoke Polish to them, because Polish and Russian, ultimately, are similar and to ask for bread, this is the same word in Polish and in Russian.

L: Good, then, and the friend with whom he escaped, it was a friend that he knew from the moment when they had been assembled at the \_\_\_\_\_ Platz or did he know him before? From Warsaw?

LR: It was a friend that I met at the \_\_\_\_\_ Platz, and we left together.

L: Good, and did he suffer from hunger in these camps?

LR: Yes, I suffered enormously from the hunger; in one of these camps, I even arrived at what is called in our language 'musselman,' that is to say it was the malnutrition.

L: Why does he say, in one of the camps, were there many?

LR: Yes, I was in very many camps, in eight, in eight camps, each time that I arrived in a new camp, I saw that the people were dying of hunger by the hundreds, by the thousands, and each time I told myself, better to die from a bullet in the head, better to be hung than to die from this death by hunger, because I saw the people who inflated, who deflated or

who became very skinny, and I told myself, this kind of death, no, it is too terrible, better to flee, and each time I fled and I was caught, I was seized, I was put in another camp and each time the conditions were just as terrible.

L: I don't understand; he escaped, he was in eight camps in Russia, he escaped from eight camps?

LR: Yes.

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L: In how long?

LR: In six months.

L: In six months, he escaped from eight camps?

LR: Six months, from eight camps.

L: What was that rage to escape? Could one escape so easily?

LR: A man who wants to live, for him, nothing is difficult; when I saw that in these camps, in these conditions, there was no more to live, I told myself, I have nothing more to lose; anything would be better, to try anything rather than be in these conditions of non-life. Rather than stay in the camp where each day death was assured, simply the fact of being in his camp, I had told myself better to try, try, try to leave from here, to run away, so I tried.

L: And if while escaping, he risked being shot, being hung, being...

LR: Each time when someone tried to escape, and to run away like this, it is because he expects something better, of course there was a danger, there was also this hope that this would be better elsewhere, it is for this that I tried each time and that I fled, but each time I was recaptured and I was placed again in a camp where I saw that the conditions were exactly the same, that is to say just as bad, until the last time when I was recaptured, when they put me in a camp that was inside a city, in Minsk and I realized that there one was still in a city.

L: But, was it exceptional to escape like this, were there other Jews escaping?

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LR: Of course, there were other attempts, other Jews who escaped, but ultimately I wanted to live, so...

Lerner 4

LR: Yes, other Jews also tried to escape, but me, me, I wanted to live; I could not, in this camp, in these conditions which were not life, continue to stay there; it was a sure thing that if I had not had the courage to leave each time from these camps and to escape, I would not be here today to tell this story to you and I repeat to you, even if I repeat myself, I would prefer to take a bullet or to be hung rather than to stay in those conditions which were not a life.

L: Was it very easy to escape from these camps?

LR: From the camp, it was very difficult to escape, but each time, I escaped from the place for labor; now I would like to explain to you an episode which will make you understand why it was necessary that I escape; in one of these camps where I was working near a German kitchen, towards the afternoon I was trying to steal something in the trash, and the Germans caught me and they submerged me in the cold water, it was in the winter, they plunged me into the cold water, and they gave me so many beatings that I had been swollen for a week, so it was necessary that I escape, I could not stay in these conditions; and in this camp, the one where I was beaten, where I had been bedded [made to need bed rest] for a week, there was a selection every week, so the eve of the day of the selection, I got up, I presented myself to the role call as if I was cured, as if I was in good health in any case, at this time it was the Lithuanians who

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LR: came, who made the selection and those who were... the Lithuanians... those who were... who were not kept were taken to the exterior of the camp and shot on the spot and I succeeded in staying... all the sick were made to leave from the camp, were shot, me I succeeded in crossing this selection without being put aside and the next day I fled, but ultimately not from the camp, I was at work, and from there I ran away.

L: All the camps were in the same region?

LR: It was a distance of 30 to 40 kilometers from one to the other.

L: So he was retaken every time?

LR: After some days... I have to say that me, I had a particular luck, because there were other people who escaped and who were brought back to the camp from where they came to run away, whereas me, I had an extraordinary luck, each time that I escaped, the Germans who were going by car caught me and took me to where they were going, therefore into another camp, because if I had been brought back to the camp whence I was coming to make my escape, then there it was a sure hanging.

L: So, what did he tell to the Germans when he was caught?

LR: Me, I said very simply the truth, I said that I came to escape. It was... there was no other possibility, a Jew had nothing to look for outside of death, I preferred still to take a

bullet rather than return to that place. From this, I hardly had any clothes, I could not pull myself, externally one could see that although I had my number, I had no more than skin

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LR: and bones, I could not lie.

L: He had unbelievable luck, they did not shoot him?

LR: This is true; yes, it's true, you know, when you have a good star to guide you, so you live. Me, I believe that it was my good star, because finally, if I had been stopped by Germans whose duty was to deal with the fugitives from the camps, certainly they would have returned me to my camp, they would have hanged me, it is this that came to pass with all the others, those that had been captured, who had been brought back to the camp, who had hung. But me, truly it seems, it was my luck, each time it was the Germans, like so, that passed by chance, who captured me, who brought me to wherever they were going and I found myself in another camp. Well, it was my luck.

L: Good; after, then, he arrives... he spoke about Minsk just now...

LR: I escaped always with the same friend, since from the last camp whence I escaped with this friend, we were caught, we were brought to Minsk and after we were imprisoned in a locked room, we waited and suddenly we were shown before two young men who made up a part of the Judenrat of Minsk and there was also a Jewish police officer from the Minsk ghetto and the Germans...

L: In Minsk, there was a ghetto, this is the first thing that he must say...

LR: Yes, this is so; so, the Germans said that we must be brought into the ghetto, and this is a fact, when the Jews of the Minsk ghetto saw us, they were truly stupefied, because we had the air of walking corpses, really of those who should have already been put in a coffin and the people of the Judenrat told us, you know,

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LR: here in Minsk, those who do not go every day to work, die of hunger, and your situation risks being very difficult, only there is near here a camp of Jewish prisoners of the Russians, maybe...

L: From the Red Army, you want to say...

LR: From the Red Army; but it was only Jews; maybe there, you would have your luck.

L: I don't understand; that he tell this story better than this, because I understand nothing; I want to say... the men of the SD brought them into a room, there are two young men from the Judenrat who come, finally... no, it will not do, this. He begins this story.

LR: ...

L: He begins this story from zero; and then, you, please, translate it right. Go, go...

LR: ...

### Lerner 5

LR: When the Germans caught us after our last escape, from the last camp, after a journey of several hours by car, we found ourselves in the city of Minsk. In Minsk, there was over there a ghetto and the Germans imprisoned us in a... probably what was an old Command, office of a command, in a locked room. After several hours of waiting, we were made to leave and were lead us to two people dressed in civilian clothes, Jews, and a Jewish police officer. And the Germans gave us up to them, with the order to lead us

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LR: to the ghetto; in the ghetto, we have so much the air... we no longer have a human appearance, the Jews told us, you can never survive here because in the ghetto, everyone who is not able to go each day to work dies of hunger; only, there is in Minks, or at least right next to it, a camp of Jewish prisoners of the Russians, and...

L: Of Russia, this he wants to say?

LR: It was the prisoners of war, nationals of the Red Army, Jews.

L: So, it was for prisoners of war, soviets, from the Red Army, Jews; good.

LR: If you can return to this camp, maybe you would have the possibility, little by little, to find your human figure and to find the strength to work, because we were in a state, truly, where we could not work. At that time, then, we were in a deplorable state, covered by thousands of lice, of [like?] veritable walking corpses. We were brought into the Russian prisoner of war camp and we were greeted by a Polish Jew who asked us where we came from, who we were, we told him, he said, Very good, I am taking you under my protection. We were undressed, made to bathe, and we spent several days in this camp, and after several days I had been infected by typhus. I then spent several weeks, sick, in the camp, in a barrack which served as a hospital, it was of course not a hospital, but at least one could receive there nourishment a little closer to edible and this allowed me, after several weeks, to heal. The prisoners of the camp left each morning, escorted by the Germans, to work in the interior of the city of Minsk and when I had been healed, I joined one morning a group of workers.

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L: Good; these prisoners of war of the Red Army, it was Jewish prisoners, this is so?

LR: All Jews.

L: For him, was there a difference between them, between the Jews there and the other Jews in the work camps where he came from, or the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, how did he see them, was it another race of men, was it different?

LR: The difference was enormous; first, their physical condition was much better, they received nourishment, one could not say that it was wonderful, but in any case one could live, from this nourishment, and then it was clean, it was an orderly camp, one could see that although there lived here these men, it was men in good health, it was really...

L: Was it men or was it soldiers?

LR: Well, they did not have their ranks on them, they did not carry their ranks, but we saw that it was soldiers, it was men, they had the air of good health, it was not like the unfortunate we saw in the other camps, these had truly the air of being men, strong.

L: This is what I ask... no, but... what you want to say that the Germans...

LR: Another difference between life in this camp and life in the other camps, it was also important in terms of the relations that the prisoners had with the civilian population, they had the opportunity to speak, to meet up with the civilian populace, which allowed them to return after their workday to the camp bringing

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LR: an extra ration, for example, of bread or potatoes, or even a morsel of meat.

L: Does he want to say that the Germans had... when they have won the victories over the Red Army and took prisoners, they separated the Jewish prisoners of war from the other Soviet prisoners?

LR: Yes, it seems that this is how it was, since anyway in this camp it only had Jews and I was told thereafter that when the prisoners, when they were made prisoners, they were asked who was a Jew, and those who were Jews were put aside and brought to this camp.

L: So, if I understand you correctly, he was made to pass for a Jewish Soviet prisoner of war, is this so?

LR: No, of course, ... pass as a prisoner of war, it is the ghetto, the people of the ghetto, who told me that it was the only place where I had a chance to survive, because I was incapable of working at that moment, I would not have been able to stay in the ghetto.

L: Good, so what happens after?

LR: When I had healed from typhus, I felt that I had found a little of my strength, and at that moment I asked to leave for work.

L: And then?

LR: The director of the camp said, good, because you are not yet in condition, I am going to give you a job that is not too difficult and you can stay all day in a warm place.

L: This is what, the director of the camp?

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LR: It was the director, who decided who was going to work where, since each morning we were split up into work groups, there were a number of us in this camp, there were one thousand two hundred and each morning we left in groups, and the director decided that I would go to some part where this would not be too difficult.

L: Oh, listen, the director, finally... Christ... the director, the director of the camp, what does it mean, the director, in the end... !!

LR: I translated, what do you want... me, I know nothing of this period... I translated... listen!

L: It was what? It was a Jew, it was a German, it was... It was the ghetto, it was the prison camp?

LR: (How... if you are in this state...) The one who apportioned according to...

L: And [ben], they say, the chief, they don't say the director, let's see...

LR: Me, I translate, what do you want, I don't know what it is... !!

L: Oh listen... !!

### Lerner 6

LR: We were already past a few months in the camp when one night, we were woken up, all the lights were lit in the middle of the night, and the barracks had been suddenly surrounded by the Germans who shouted, Get up, get up, get dressed, go! At the entrance of the camp there were parked

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LR: German military vehicles, we were made to get into these cars and we were taken, we knew not for where, we found ourselves before the train station and there we were made to climb into the railcars.

L: This was when?

LR: At the beginning of September '42.

L: '42?

LR: Sorry, '43.

L: And which were those who were made to get in?

LR: Us, all who found themselves in this camp.

L: In this camp, you mean it was then the Jewish prisoners of war... ?

LR: Yes, but at the moment when we were made to climb up into the railcars, we realized... We realized, towards dawn, that they brought also the Jews that we had left from the ghetto.

L: The ghetto in Minsk?

LR: Yes, the ghetto in Minsk; we realized because they wore the sign, the star, then one knew that it was the Jews from the ghetto. But us, the prisoners, we were in more railcars, all together.

L: Then, he was with the Jewish Soviet prisoners of war?

LR: Yes, with the people from my camp.

L: Very good; then?

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LR: They made us climb into these cattle cars and at the entrance, each person received two loaves of bread. For five to six days we rolled, without knowing very well in what direction, until we arrived...

L: It was railcars for merchandise?

LR: Yes, railcars for goods. We arrived in Lublin and in Lublin...

L: Were they told something when they boarded the railcars?

LR: Nothing; one did not even say... we were not talking, nothing at all. In Lublin, in Poland, it became known thereafter that located there was an extermination camp, Majdanek. We have a half-day there, in the camp, well, not quite in the camp, a little outside the camp, it seems that it must not have had there a place for us, so we [retook] the route, the journey.

L: In the train?

LR: Yes, in the same train; after two, three hours of the journey, we arrived in Shelm. In Shelm, a Pole who worked in the train station for the Germans, he came close and said in Polish to one of the Jews who was near him... there was a little opening like this in the railcars, an air hole, he told him, Flee, you are going to be brought to Sobibor, as my friends did not understand Polish, they called me so that I could try to understand, and the Pole repeated, he had time only just to repeat, Flee, because in Sobibor, you are brought to be cremated [?].

L: He made a gesture, the Pole?

LR: No, he did not make gestures, he was there in fact

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LR: to write down the numbers of the railcars. And me, when I was made to come, it was already going away and he very very quickly called simply, Flee, because you are being brought to be cremated in Sobibor, this is what I was able to catch.

L: What did he think?

LR: The Pole, ... I explained in Polish that... I explained to my comrades what the Pole had said, that the Jews were being brought to be destroyed by fire, but no one actually believe him, he was not believed and we continued to roll, at that moment we could have escaped, why? Because in fact, as it was necessary to meet our needs, we had with a knife made a big hole in the ground of the train car...

L: In the floor...

LR: In the floor, we could have very well left through this hole, but given that we did not believe him, we could not even understand that people would be taken to be burned, we never again heard to talk about this. We continued to roll, night had already fallen when we arrived at a place where we could not know the name since it was too dark to be able to discern any surface; at that moment, the Germans surrounded the train screaming that those who were looking outside would be shot in the field, and that we had to spend the night in the train, that the next morning, we would be made to leave. Towards ten in the evening, we heard the sound of a trumpet, and we said to ourselves that this was probably a rather important camp in order to have a signal for bed time, probably the people were going to sleep at that moment. We spent the half-night we stayed without being able to sleep, because everyone was asking themselves where we had arrived, what would happen to us; in the morning we could finally read the name of the place where we found ourselves and we saw that it was Sobibor.

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L: And then, you understood that the Pole said the truth but it was too late, you could flee anymore.

Lerner 7

LR: We continued to go forward with the train, then the train made the maneuvers into the interior of the camp and then the convoy was dismantled; when the train stopped, we were forced out with shouts of, "Raus, raus!" out, out! and there were a lot of Germans, of Ukrainians, in black uniforms, and we were forced to exit. All the prisoners of the camp...

L: The prisoners of war...

LR: The prisoners of war, they made up only one group, we had been taken aside, and a German approached us saying, I need 50 strong men...

L: There were how many, these prisoners?

LR: 1200. The German said, I must have 50 strong men and I said to myself, wherever there needs to be hard labor, there is probably something to eat, I am so. The German had demanded 60 men, 50 left, so the German began to shout, Ah good, you do not want to work, you are going to soon return to the house of Moses, we did not understand what this meant, the German approached, he himself chose some more men, and when we made up a group of 60, we were taken, we were put apart and at that moment we understood that the rest of the convoy was being taken to another part, the cries and screams began to rise, and cries of geese, really of geese, the lasted almost an hour, and all of a sudden, silence.

L: Why does he say geese cries?

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LR: We were told later that the Germans had a flock of geese, and the moment when the Jews were taken and when they started to scream, the Germans probably made the geese run in all directions, so that the geese start to cry as well and that the geese calls covered the cries of people.

L: This is surely true, because the Poles have recounted the same things, in Sobibor, at Treblinka also; ... that the Jews cried like geese, when they were gassed.

LR: It was particularly true that it was actual geese, it was really the flocks of geese raised just for this reason, in order to be able to cover the cries of people at the moment when the people were crying out. The reason was that, since many thousands of people were taken at a time, the Germans wanted to avoid... the convoys were made up of thousands of people, so the Germans wanted to avoid having the people located at the end of the convoy hear the screams of those who were at the beginning of the convoy.

L: Good, so, he then heard the geese cries, and then after the silence, this is so?

LR: When the silence occurred, a kapo, a Jew, came and told us to put ourselves in rows, in file, and he brought us into a place, inside the camp where barracks were located, we had been, the 60 selection people, we found ourselves in one barrack, and it was almost the afternoon, in the camp, the people, the men were walking around. When we were in the barrack, we were given new clothes, but real clothes and blankets, blankets like we had not seen in months, in years, then we knew that it was the clothes and the blankets that been taken by people in the transport, in the convoy...

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L: The previous convoys...

LR: And the previous convoys; then, when we were clean and dressed, we were brought into the kitchen and there, we were given an excellent meal, as much as we wanted, afterwards we were brought back into the camp and we started to talk to the Jews who were there and who were walking around, we spoke in Yiddish, in Polish, and we were told that here, in Sobibor, the people were burned, they cremated the Jews; first, they were gassed, and then, they were... there were the crematories, and then we understood that from here, nobody left still living; we were also told that we could not escape from here, it was a place from which no one had escaped, save two people. All night, we talked, we talked of our fate and about what we could do. The next morning, we were told that we need to leave in order to work; we were escorted and our work was to cut down trees and to build the kinds of subterranean warehouses for munitions. The next morning, we decided that in this place, it was forbidden to waste time, or else we risked being brought very quickly to the crematory and since the people with whom I was were all prisoners of war, therefore soldiers, they knew what to do, they started a committee who was in charge of staying in touch with the people of this place, those who had... who already knew Sobibor.

### Lerner 8

LR: The head of the Committee was an old officer in the Red Army and his name was Sachka Petchevski and after having made the contacts with the men of Sobibor he relayed the following information to us: two previous revolts had failed, the first time they had burned, truly burned, a group of 50 people, and the second time, the people who

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LR: revolted had tried to create a tunnel, they had also failed and we understood that if we wanted to have a chance to succeed, everything must stay clandestine. We understood that then, we must keep our movement secret, that very few people only could be up to date, and that our only chance was to succeed in killing the Germans. In the camp there were all the groups of business, of craftsmen, of cobblers, of tailors, ultimately the people who worked for the Germans and we knew the extraordinary precision of the Germans. Our plan was to get a group of German soldiers together every few minutes and kill them.

L: But wait, I imagine that he said a little more than what you say... These craftsmen, he must specify, they made.... they worked... what did they do for the Germans?

LR: In the camp, the Germans could receive the complete services of the body of business that was found there; there were the cobblers who worked for the Germans, others who worked for the Ukrainians, the tailors for the Germans, others for the Ukrainians, there were even the goldsmiths, so that the Germans who left for example for permission could make them make a ring in gold or another jewel, and all these artisans were at the service of the Germans.

L: It was the Jewish artisans of the camp who were prisoners and who worked for the SS?

LR: It was the Jews who gave all the necessary services for the German supervisors of the camp. We determined a warehouse in which we decided to construct a new barrack; the idea was to say that there was a certain number of carpenters in the camp and the we could therefore... we therefore needed a new barrack for this work group, the carpenters.

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LR: We also thought about with which instruments we could kill the Germans and that as carpenters we had the right to have axes and we said to ourselves, in this barrack for which we received the authorization to build, we could have the axes and that each would receive an ax which would allow him to kill the Germans.

L: There were no weapons, there were not the firearms, there was nothing at all, they had nothing at their disposal?

LR: Of course not; nobody... no one had any arms. Then we decided to convene the Germans in each studio of each artisan, at those of the cobblers and the tailors,...

L: You mean the SS were getting their boots from the Jews, their uniforms from the Jews?

LR: Then the Germans would have to come, this was the plan, we would make them into the studio, and for each studio, two men had been chosen by the Committee, two Jews had been chosen by the Committee, to go into this studio, and so that they had the authority to go into the studio, they were responsible to contact the person in charge of each barrack, of each studio. That is to say that for example myself, I had another friend and for us two, we were responsible for contact with the person responsible for the tailors' studio.

L: ...cut, this is not going at all...

LR: Inside the camp, there was a certain number of artisans who were in fact in the service of the Germans, which made

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LR: whatever the Germans needed, there was for example the ateliers of tailors, there were the stalls of cobblers and the plan was as follows: to use these studios and the fact that the Germans needed to show up there in order to be able to kill them inside these studios after having made the people who worked in these ateliers aware, for example myself and one of my friends, we were going by groups of two, we had to put ourselves in the atelier of the tailor, we can convene for example, the tailor had to call in a German for example in four hours, and we had to wait for this German.

L: And how is it that the tailor was sure that the German would come every four hours, he summoned them under what pretext?

LR: For example in the studio where I was located, the tailors' atelier, our task was to kill a German who was name Greschutz, who was in charge of the Ukrainians in the place and we had to... we made him a leather coat that was lined with fur, so he had to come in four hours for a fitting and we set the time of the revolt for the entire camp for the 14<sup>th</sup> of October, at 16 hours [4 p.m.] and all had... all the Germans had to be convened in different ateliers at the same time.

L: Was there a precise reason why the revolt was set on this date?

LR: Yes, there were children who worked in the kitchen and also some of these children were in the houses where the Germans lived to shine their shoes and from these children who had heard information saying that the camp was to be very quickly completely destroyed, we decided, after having heard this information, that it was necessary to act as fast

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LR: as possible, because if we waited to long, we would risk being exterminated with the rest of the camp.

L: You mean, it happened finally very shortly after their arrival in Sobibor at the beginning of September and the revolt, then the revolt was October 14, they acted very quickly?

LR: Yes, in all, ultimately since our arrival, we spent six weeks in total.

L: Good, so can he continue?

LR: In the tailor's atelier, my friend and I were prepared with the axes that we had sharpened very well and our task was to kill a German who had been [scheduled] for 16 hours and a second German who was to arrive at 16:05.

L: There were... how many men were to participate in this killing?

LR: More than 20 and we were put in all the places where we could convene the Germans.

L: They had been chosen for how long and chosen according to what criteria?

LR: It was the Committee responsible for the revolt of the camp who chose those who would participate in the action, but I do not know for sure what their criteria were. Myself, I thought that it was for myself a mark of honor, and honorable badge that I was given as a task to kill a German, I was relatively young, still a kid, but I was already very mature, and I truly thought that it was an honor to be able to kill a German.

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L: The plan, it was to kill all the Germans in the camp?

LR: Yes, the plan was to kill the 16 Germans who were located in the camp; actually, there were 30 Germans in the camp but since the Germans could seek permission and go outside, they divided themselves into groups of two and in general, at the moment when we decided to revolt, there were 16 Germans in the camp.

But in this camp there were several hundred of Ukrainians who were charged with guarding the whole camp. The camp was also surrounded by an electric fence and beyond the fence there was still the minefields and at 16 hours, at the moment when the revolt broke out, we charged a comrade who was an electrician to cut the who electric system... the electrician, this electrician Jew worked all the time in the homes of the Germans as an electrician and his duty, his role that day, was to cut the electricity, he also cut by the way the phones.

L: Had Mr. Lerner already killed in his life?

LR: No, I hadn't even killed a fly... No, but it was simply the reality, we knew that if we did not act, we would be killed, we would be brought like all the Jews who preceded us to the crematory oven, so it was simply the reality that forced us to act this way.

And for me, it was a great honor to have been chosen as one of those who were supposed to kill the Germans.

### Lerner 10

L: Had he already killed before, Mr. Lerner?

LR: No, I had killed no one, no.

L: Did the idea of killing scare him?

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LR: Of course I was very afraid of this idea of killing, but sometimes reality forces a man to act a certain way, even if it is not the way he would have chosen. In this camp we knew also that we did not have the choice, we would end by being killed, but what we wanted was to not be killed like lambs, we wanted to die like men and it was still better to be killed than to be led to the crematory, this was the reality that forced us to act.

L: Good, so it is 16 hours, October 14, 1943, 15h30, I do not know, he is in the tailor's atelier, he waits... what does he tell.

LR: We took our place in the atelier of the tailor one hour before the set hour for the revolt; we placed ourselves in accordance with the tailor who directed the atelier, and he understood that we would be there as if we were ourselves tailors, but it was absolutely necessary to find a moment, a minute, during which we could be behind the German, in order to give him the fatal blow.

L: We, this is what he wants to say, there were two, then?

LR: Yes, we were two, a comrade and me, we waited together for the two Germans. So, the one who was called in, it was at the moment when the tailor would fit the hood on the German and mark his coat, on the back of the coat that placement of the buttons, at a certain moment, he would kneel, and it is at this moment that we could rush onto the German to kill him.

L: And was it anticipated who would attack first?

LR: Since my comrade was a soldier, we anticipated that he would be seated first, closer, and that the tailor

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LR: would arrange that moment of movement, it was my comrade who was the first to be able to advance and give the first blow.

L: So it is the Jewish Soviet prisoners of war who must deliver the first blow? What did they have as weapons?

LR: Axes. Axes that we had or that we had come to hone in carpentry, because we worked, we had pretended to be carpenters, we worked in the carpentry workshop.

L: What were these like, these axes?

LR: What do you want to say, how were these axes, like all axes, they were not especially big or... they were relatively small in fact, and especially they were quite sharpened, we sharpened them to such a point that they were like razor blades.

At 4 o'clock which was the anticipated hour for the entrance of the German into our barrack, or even more exactly at 5 minute to 4, we saw through the door of the barrack that there remained the horse of a German in another barrack, that this was a

signal that the German in the other barrack had already been executed. At this moment, my comrade and I were already seated in the tailor's atelier, and we were working, me I... I had on me a coat which covered my knees, and I was pretending that I was sewing buttons, and beneath the coat, between my knees, were hidden the axes. At 4 o'clock, the German for whom we waited, who had to come for the fitting, Grischitz, entered.

L; At 4 o'clock precisely?

LR: Just like clockwork. It is by the way on this that

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LR: we developed our entire plan, because we knew that the Germans were very punctual. And it was only because the Germans are very punctual that we succeeded, if only for that day they had not been punctual, everything would have failed. And when Grischitz entered, he came forward, withdrew his belt, which held his pistol, he put his pistol on the table and he advanced so much that all of a sudden he was right beside me and we had thought that it would be my friend who would have been the closest, and my friend was a soldier while I had never ever killed anyone, and it happened that the German was right next to me.

L: What was he like, Grischitz?

LR: Grischitz, it was... really, I can not very well say, he must have been 1.48 meters [?], really it was truly someone very tall, with large shoulders, truly someone enormous, tall, quite exceptional, a large height and I knew him already, I had already seen him before, but to be like this right next to him, to tell you the truth, I was petrified, when I was right next to such a monster, truly I was filled with terror.

### Lerner 11

L: Did he have a premonition, Grischitz?

LR: No, even in his dreams, Grischitz could not have been able to imagine such a thing, you know, the Germans in this camp felt so sure, they had such assurance after having killed hundreds of thousands of Jews, they could not even imagine such a thing. You understand, in this camp, for the Germans, all went as if on wheel, it was well-oiled, they shouted, they ran, they sowed terror inside the camp

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LR: and it was us poor people, at last, the unfortunates, it was indeed the fact of the unhappy, so the Germans could not even imagine anything would change from our side, and the hundreds of thousands of people were put through this camp.

L: Good, so then we keep going, Grischitz was beside him instead of being next to his comrade...

LR: Yes, he was a meter, a meter and a half closer to me, he was therefore it was agreed [?] that when the tailor fitted the hood, made marks, indicated the place for the buttons and bowed down, I had to, my friend would have rather approach, but then it was me who was the closest, I got up, I had the coat which covered my hands and the ax under the coat, so I got up and let the coat fall, I took the ax, I made a small step towards him and it took maybe a thousandth of a second. It was so fast that I cannot even... imagine, it was a quarter of a thousandth of a thousandth of a second and all was done, I took the ax, and he let out a big cry and he fell, and I had raised the ax and I had struck on his head the blow, the ax, the whole ax on his head in a blow.

L: He hit him on the skull?

LR: The ax entered exactly in the middle of his skull, I can say that I split his skull in two, I don't even know how this happened, it is as if I had done this all my life, as if I had been a specialist, I had struck exactly in that place and I succeeded.

L: You had completely split his skull?

LR: Completely, he fell; this took truly a quarter of a second, that I attacked, he falters, he collapsed, he fell and my comrade came, he gave a second blow

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LR: and at that moment, the men who were working in the atelier came to try to take away the body, because we knew that a second German had to come immediately after.

L: The men... there were three, them two and the tailor?

LR: No, there were still other tailors and other cobblers. The husband of Ada worked in this studio, the husband of Eva that you know... In this atelier the, all the men who were there rushed to make the body of the Germans disappear and you know, in the ateliers of tailors there is a table on which the tailors iron the clothes that they are going to finish, so there, there was a table beneath which was a pile of coats already prepared for the Germans, we dragged the body towards this table and buried it beneath the pile of German coats.

L: Was there blood?

LR: A lot of blood. Yes, the men who were working over there immediately cleaned all the blood and put blankets over the mop. It took us only a few seconds to wash ourselves, take up our coats, to sit ourselves at our place as if nothing had happened.

L: The second German was to come at what time?

LR: At 4h05; I believe that all these events lasted a half minute.

L: Unimaginable.

LR: Yes, it is true that it is unimaginable, but all depended on the punctuality of the Germans and our speed and indeed the Germans were punctual and all went like a watch.

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L: Who was to kill the second German?

LR: Us two, at the same place, we waited, we waited for the second German. At 4h05 exactly the second German enters, looks around him, thinks that the place is truly clean, that he must think that the walls have already been limed and put some order in all this and he advances, he looks around hi and at this moment, Grischitz who had been hidden beneath the pile of coats but whose arm exceeded, probably we had not paid attention and his hand still was out of the pile of coats and this German, while walking, walked on Grischitz's hand. And maybe the hand was even covered but when you walk on a hand you realize that you did not walk on a piece of clothing, so the German started to shout, "Was ist das? was ist das?" what is this, what is this? and immediately my comrade pounced and hit him.

The German was laid on the ground, I went forward also and I also hit him and my blow, I will remember this I believe for my whole life, the ax hit exactly on the teeth and a kind of spark flew, it is really something you know that you cannot forget.

L: So, wait, this must have a picture...

### Lerner 12

LR: Beneath the blow, the German collapsed, he was already laid out on the ground and I rushed there to hit him again and it was something that I will never forget, at the moment when my ax hit him, I hit him right on the teeth, a spark flew and you cannot understand, you cannot imagine, I had really been so scared and he was asleep.

L: He felt something, how did he feel immediately

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L: after this?

LR: To tell the truth, we suddenly felt joy to have succeeded at what we had to do here and immediately after, we got up, we changed our clothes, and we learned that 11 German soldiers had already been killed, there were children who would go from the places into the barracks to tell us, to keep us informed. There was also a kapo who worked with us and who told us, until now all happened as anticipated.

L: Am I wrong, he has an air completely pale?

LR: Of course I am pale; of course, when you recount the things like this, one cannot feel nothing inside that bubbles up, really it is truly a feeling, the joy of having succeeded, also the tears which welled up in my eyes because so many people had died there, the satisfaction to have succeeded at avenging those who had died and the feeling to have done what was necessary. At 5 o'clock we had then finished everything, we already reunited, prepared to continue to rest of the plan. You know, an experience of this sort happens only once in a life, this is an experience of life and death.

L: Had he come to kill, ever since?

LR: No; if, then, I killed, like a soldier, like a combatant, then I became part of the partisans, but there it was the same thing, there it was the combatants versus combatants with weapons, while in the camp, we were not even humans, not even beneath humans, we knew what we were, it was an indescribable feeling. After, it was soldiers against soldiers, it was another kind of war whereas

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LR: there... there, it was an extermination, it was more than war, over there, it was to take the men and in fact the savage beasts, not even beasts, nor human beings, nor numbers, we were already nothing. And to come to kill at that moment when it kills a German who comes to realize the things of this sort, to exterminate thousands, the thousands and thousands of men, of course we feel a joy in our heart. And at this time I knew already what German force represented, I already knew how far their cruelty could go, a cruelty that the human spirit can not even seize, I already knew what kind of savage beasts they were.

L: So, good, it is 5 o'clock...

LR: Every day at 5 o'clock in the camp, there was a roll call. The roll call, it was made to convene all the prisoners of the camp, we had to stand in file, and at that moment a German who was called Franzel, who by the way today is located in a prison in Germany, this German called the names and then we were freed. At 5 o'clock, while we were still waiting, ready for the roll call, some of our comrades had weapons so then we would be able to take the pistols of all the Germans that we had killed and at 5 o'clock, we were waiting for Franzel, and he did not come, it had never ever occurred in the history of the camp that Franzel was not there at 5 o'clock to make the roll call, but it seems he felt that something happened, because there was no telephone, no more electricity, no anything, in any case at 5 o'clock, Franzel does not come. We understood that we must not lose time, so our comrades who knew Russian shouted to the wings for the Ukrainians who were located around the camp and who guarded it, "Hurrah, we have succeeded in killing the Germans! Let's flee!" At that moment, in the camp, there was a dispersion, everyone ran towards the fence, the Ukrainians started to shoot, some succeeded

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LR: in scaling the fence, and we heard throughout the camp, bang bang nonstop since even those who had succeeded in scaling the fence which was not electrified died in the minefield.

L: The explosions everywhere...

LR: The explosions... We managed to get to a warehouse where there were the weapons of the camp and with these weapons we scaled the fence and between the fence and the forests which surrounded the camp, there was not more than 450 to 500 meters, the whole camp was surrounded by forests.

At the moment we were told that the voice of Franzel was heard throughout the camp, that it was in the middle of giving an order to pursue the people and to shoot; effectively, everyone on the other side of the fence and myself I was already on the other side, the rain begins to fall, it is October in Poland, it is not really a strong rain, the drops, I arrive in the forest and I collapse, I have absolutely no more strength to stay on my feet.

L: Let's go, replace it...

### Lerner 13

L: Yes, so there were explosions everywhere...

LR: There were the explosions, the shots, the rain had started to fall, it was winter in Poland, in the month of October at 5 o'clock it makes it already evening, so it was in the evening, I arrived in the forest, I returned to the forest and at that moment I think that the emotion from everything that came to pass on me, the fatigue, the night, my legs could not carry me, I fell and I passed out.

L: But tell me, this had been organized to an extraordinary degree,

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L: this revolt, the organizer, Satchka Petchevski, was he a genius?

LR: It's true; there is nothing to say, Satchka Petchevski was truly a genius and it is thanks to his sense of organization that we are living today; he was not only an extraordinary organizer, the quality where he knew as much to drive all those into secrecy, then finally apart from those who had been directly involved in the action, nobody currently, it must also be said that some people of the camp helped us and it is also thanks to them that we are alive, but it is the sense of organization, the planning, the capacity to lead of Sacha that truly won the whole action, and this, nothing to day, it was truly awesome.

L: What does he think of the fact, that there are 300,000 Jews who had been exterminated at Sobibor, 800,000 at Treblinka, 600,000 at \_\_\_\_\_, and they did not revolt, they could not revolt, at Treblinka, if, there had been a revolt, but this is another history... but this

revolt in Sobibor, organized in such a short period of time, is it... I want to say it is very very important that these people who decided the uprising, who scheduled it, they had been soldiers, they had a relationship with weapons, perhaps that the others did not have?

LR: Yes, it is certainly so that the people who made the uprising at Sobibor, had experience with weapons, that we have been able to succeed, it is certainly this experience that allowed the revolt.

L: It is not a question of personal courage, they were not more courageous than the others, they had this experience with weapons.

LR: You know, it is difficult today to evaluate these

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LR: things, it is very hard to judge, it is certain that the fact that there had been here the soldiers permitted them to have more of a hope of initiative, more courage, this is not to say that in the other camps the people did not have the courage, they did not have equivalent things, the only thing, it is that our uprising succeeded, I believe this is the only uprising in an extermination camp where the Germans had been killed and where there are still survivors today and I believe also that it is due to the organization which was absolutely extraordinary. Of course it is one of the elements that allowed for success, there is nothing else to repeat.

L: Tell him that we stop here, I don't want him to tell me the rest, because it is too good to stop when he says he has collapsed in the forest; the story of the partisans, this is another chapter.

End of the interview with Mr. Lerner.