

“Yad Vashem” – The Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority – Evidence Collection Department

Testimony Title Page
(Translated from Hebrew)

Country: Poland Language: Yiddish
Name: Ze’ev Schiff Education and profession: Primary, carpenter
Address: 1 Aminadav St., Ramat-Gan

Date, place and country of birth:

1914 – Janionoska [Jasionowka, Jasinowka] – Bialystok

Principal subject: Native of Jasionowka (Bialystok District), on his capture and imprisonment in the Bialystok jail after having hidden together with a group of Jews over a period of 3 months following the liquidation of the ghetto in August 1943 and his assignment to a company engaged in removing corpses that operated in the region of Grodno, Skidel.

Contents of testimony:

The burning of 2000 Jews in the Great Synagogue of Bialystok following the entrance of the Germans; the witness’ work as a housepainter in various places outside the ghetto under a special permit issued him by the German Hirschfeld company; obtaining a travel permit for the witness’ wife from the German foreman Busel, so that she could visit her parents in the Wysokie ghetto; escape of the wife together with her child to the forest when the Wysokie ghetto was liquidated; poisoning of her son by peasants in the course of her travails and her return to the Bialystok ghetto; the witness hiding together with a group of Jews during the first “action” in Bialystok**; German punitive action for the assassination of a German in Bialystok by a Jew*** during the first “action”; hanging of 3 Jews on Kopiecka St. in the ghetto for the crime of

stealing grain from their workplace; the hiding of the witness together with his wife and a group of Jews following the liquidation of the ghetto in 1943 and their sojourn in the hiding place in an attic on Kopiecka St. until November 1943; the witness and the other hiding Jews being caught by the Gestapo due to a local Christian informant and his transfer to the Bialystok jail; removal of the witness together with another 30 Jews during a “selection” as an artisan, and exploiting him for various jobs in the jail; inclusion of the witness in a group of 40 Jews as a special detail for removal of bodies and his transfer to the Skidel area; the work of the witness in uncovering mass graves and burning corpses in the vicinity of Skidel and Grodno; the witness’ escape from the pit at the time that the detail was exterminated with the approach of the Russians in July 1944; liberation of the witness at the end of July 1944 and his return to Bialystok; the witness joining the “Brecha” (clandestine organization helping Jews to leave Europe for Palestine – JA) with the help of Yitzhak Bokerman and his arrival in Palestine via “Aliyah B” [illegal immigration] on the eve of Sukkot, 1945.

* Sonderkommando 1005

** On February 5, 1943

*** The name of the Jew – Melamed

Testimony is composed of:	Testimony, summary, 2 photographs
Total number of pages:	29
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Interviewer and signature:	Yitzhak Alperovitz

Certification by the Department Management

Comments: Testimony and corrections: Yitzhak Alperovitz

Signature: Miriam Peled

Date: February, 1973

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Summary of Testimony by Ze'ev Schiff

(Translated from Yiddish)

Very few Jews have survived the large Bialystok ghetto, and the very small number of survivors of the liquidation of the ghetto in August 1943, have met different fates.

Ze'ev Schiff did not belong to the Jewish fighting organization in the Bialystok ghetto, and he does not belong to a known cross-section of a defensive position during the uprising. During the uprising he found himself, together with a small group of Jews, hiding in a hiding place where he found himself together with another 11 Jews and his wife. They managed to hide themselves in this hiding place for 3 months, until they were discovered by a Gentile who handed them over to the Gestapo. The 12 Jews were transported to the Bialystok jail. As Schiff related, every day Jews would be removed from the cells and every 15th would be shot on the spot. As fate would have it, during a "selection" for death or life, Ze'ev Schiff was selected from the remaining 170 Jews in the prison with 40 Jews who were formed into a Sonderkommando for disinterring corpses from mass graves and then burning them. This "Sonderkommando" bore the number 1005 and its members were transported to various places where there were mass graves and they were required to liquidate the traces of the German criminals.

As is known, many such brigades existed on Polish territory, organized on Himmler's orders, shortly before the Stalingrad failure and the well-known "Kantig Affair" (I believe the reference is to Katyn – JA), where mass graves of thousands of shot Polish officers were revealed (by the Soviets in 1943 – JA). It also reverberated throughout the world, when the Germans placed the blame for the shooting of the Polish officers on the Russian NKVD. It is thus understandable that with the retreat of the German army, the Germans wanted to rapidly liquidate the traces of their crimes and the brigade in which Schiff found himself was moved from one place to another in the forests of Skidel and Grodno. Of the above-mentioned Sonderkommando, Schiff recalls the names of the three Lipsky brothers, Meir Prosak, Rodnitzky, Karasiek A.A.

On pages 14-18 we find a description of the work conditions of the abovementioned "commando". According to his information he found among the corpses Russian men and women, corpses with foreign passports and a characteristic fact that except for the Russians who were shot in their clothes – the others were naked.

The brigade in which Schiff found himself numbered 40 Jews, hailing from different towns and shtetls of Poland. The German guards said that one

minute before retreating from the place, they will be killed and that just as the 40 Jews were assembled from various places, so the guards were also recruited among various Volksdeutsche (ethnic Germans from outside of Germany proper – JA).

Schiff relates that on July 13, 1944 the Germans decided to kill them as they were planning to run away. The Jews were ordered to dig a grave for themselves. On page 19 is a description of how the Jews were shot in the grave and how he managed with another 4 Jews to run away during the execution itself. An authentic description of the survival of another Jew of that brigade is found in the memoirs of Avraham Karasiek (see Memoirs of Avraham Karasiek K-173/1). It can be seen from both sources that only 5 Jews succeeded in saving themselves from the execution.

Ze'ev Schiff was one of the first Jews who arrived after liberation in Bialystok. Several months later there assembled already a substantial group of Jews who survived various ghettos. These “remaining survivors” had no illusions of being able to reconstruct a Jewish life on the ruins of the Bialystok ghetto and each was searching for a way of getting out into the world. Schiff, with the help of the “Brecha” (organization for helping surviving Jews to reach Palestine – JA) already crossed the borders into “the land” (Eretz Yisrael – Land of Israel - JA) on the eve of Sukkot 1945.

J. Alperovitz

Testimony by Ze'ev Schiff

(Translated from Yiddish – English spelling arbitrary)

Names mentioned in the testimony:

Place Names:

Barash	page 6	Jasionowka	1
Nowosielsky	“ 8	Bialystok	1
Wissotzky	“ 10	Siedlce	1
Lipsky	“ 14	Skidel	14
Rodnitzky	“ 14	Krakow	24
Yisrael Feldman	“ 20	Milano	24
Karasiek	“ 21		
Tevel Wrubel	“ 22		
Zalman Eidelman	“ 22		
Sheinman	“ 22		
Chayke Grossman	“ 22		
Shimon Amiel	“ 22		
Antek Zuckerman	“ 23		
Esther Zirel	“ 24		
Moshe Rosenblatt	“ 24		
Zalman Schiff	“ 24		
Shmuel Brostin	“ 26		
Yona Schiff	“ 26		
Zalman Nowosielsky	“ 26		
Harav (Rav?) Siedlicky	“ 26		
Busel	“ 3		