



### Episode 4 Transcript Teaspoons of Gunpowder Women Prisoners in Auschwitz and the Armed Resistance

Hello and welcome to “The Human Spirit in the Holocaust”, an Echoes & Reflections podcast, in which we uncover remarkable stories of courage during one of the darkest periods in human history. Echoes & Reflections is a partnership of the ADL, USC Shoah Foundation and Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. Our podcast is produced by Yad Vashem.

I’m your host, Sheryl Ochayon.

[LUSIA HABERFELD]

“My mother and I, we went to Auschwitz. And there, one day they put us all in one place. And they had four gallows. And they brought those four girls, and they hang them. And we had to stand there and watch. And I averted my head. And an SS woman noticed that. So she came over and slapped me on the face. And she said, you watch. ... So I watched. I had to. I looked. And as they were putting the noose on her neck, she said in Polish, ‘Revenge.’”

In January of 1945 Lusia Haberfeld was a prisoner at Auschwitz and an eyewitness to this shocking event – the hanging of four women for sabotage. Their crime was stealing gunpowder meant to manufacture weapons for the German army, and smuggling it to a group of men who then staged a spectacular armed uprising – the only one in the history of Auschwitz.

Auschwitz was, itself, a labor and death camp where over 1.1 million Jews were murdered in gas chambers. Why would the Germans hang four women? Especially when the Russian army was advancing and the camp was about to be liberated?

This is the story, little known and still shrouded in mystery, of those four women prisoners – and many more, actually – who risked their lives in order to resist the Germans. Although the Germans found and hanged four women, there were about thirty in the chain who smuggled the explosives. We still don’t know all their names, and we may never know them. Most of them were in their teens and early twenties. Their story is an inspirational story of the will to fight back, made even more extraordinary by the fact that it happened in a death camp – theirs was a courageous choice to act when action was practically impossible.

The Auschwitz camp complex included a factory called Weichsel-Union-Metallwerke (or “Union”) that produced munitions for the Germany army. Over 3,000 prisoners were forced to work in this factory. Among them was a small group of women prisoners who worked directly with gunpowder, and others who worked with various machines that made explosives. Ties developed among them as they struggled to endure the

horrific conditions of the camp. They marched everyday back and forth between their barracks and the factory, forced to sing patriotic German songs, through the freezing rain and snow in winter or the scorching heat in summer. They starved together. They suffered together from chronic malnutrition, abuse and humiliation.

Anna Heilman, born Hanka Wajcblum, was one of these women. She was deported to Auschwitz when she was just 16. Anna remembers how they tried to boost each other's morale.:

[ANNA HEILMAN]

"There was a group of girls that used to get together, tell stories about each other, sing Hebrew songs, dream of Israel. And somehow, we lifted ourselves from the reality of the camp into the fantasy of our meetings. They became more real to us than the reality around us."

Both Anna and her older sister, Esther, nicknamed Estusia, worked at Union. They were devoted to each other. Estusia was a beautiful 20-year old with expressive eyes, who dreamed about the day of liberation. The sisters came from Warsaw, Poland and had been prisoners in the Warsaw ghetto. They had been members of a youth movement there whose focus was on social justice as well as Zionism, a movement for Jews to have their own country in what is today Israel. In the Warsaw ghetto, the movement created shelters for orphans and public kitchens for the hungry. During the Warsaw ghetto uprising, the youth movement fought back against the Germans, and urged the Jews of the ghetto to fight – Anna herself ran through the ghetto after curfew like a shadow, risking being caught, pasting posters on the walls calling for armed uprising.

Among most prisoners of Auschwitz, the Warsaw ghetto uprising was as yet unknown. So Anna's and Estusia's descriptions of the uprising electrified their friends. It was unthinkable – the Jews had actually taken the Germans by surprise, resisting them valiantly for an entire month. As Anna said:

[ANNA]

"I don't think it was a question of Jews fighting Germans. It was us not going without resistance. ... And this felt very good and very frightening at the same time."

If it was possible to resist the Germans in Warsaw, was it possible to resist them in Auschwitz? Talk of the uprising, combined with news from outside the camp, led Anna and the young women to a kind of lightbulb moment:

[ANNA]

"There was also news. I remember there was a Yugoslavian girl among us and she seemed to have the news from outside. There was always a way to know. We knew what was going on outside.

We knew, certainly, when the Germans were beginning to lose the war and this was, of course, for us, great news. So, we knew what was going on.

In this particular group, we also learned that the war is coming to an end. This had to be in the beginning

of 44. We learned that partisan, Polish partisans from the outside and the Underground in the inside are preparing a revolt, and that when the Germans are losing, they are going to rebel against it.

We started to think, well, what can we do in order to help. We can have access to the gunpowder and we can start smuggling the gunpowder.”

As workers in a munitions factory, the women were closely guarded at every moment. If caught sabotaging production, they would be killed. And yet, one recruited the other. Eugenie Langer remembered that Regina Safirstajn, who was in charge of the women in the gunpowder room, rallied them, saying, “Girls, we have to organize gunpowder for a planned uprising.” Mala Weinstein remembered that Ala Gartner, who worked in the office at Union, encouraged her as a way to avenge the deaths of her sisters, murdered at Auschwitz. Rose Meth remembered that Estusia told her, “It depends upon us. We can do this.” Rose agreed immediately because it gave her a way to fight back.

The women took a huge risk by stealing gunpowder. The Germans weighed it, counted the fuses the women had to fill, and then tested those fuses to make sure they exploded. If production was off, or if the fuses didn’t work, the Germans would know there was stealing going on. So the women had to sneak the gunpowder out invisibly, grain by grain, under the noses of their guards. In one day, three women could collect less than two teaspoons of gunpowder.

It was also incredibly dangerous to smuggle the gunpowder out of the isolated gunpowder room since every woman who worked there was searched. Estusia, whose work station was next to the door of the room, collected the explosives but could not leave the room with them. So Anna came up with a creative strategy.

[ANNA]

“I used to take two little metal boxes that were used for garbage and walk around as if I was doing something. Eventually, I used to take these two boxes to my sister, she used to put a little bit of gunpowder, wrapped up in a little rag tied with a string, into a box and put garbage on the top box. And I was walking with these two boxes from my place to her door, and from her door back into my place, and put it under the table and put it inside the cuff of my dress.”

Other girls used other tricks. They secreted the gunpowder in pieces of paper or cloth in pockets, hems and even under their arms, on their bodies or in their shoes. Often they were halted on their way back to their barracks at Birkenau, another part of Auschwitz, the threat of a search constantly hanging over them. Yet, fear did not stop them.

[ANNA]

“On the way from the factory, it was about 3 kilometers to Birkenau where we lived. We used to carry this on our bodies. From time to time, there were searches. When we heard that there was a search, we used to unwrap this gunpowder, throw it on the ground, and mix it with our feet on the ground so it was not distinguishable from the dirt underfoot.

INTERVIEWER: And if there was no search?

Then we used to bring it to Birkenau. I'd give it to my sister. And my sister gave it to-- I don't know."

For reasons of secrecy, the women in the chain of smugglers didn't know everyone's identities or how many hands the gunpowder passed through. But still they chose to resist. They smuggled the gunpowder, spoonful by spoonful, over a period of at least 7 months, risking their lives every single day.

At Birkenau, the gunpowder reached Roza (or Ruzha) Robotka. She was the final link. Roza, like Anna, Estusia and some of the other girls, was young and very idealistic. She had been educated about justice and morality in the same Zionist youth group in her home town that dreamed of creating a Jewish state. She promised her co-workers at Birkenau, "You'll see. We'll pay the Germans back." Roza's job at Birkenau was to sort through the looted possessions of the murdered Jews. She worked close enough to the gas chambers to transfer the gunpowder she received to the men who worked there.

These men were called the "Sonderkommando." They were the prisoners forced by the Germans to facilitate the killing process by working in the gas chambers and crematoria. Most of the men were Jewish themselves. In anguish, they watched as the Jewish people, and sometimes their own families, were destroyed. They knew the Germans would not allow them to live because they had seen the heart of the Holocaust. Dario Gabbai, a Sonderkommando prisoner from Greece, remembered:

[DARIO GABBAI]

"The problem with the Sonderkommando is the inside of your soul. We knew that we are not going to survive. We knew exactly from A to Z how the Final Solution of the Jewish people was made. We are the only eyewitnesses of the Final Solution."

So these men decided to document what they saw in diaries and even in a few priceless photographs. And they also decided to revolt.

Once Roza supplied the Sonderkommando with explosives, the men were able to construct primitive grenades made of tin food cans containing sharp glass, stones, and nails, with fuses soaked in gunpowder. They built as many as 100 grenades. One of the Sonderkommando prisoners actually slept on top of some of them in order to hide them.

On October 7, 1944, the Sonderkommando attacked the SS guards. They succeeded in setting ablaze one of the four massive installations that contained the gas chambers and crematoria, and even killed 3 Germans. In the ensuing chaos they cut through the wire fences and began to run. But the Germans quickly crushed the revolt, killing about 450 Sonderkommando prisoners with machine guns.

The investigation that followed led the Germans at Auschwitz to the Union factory. They interrogated tens of terrified prisoners, and finally identified Roza Robotka, Ala Gertner, Regina Safirsztain, and Estusia Wajcblum as part of the gunpowder chain. The women were brutally tortured. They withstood the beatings and refused to divulge any names – thus heroically saving Anna and the other women from the same fate. Roza, Ala,

Regina and Estusia were finally hanged in January 1945 in two chilling public ceremonies, one to warn the night shift prisoners and one to warn the day shift, of the punishment for sabotage. All the prisoners were forced to watch (though Anna's friends made sure she did not see her sister executed).

Less than two weeks later Auschwitz was evacuated, and three weeks later, it was liberated.

The Sonderkommando revolt is still celebrated as the only armed revolt in the history of Auschwitz. Although it was subdued quickly, one of the enormous gas chamber and crematorium installations was so damaged that it could never be used again. As for the young women, their astonishing story of resistance is still relatively unknown. If you are inspired by their incredible courage, share it. Every time you do, you honor them and defeat the myth that Jews did not fight back. That is a remarkable thing.

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Thanks for listening. For more podcasts about the human spirit in the Holocaust, please see the Echoes & Reflections website, at [EchoesandReflections.org](https://EchoesandReflections.org). For more information on the women discussed here, you can find testimonies by and about them among the thousands in the USC Shoah Foundation visual history archive. Special thanks to Justene Manson.