

Conversation with a hero*

Anna Rolli**

Abstract. The 2016 book *Conversazione con un eroe* [Conversation with a Hero] is the synthesis of 10 years of long conversations between the author and Simcha Rotem, in his home in Jerusalem, about peace and war, about the past and the present. Famous hero of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, during World War Two, under the cover name of "Kazik", he was a leader of the young Jews who were the first in Europe to rebel against the Nazi occupation. He was a Jewish fighter and a partisan and he saved thousand of human lives from deportation and death. After the war he immigrated to Israel to fight again and to work to defend and build the state of the Jews and to share the destiny of his people in their ancestral homeland. The article portrays part of his words of greatest historical interest.

Keywords: Heroes, Jewish fighters and partisans, World War Two, Warsaw ghetto uprising.

Śimḥah Rotem: ...and my brother was killed at the beginning, during the occupation of Poland by the Germans... they bombed us from the air and six members of the family were killed. My mother's parents, my brother and an aunt of mine were killed. I was wounded. That's it. This was the beginning...

Do you know Abba Kovner? When I finished my Memoir, I gave it to him to look at it. He said to me: "It is a police report", and I answered: "It's ok! I'm satisfied! It's you and me exactly!". He told me: "Please, write more about everything that happened...". "Abba I'm not a writer, I'm not a poet, I'm not going to do it! That's exactly what I can do. Short, clear, that's it, that's the book!"

...because, at that time I needed... you know, there were police all the time, in the mornings and evenings, so to get to the ghetto I needed a place that was nearby and didn't face... the concierge.

It was on the first floor, I went in and came out through the window... so the concierge couldn't see me... We looked for a place from where I could get in and out... that was the reason why I went from that place. It was a few meters to go down, and then I came back in the same way.

After curfew.

...there were places in which I was afraid of what I was going to do inside. Look, what the Germans did was this... the canals are 2,20 meters, the main canal 2,20 meters high. I didn't know the risk of it but I remember exactly when I was inside and I wanted to touch the sides because the stream was so strong that I was afraid that I was going to fall into it. I tried to hold on from one side to the other, I can only move a few centimeters, that's all.

What did the Germans do? They probably... maybe somebody told them that the Jews were using the canals, so they put gas inside... downstairs it is dark, you cannot see anything, nothing at all, really nothing, it's pitch dark night.

We took torches with us... electric torches... That is what we were using to make our way through. So it took a long time and I don't know how long I was moving through but it took a lot of time, that's what I remember, I went out and I was fed up...

The problem was how to get in and out, I mean even for a minute, because the Germans were standing every 150 meters. There was a place for the German soldiers to stay there all the time

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** School teacher, psychologist, and journalist; Via Benedetta 26, 00153 Roma, E-Mail <anna.rolli01@gmail.com>.

because they had a warehouse... I was asked many times: why did we choose that place? It was very simple, we needed a place that we could use after curfew. So the only place we found was of somebody who lived in the parterre... the windows went out to the street, that's why we chose that place, I told him that I was not a Jew and he believed me at first, I told him that there were our friends in the underground that have gone inside the ghetto to do some business with the Jews - the Polish were doing it at the time, so it was easy for him to believe me - and now we were going to rescue them... suddenly the uprising broke out and they were stuck over there and we wanted to rescue them. So he helped us, but in the last minute, before I was going out he understood: they were very clever. He said: "You know, I think that you are a Jew", I answered: "You think what? No problem! I will convince you I am not, you know where I am going and I am coming back to you." So it was agreed between us that he would wait until I came back.

...maybe he didn't want to help Jews.

I told him that it was not true: "I will prove it to you, very simple, I will show you what I am. It wasn't me!" I told him: "I am going down and then I will return to you, and prove it to you!" But I didn't come back to him.

That was a bluff, of course, I didn't come back to him. Perhaps he didn't want to help Jews.

There is another time... I was staying together with Antek for a time in a flat, there was a Polish lady, and she was told that Antek was a Jew, somebody from the underground... and I was taking care of him, but after a month or maybe a little bit more, one day she said to me: "You know? I think you are a Jew too." I told her: "You know what? I can prove it to you." She said that, my pants fell down and she turned away. When I remember this I laugh. Look, you have to act immediately, give an answer. I said "Ok, no problem!" The pants fell down and I remained in there... She was ashamed. And then I decided that it was time to leave.

There were police aware and around after curfew and you couldn't be in the street. The Germans were shooting and after that they'd ask who you were. After shooting, after they had killed you...

I could leave this man, after the police was awake, I could go out through the window, so nobody could see me, I was immediately in the street, to the other side and hop there and that gentleman was waiting... with the two workers

...what I remember was, we went down immediately after curfew, then we walked for at least an hour and an half, maybe two, and then I went out and I couldn't recognize any street. Everything was destroyed. Anyway, I knew where I was, so more or less I had the direction where to go. And I didn't find anybody. No answer! We had a password and I was shouting. No answer at all! So I didn't know what to do, I was running like crazy, shouting, shouting, and then I decided, I sat in the ruins, I don't know how long I sat there, I decided I was not going back, I was staying, I would wait until the morning, the Germans will come, maybe I will succeed and kill somebody, maybe one, maybe nobody and that's it. I don't know how long I was sitting there and then suddenly I decided that I was going back to the people who were waiting for me, downstairs, the two workers and my friend who went with me, towards them, not to escape... I decided to go back... I came back, I went down, I remember I shouted: "Let's go! I didn't find anybody", and we began to go back. And then it happened... suddenly... I was feeling that... I suspected that somebody was inside, people, but I didn't know who, maybe the Germans. After a minute, maybe a second, you know, the time was... I shouted again the password we had and one of my friends came out, a girl which I knew, a ghetto fighter, with a group of other nine...

You can imagine, it was...

I don't know. You see it turned out to be so different... I don't know, I can't give you an answer, no or yes, I don't know. I just don't know. Look, I had another episode over there... when I went out, inside the ghetto, I met, immediately after that, two or three people, they were nearly dead, Jews, of course, inside the ghetto. First of all I asked them if they knew the ghetto fighters, maybe they had heard of them or they knew... they said that they didn't know anything, they hadn't seen anything or anybody, they didn't know. I told them: "Look, I am coming from the Aryan side just now, and if you wait for me I will take you with me" and, of course, I went and I was looking for

somebody, and when I came back they had disappeared. They didn't trust me probably, that's what I think, because: "Why not? I made them a proposition that I would take them with me. Then, inside, I was shouting and shouting and suddenly somebody began to talk to me, and it took me about 15 minutes, I suppose. Once I heard the voice from the left, second time I heard from the right, and then before me, and then after me. And I asked: "Where are you?", and she told me: "I have a broken leg, I'm lying somewhere". After 15 minutes I decided: "What can I do? I can't find her, I don't know!" There was no address of where to go, and so I went farther and I didn't find anybody, and I sat down and I suppose I was really, almost unconscious for sometime. I was fed up, I decided to sit there and wait, and then suddenly I said to myself: "No, I am going back!" This was the right decision, I went down... and my friends appeared, I knew all of them, all the group, of course. All of them, one by one.

It's unbelievable!

Sometimes I think about it, just unbelievable how things are working out, you never know. Everything finished, no chance for me to see anybody anymore, that's it and suddenly...

They told me that they were convinced that I was already dead. And if I was dead, it couldn't be possible that I was over there shouting. They told me – but they were not sure one hundred per cent – that now when I told them the story, they thought they had heard my voice but if a week had passed and I hadn't return, they were sure that I had died.

Anna Rolli: Would they ever think that you could abandon them?

Simḥah Rotem: No, I don't think so, nobody. They would have told me.

Between those ten there was one of my best friends. He was about a year younger than myself, I think. And I told him immediately... I was really thinking... the same minute I met them, we were happy to see each other, and then immediately I told him: "Look, now what you are going to do..." and I asked him if he knew if there were still other members of the organization. He answered: "Yes!" I told him: "Ok, go back, take with you another man, go back, tell all of them to come down, I will leave signs inside, and there you stay and wait until..." ...Because they began to ask me: "Do you have transportation, you have that, right?" And I said: "Yes, I have everything!"

What should I say: "No"? Look, I looked at them and they were almost dead, all of them, nothing to eat, nothing to drink, no water, nothing! It was not one day. So I got up in the morning from the inside and I went, I washed myself to look proper and then... I began to run, to look for some transportation, to organize everything to take them out. It's not something that would have been done by itself. And then I lost contact with this friend: Yitzhak Zuckerman, Antek. And I had to do everything alone, and somehow we succeeded but not one-hundred per cent. Sad story! What I can say about it: we did whatever was possible in those circumstances, Nothing more could be done. We did everything that was possible, and this friend of mine, Shlamek Schuster, finally he didn't go out. It's the saddest story! I didn't even know that he remained inside, I wasn't aware. Even if I had known that he was downstairs I wouldn't have waited. It was either nobody, this was the risk, or less. When I went out, I told them again and again that nobody was moving anywhere, all of them have to stay in that place until I came back. I couldn't tell them the time I'd be back, I couldn't tell them the day. I had no idea what I was going to do... Helpless!

Now, tell me another story, I thought about you too. Are you going to translate my Memoir ?

Anna Rolli: I have already translated it.

Simḥah Rotem: Look, what they achieved... if I went, I passed and I saw a living baby in the hands of a dead woman, mother probably - I suppose she was the mother - the mother dead already... holding this baby, I could only look at them and go farther, because I couldn't help them, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't take the baby. I couldn't take. Nobody would let me in downstairs, because the baby is crying... There were mothers who, unwillingly, when the Germans came... they had a baby... they covered their mouth and found them dead after a minute. Could you imagine something like this? I never saw it but I know it happened. This was the way... It was in those days.

I found no one, what I found was a voice of a woman. Finally I was looking for her, believe me,

I was looking for her. I was almost... I didn't know what to do. I heard from right and then from left, and then from back and forth, and I didn't know what to do. She told me: "My leg is broken", then I understood I couldn't do anything, I couldn't help her. So, in the end, and this is the truth, that I sat down there for I don't know how long. I have no idea. I saw that I was on the edge of the unconsciousness... I don't remember how long I sat there, but I think it was a long time. And then suddenly I remembered that I had left somebody waiting for me and I came and I decided to go back. Look, it was a miracle that we met downstairs... so here you have already another witness: Pnina... Pnina was the first person I met... Can you imagine such a meeting, how lucky we were at that moment?

Two years ago they built a monument in Warsaw .

So, you see? These are the names of the... fighters who went out, they were about forty or fifty, I don't remember exactly. The monument has existed for only two years, that's all... I gave them the names of the people I could remember, I had to look for them, but to tell you... not less anyway, but maybe there were some more, because here there are about forty written but I think they were fifty.

And ten were left inside, they didn't come out, because they didn't do exactly like I told them to do. I told them: "In no case...", when I met them the first time, before I went out to arrange everything... I told them, in no case were they allowed to move to another canal, and somebody decided that: "Never mind!" and then they sent my best colleague, my best friend to look for them. I told them: "Look, you have to stay here, in no case you are moving away because I don't know what is going to happen in the last minute. Who knows?" And then some people asked for permission downstairs... asked permission to go to another place, more convenient to stay and wait. They got permission... and they sent him to look after them. At first he refused to go, so they promised him that they would wait for him, but they didn't... they told me on the truck that there were some other people downstairs and so I didn't agree to wait anymore.

It's a tragedy, yeah, but that is what it was. The price was very high for it, I think there were at least ten people left inside maybe more, I don't know, nobody knows. And my friend, this boy, he was my age, he was younger than myself, a year younger I think...

I talked to him before I left... All of them wanted to know if I was ready and if everything was ready and I said "Yes!" because I knew that if I would tell them the truth it would be terrible. So I wanted them to believe that everything was almost ready and everything would be good... what to do?

...they sent me from the old city... back to that place and everybody was running to the opposite side and we were going to the Germans, it was crazy! After they urged me for sometime, I said: "Ok, if this is what you want..."

Because there was no changes to do it! It was what I believe and I told them! In a couple of hours the Germans would arrive and then what to do? To look for the documents or to save the lives of the people who were with me?

Anna Rolli: Marek Edelman wrote something different. He wrote a different story.

Śimḥah Rotem: What did he say?

Anna Rolli: He said, Kazik, that you didn't know that inside the box you had to look for there were any papers. There were no papers, there were no documents inside.

Śimḥah Rotem: Ok, that's what they said to me! So why did they send me there?

Anna Rolli: Didn't you know what was inside the box?

Śimḥah Rotem: No.

Anna Rolli: They didn't tell you later?

Śimḥah Rotem: I didn't even look for it, I didn't care about the box.

Anna Rolli: I know because I read your Memoir, but... afterwards they didn't tell you the truth?

Śimḥah Rotem: No.

Anna Rolli: Marek Edelman wrote in his book: in that box there were forty thousand dollars and a big bar of gold, that American Jewish community sent to Warsaw ghetto.

Śimḥah Rotem: That is probable! Yes, I suppose that's the truth.

Anna Rolli: They didn't tell you, they didn't want you to know the truth for security reasons. If you were arrested you couldn't talk about this, but Marek is very clear. . They sent you back, not for documents, not for papers... they needed gold to finance the war, they needed gold to buy weapons. This was the reason why they sent you back.

Śimḥah Rotem: Yes, he sent me back... I didn't want to go and finally I agreed, and I went with my girlfriend there. I had no idea about it! They didn't tell me, that's the truth, they didn't tell me about the money, and I wasn't looking for the box. I didn't look for it, I didn't get it, I didn't care about it. I didn't even look for it, when I went there I didn't go to look for it, I didn't care about it... at all.

The human being is the highest and holiest being that exists, all I know, if he is a human being, if he really is, because I can't consider the S.S. as human beings. They weren't to me... they were not human beings, human beings on two foot, that's all, not anything more, no human feelings, no human behavior... nothing! So I have no pity for the S.S. men and as such, because they were volunteers. It's not soldiers who have to go to the army. They volunteers to be S.S. men, to kill innocent people, to kill innocent children, to kill innocent women... so I have no pity for them at all!

In those years we tried to prepare ourselves and take revenge and kill as many... I think that we could do it! As I saw the things until today, we could do it! And then Abba Kovner went to Israel, at that time there was no Israel, there was Palestine. He went to Palestine to talk to important political figures, and then I don't know what happened, if somebody reported us, probably, I don't know! It was a big mistake because we could do it, there was no problem at all!. Anyway most of the time I was in Dachau. In Dachau, in the American prison, there were at that time about thirty thousand S.S.

Yes! yes! Or twenty-eight, I don't know, I didn't count them. S.S., yes! And because, you know, we wanted in the beginning to do something bigger than that... You know what happened: the war ended, so many people from other countries were coming into Germany. It took a very short time and there were the French, the English and the Americans, and the Russians... Yes, and Germany was divided. And we didn't want to kill somebody... innocent. We wanted only this: to be sure that we were killing only the S.S.

So, I don't know, in the last minute in Dachau I got a message that I had to run away because they were looking for me.

That is what I was told after that... I really don't know if that was true or they just didn't want to do it anymore. That I don't know.

In Nuremberg something was done. I was not in Nuremberg, I was in Dachau.

It was in June or July 1946. Something like that...

I have been in Dachau to prepare this... almost all the year, to prepare everything that should be done, like we have planned. And I thought we could do it with no problem, but you know... by the way, it was done in Nuremberg, and it could have been done also in Dachau only if we would have acted at the same time, at the same minute in Nuremberg and in Dachau... I was told, at that time, that they knew about us and I had to escape. They will come to arrest me. What they said is to go quickly, immediately, and that was a mistake!

We didn't want to kill anybody innocent... we gave up the plan of poisoning the water.

There was a bakery inside Dachau which prepared the bread for the S.S., only for them. That's how we were sure we were not going to kill innocents.

Look, we were... not only that... we decided that if we succeeded in doing it we were not going to run away, we were going to wait and... we were sure that they would arrest us and they would

put us on trial and so on, and we wanted to tell them why we had done it, we wanted all the world to know why we had done it, what we had done, because the S.S. were volunteers, not even soldiers, not the German army. They were volunteers!... We didn't see any reason why we shouldn't do it, why we shouldn't have to kill them.

So, no, it wasn't so sad, we were not going to kill innocent people, and God knows how many... no, we wanted to be one hundred per cent sure that we were killing only the S.S. men. There was a bakery and we prepared everything and we had the possibility to go inside and... really, one-hundred per cent we were going to do it, and the bread was only for the S.S. That's it!

They stopped us. Probably... somebody from Israel... I don't know if it was Ben-Gurion or it was somebody else... they thought that we shouldn't do it. Ok!

We were ready at the same time that Julek was ready, in Norimberg. I know that... Look, I know all of them... there were many colleagues, my friends, which were working on the same project in Nuremberg.

There was a bakery too, separate one... in Nuremberg also. That's what they did.

To poison the water channel, this was the first idea... and then we understood that we couldn't do it because we were going to kill innocent people, children, women, whoever. So we gave up and we went on the plan of poisoning the bread which was only for the S.S. in prison. Because also in Nuremberg there were S.S. in prison, also in Nuremberg.

Ok it's... look, I don't care, I think that it's a pity that we didn't do it.

Anna Rolli: Didn't you manage to kill some Nazi criminal?

Śimḥah Rotem: No, no, I didn't, no! I didn't succeed in killing even one of them. I am not ashamed to say the truth. If I had, I would have admitted it and said: "Yes, I did it!" No!

Anna Rolli: Because in Italy there was the Palestinian regiment, you know?

Śimḥah Rotem: That's true! That's true! They did it when they were in the British Army. During that time, from time to time they succeeded in killing... secretly... Yes! They did it! Yes, I know, I know exactly how the story was, but we had the problem... the plan was with water, that's true, and then when we began to think about it we understood that we were going to kill at the same time innocents...

human beings... people, women, children, everyone who uses water. So we decided for the bakery, because this was the bakery for the S.S. men. I couldn't give a guarantee that someone else would maybe take a piece of bread, that's true. But this bread was from a bakery that was only for the S.S. in the prison, only...

She told me that she finished the movie about me, about myself. She worked on it for one year, and she... few days ago she called me and she said: "Ok I have finished, and I want you to see the film!" And I said: "Ok, I am ready to see it."

So there are two possibilities: either we go there or she will come with the film here. So this still isn't clear, we can... I am ready to go to Poland... at the moment no, I don't think that I am ready to go... Ghina, she is ill and I won't leave her now, but I hope in another few days, maybe two weeks, she will be ok, then I will be ready to go.

I don't mind going to see the film and say: "Ok I have no objections at all!" or: "I have objections!" She is fair, she was here two weeks with the... sitting with me every day... here, outside.

...and then, in 1945 already, I was sent by Antek with my girlfriend, with Irena, to go through the front and to go to Gomulka and tell him that the situation was very bad and so on and so forth, and to our luck we went out... and the war ended...

Immediately, in the morning, and what I saw... the Russians and the Polish Army were there, so I didn't have to go far.

But, anyway, I decided that I had to see Gomulka so I went to Lublin. Gomulka received us, me and my girlfriend, and I reported to him. We talked to him for some time, in the beginning I thought that he didn't believe us... you know, they were very suspicious, so I saw in his eyes, in his

behavior, that he didn't believe me... I don't know what... He asked me if we wanted to go to eat with him and I said ok. I was hungry like... I don't know... so we went. He took both of us in his car and we went somewhere in the new Lublin, and he brought us to some place and when we went in suddenly somebody, more than one person, began to shout because they knew us, and then he understood that everything I had told him was true.

I went to Prime Minister Gomulka and told him about what I was asked to pass over to him and he said: "Ok, there is nothing to do now. It's a question of a few days." As far as I remember, exactly those were his words. It was a question of few days and Warsaw would be free. It was exactly like this, that's it, in short.

I was then living in Tel Aviv, my unit got a note that we have to go almost to Jerusalem. To go there at any price. Any army when it fights, it fights! I don't remember exactly, there were sixteen or nineteen panzer-automobiles. We have to go to... before Jerusalem there is a kibbutz called Malea Hamicha... and Kiriath Anavim, two kibbutzim, the first in the middle of Abu Gosh and Kiriath Anavim, the second one, nearer to Jerusalem.

Our mission was to go there, to one of them, to bring something to eat for the people in Jerusalem, as much as we could take with us. It is not like today that you have everything you can take with you. Also some ammunitions for the unit which would remain there and try to go into the city of Jerusalem and stay with the people in Jerusalem.

I myself, as a new immigrant here, I didn't know the situation exactly and what was going on, so we went out from some point and we began our way to Jerusalem.

We came to Abu Gosh, I saw some Arabs going here and there, not shooting... I didn't know what to do, I knew that the Arabs were our enemies and that you have to kill them, but I'm not a man to kill others so quickly... I didn't do it, never! I was very nervous about... killing somebody for me it's a problem, even if he is the enemy, so I was astonished, for some minutes I didn't know what to do! Because I was the last one, the one who closed the line of the panzers, the last one, all the others had disappeared... You know, when you are going all depends on the driver, and the distance had been growing and growing... I still remember this story and I will never forget... I didn't know what to do! Maybe somebody else would kill them, they were Arabs! I told myself it couldn't be true, if these people are going peacefully why should I kill them?

...The poor people get orders, they are never asked, I think so, never asked what they think, if they have their opinions and their way of seeing things. They have to obey and do what they are told to do or asked to do. I don't think that things have changed, today it is the same, in many ways...

In September 2009 I went to see him, he died in October.

I got up one day in the morning and I said to Ghina: "I am going to Poland." I don't remember exactly, it was about a month before he died. I had the feeling that that would be the last time I would see him. So I... my son, the older one, went with me... already then I didn't go alone anymore, it was after one time losing consciousness. A few weeks ago it happened to me again, here in Jerusalem... I was driving the car by myself in the city and suddenly I had the feeling that I didn't know where I was. Immediately I stopped the car, went out from the car, sat down, I didn't remember for how long, maybe ten – fifteen minutes, I sat there and then I decided I was fit to go, to drive home.

When they went out from the sewer canals and they were lying like dead people... I asked Marek: "You were my commander, why didn't you tell me what to do?" He said to me: "Look, I thought that you were the only one who knew what he was doing!"

He was a clever man, really a clever man!

I was a Zionist and he was in the Bund... they were not communists... socialist, that's right.

He wasn't against Israel. This is the mistake that Israel is making, because he was very worried about our situation, we talked about it many times. At that time, I mean, 40, 50 or 60 years ago he said to me: "How could you? You are endangered! You are surrounded!" At that time he was talking about one hundred millions Arabs. I told him: "Marek, what's the difference? If it is 10 millions or 100 millions?" Of course they outnumber us. There is no comparison, we know it. But I

think that we can survive, maybe we will come... I will be the happiest man alive if we will find a way to establish friendly relationships between Israel and Arabs, but this isn't the case, because the Arabs... what they really want to do - and I am convinced of this - is that they would like us to disappear. That is what they want, said openly, we have to disappear from this world and we are not going to do it, we are not going to commit suicide. For the time being, I don't know, maybe there will be such a day...

Anna Rolli: So Marek understood the problems of Israel.

Śimḥah Rotem: Yes, he understood very well and he was really worried about it. I said to him: "Look, it doesn't mean, it doesn't make any difference if it is 100 millions or 10 millions, it's almost the same, we are outnumbered." That's true, I know it.

Anna Rolli: Last time you told me that you asked Marek why he didn't give you orders when he came out from the sewer.

Śimḥah Rotem: That's right. About my behavior. Look, when, at this certain minute... there was a minute when nobody was coming out, I checked it myself and I was convinced that nobody else was coming...

I will begin a little bit sooner, when I met the people in the sewers, downstairs, I gave the order that under no circumstances they were allowed to move to other canals, they have to stay there. They said: "Look..." I said: "I know, I went all the way back and forth so I know where I am, that's the order, here you have to stay as long as needed!" because they asked me... they asked me if everything was prepared and so on... I wanted them to feel much better. There was nothing, nothing! But I wanted to give them a good feeling. I said: "Yes, everything is almost ready to take you out!" And one idiot, I call him "an idiot", a journalist, there was a Polish newspaper... I don't remember how it was... He asked me the question why it took me a week to do... to organize all the things. I decided not to answer, he was such an idiot, I was not going into a discussion. No reasons to give him the satisfaction that I was abused or something... no, he was an idiot, I didn't have anything in common with him if he thought so...

Tivia told me: "Stop!" Because there were people left inside and I had to make my decisions in seconds. I told you already and I will repeat it, and you can check it, even today if you go to Warsaw, or if you will go next year. I will take you over and there you will see... it was about 100 or 150 meters from Germans staying over there...

Why? I can explain it very clearly, why I had to do it, because there was no way, no other way. This was the only possibility, take it or leave it, I decided to take it... You can say everything, you know, but I wasn't stupid at all, I wasn't an idiot. I made my decisions, like I should have made them, and I don't regret anything, not then and not now. Who wants to see that I have to regret, it is his problem, not mine. My problem... I have no problem! Of course, I would prefer all of them alive, and it could have been if they would have followed exactly what I told them to do. But they didn't! Somebody else gave them the permission! How? How could they do something like this? They had talked to me, they knew my plans. They asked for permission... More of that, my best friend, he was sent to look for them. He didn't want to go, that's what they told me, people who were there listening. He didn't want to go because he remembered what I said: not to move. So he was told that we will wait for him. How could they say such a thing? Did they know in what situation...

You know? A commander - I don't know a better word now - shouted at me: "Kazik! Do you have a coverage?" I answered: "All the people around..." Not a stupid one!

Anna Rolli: Marek?

Śimḥah Rotem: No, there was somebody else. Marek was where I was, this is why I spoke about Marek. The ghetto was divided and he was from another place, so he said to me: "Kazik, do you have a coverage?" I answered: "Yes, all of them! You see?" And in the meantime, it was about 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning, people coming out were astonished, they were paralyzed. Warsaw

was a big city and people were going here and there... and they saw something that they had never seen in their life. I too had never seen it before: people coming out. And I was outside to look the Germans and to look who was coming from their side.

So I was walking around and then one man saw that it was finished, nobody was coming out, so I didn't ask anybody, I was running to the place from where they came out, shouting inside if there was somebody. No answer, I didn't see anyone. I gave the order: "We are going!"

When I went up to the truck they told me that there were people left. I said: "Ok, now I am the commander and we are going. I won't stay a minute longer!"

Anna Rolli: And Marek said nothing.

Śimḥah Rotem: Nothing! Nobody! Only Zivia... she said to me: "Wait!" I said to her: "I won't wait and I am the commander and you won't tell me what to do." I was sharp, it's written, I don't hide it. It's my responsibility what I did and you have it in the book. Believe me, until now I read many many books about the Shoah. I haven't seen anybody who takes responsibility clearly written: "Yeah, I did it!" I didn't find anybody who said: "Ok, I am responsible for all this!" But I had many talks with Marek, I told him: "Why didn't you think about it? In case if somebody... I blame you!" I told him: "Why didn't you see it?" I don't blame anyone, but what I say is that they should have obeyed to what I said, because I don't know, maybe... in fact... you have facts, that all of them who were downstairs, as I told them, I took them out. I didn't leave anyone.

He didn't say one word, I asked him: "Why didn't you take the command? You were my commander, you should..."

He said: "Look, I understood that you were the only one that knew what to do and what was going on", and that's true.

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