Aktion Erntefest
Majdanek Concentration Camp
November 3, 1943
In memory of my Father, Dr. Joseph Giebultowicz (1915-68), and of tens of thousands of his fellow Majdanek Camp inmates who did not live to see the day of liberation.

At Lvov, Spring 1943
Presentation Outline:

1. Some general remarks;
2. Historical background – “Aktion Reinhard”;
3. The Majdanek concentration camp;
4. About my Father;
5. Background continued: the Jewish resistance;
6. Hitler’s men reaction: “Aktion Erntefest”;
7. My Father’s escape from a convoy to Auschwitz; reunion with the family; the Majdanek Trail, and my Father’s doctorate.
1. One General Remark:
Even though my Father had narrowly escaped death from the hands of men who were German nationals, he never fostered hatred toward German people. Many times, he admonished my sisters and me not to develop such feelings.
Therefore, I try not to use the words *Germans* or *German* when speaking about the evils committed by Hitler’s state.

Today’s Political correctness recommends using the word *NAZI* on such occasions. However, personally I don’t think it’s an appropriate term. The exact meaning of “Nazi” was person associated with the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, the Hitler’s party. Out of 90 million of the Third Reich population, there were only about 5 million “real Nazis“ in 1939, and about 8 million towards the end of WW II. Yet, the number of Hitler’s loyal servants was surely much, much larger.

Polish language has created a word, that, in my opinion, is much better: HITLEROWCY – simply, meaning “the Hitler’s men”. There is no single-word English equivalent – but I am inclined to use “Hitler’s men” rather than “Nazis”.
2. Poland after being conquered by Hitler and Stalin in September 1939

The “Generalgouvernement”

Annexed by the III Reich

Annexed by the Soviet Union in Sept. 1939; after June 22, 1941, added to the Generalgouvernement
In total, the Nazis established 356 ghettos in Poland, the Soviet Union, the Baltic States, Czecho- slovakia, Romania, and Hungary between 1939 and 1945.

Systematic actions of rounding up Jews started just weeks after Poland was conquered.

All Jews are required to wear white armbands bearing a blue Star of David so they might be easily identified. By January of 1940, Jews are forbidden from such public places as restaurants, theatres, parks, and museums.

A HEART webside with a list of over 30 major Ghettos in Poland and other territories conquered by Hitler’s armies (each item is a clickable link to a sub-page with detailed Information).
Warsaw Ghetto: establ. in Oct. 1940
140,000 “aryans” from blue-collar areas ordered to move out; over 450,000 Jews ordered to move in.

Total area – slightly over 1 sq. mile. Sealed off Nov. 1940, surrounded by a 10-ft. brick wall + barbed wire.

Some other major Ghettos:
• Lodz (over 160,000)
• Krakow (known from “Schindler List”; about 60,000)
• Lublin (about 50,000)

After Hitler invaded USSR on June 22, 1941:
• Lvov (12/1941; over 110,000; one was Simon Wisenthal)
• Bialystok (~60,000)
• Vilnius (~20,000, but more Jews were murdered at Ponary by Einsatzkommandos shortly after June 1941)
Wannsee Conference, held on Jan. 20, 1942 at a bucolic Berlin Suburb. Plans were laid out to exterminate the entire European Jewish population.

Killing was never explicitly mentioned – but in totalitarian bureaucracies orders are understood, even if no exact directives are given.
At the time of the Wannsee Conference, Hitler was triumfant. In less than six months after the “Operation Barbarossa” started, his troops reached the outskirts of Moscow….

It seemed that he was responsible only before God – no earthly power could oppose him….

And in God, they say, he did not believe….
Here is how the victims saw their situation: Extracts from the “Tragedy of a Jewish Teenager” by Stanislaw Szmajzner. The ghetto he lived in was liquidated in May 1942, and all its inhabitants were sent to the Sobibor death camp.

A few days before our tragic trip they had captured the Last pocket of American resistance in the Philippine islands. In Africa, Rommel was completing the siege of Torbruck. in the following month, the important citadel would fall in their hands and the victorious German-Italian troops would invade Egypt and would head for the Suez Canal. Simultaneously, on the Russian front, the Wehrmacht would start its second largest summer attack against the Soviet forces and would besiege the strategic industrial town of Stalingrad. The Russian army was withdrawing and did not seem able to curb the Progress of the German armoured divisions. Most of continental Europe was under German domination, excepting Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the Iberian countries. Everything made us believe that victory would smile on the Axis.
Extracts from the “Tragedy of a Jewish Teenager” by Stanislaw Szmajzner, continued:

In Germany and in the occupied territories, the persecution against the Jews had resumed and great names already pontified in the malign profession of sweeping Israelites off the surface of the Earth, such as Julius Streicher, Heinrich Himmler, Martin Bormann, Baldur von Schirach, Artur Seyss-Inquart and so many other murderers which mounted, under Hitler’s inspiration, a real Death Autarchy. They thought their crimes would go unpunished and they started specialising in the most efficient system of mass murder. Enthusiastic about the successive triumph of their armies and as they thought they would win the war, … ….. (they) had built immense extermination camps in Poland among which the most remarkable were Sobibor, Belzec and Treblinka.
Reinhard Heidrich, who chaired the Wannsee Conference, was one of the chief architects of the Holocaust program. He was the head of all security agencies of the Nazi state, and early in 1941 was appointed the Acting Protector of Bohemia and Moravia.

Due to his brutality, he was nicknamed the Butcher of Prague, the Blond Beast, and the Hangman. The exiled Czechoslovak Government issued a death warrant on him. Two patriotic officers, Jan Kubis (Czech) and Josef Gabčík (Slovak) were selected to carry out the assassination. On May 27, 1942, they assaulted the Heydrich’s car and seriously wounded him.

Heydrich died on June 4, 1942. Kubis and Gabčík were eventually tracked down, and killed after a 6-hour gun battle.
The plan of exterminating nearly two million Jews from the Generalgouvernement was code-named *Aktion Reinhard* – in honor of the assassinated Heydrich, as is believed (if the word “honor” is appropriate in this case).

Industrial-scale killing facilities were created: three in desolated wooded areas in Eastern Poland (Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec), two on III Reich territories (Auschwitz and Chelmno); only one (Majdanek) was close to a big urban center).
3. The Majdanek Concentration Camp
(detailed descriptions can be found, e.g. in the Web sites: Majdanek Concentration Camp, or in the page set up by deathcamps.org)

The Majdanek Camp was located only 2 miles from the downtown of Lublin, an important regional Capital established in the XIV Century.

In particular, Lublin was an important Jewish religional and cultural center, known from the famous novel of Isaak Bashevis Singer.
Originally, Majdanek was planned to be a labor camp for Soviet POWs who would work in Waffen-SS armament plants in the Lublin area.

First 2000 Soviet POWs arrived at Majdanek in Nov. 1941. They built the first “Field” of 24 barracs that could house about 4000 inmates.

The plans were later extended – Majdanek became a “dual-role” camp, concentration AND extermination. Within a year, five more “Fields” were added. The camp could hold ~20,000 inmates.
A photograph showing the double barbed-wire fence, and a watchtower in a distant perspective (taken shortly after the Majdanek liberation in July 1944).

A Soviet aerial photograph taken weeks before the liberation.
An original photograph of the large Majdanek Crematorium, completed in August 1944.

The wooden crematorium building was set on fire by the escaping guards on July 23, 1944. But the furnaces and chimney could not be destroyed by fire, of course! This photograph, showing human remains not disposed off before the guards escaped, was taken on the day of the camp liberation.
The crematorium furnaces, today’s appearance – in the State Majdanek Museum
4. I now change the subject… About my Dad:

- Born in 1915 in Dobromil, a small town now in Ukraine (3 miles from the Polish border);
- In 1932, enrolled to the Law School of the Johann Casimir University at Lvov.

Lvov was then in the State of Poland, and was an important regional capital and a vibrant cultural center.
My Father was fortunate to become a student of Professor Ludwik Ehrlich, a world-renowned specialist in “The Law of Nations” (today, we rather call it “International Law”)

Ehrlich, Ludwik (1889–1968), jurist and legal scholar. After attending elementary and secondary school in Tarnopol and Lwów (then Lemberg), Ludwik Ehrlich studied philosophy, Polish studies, and law at the university in Lwów (1907–1911), graduating with a doctorate in law. He did supplementary studies at universities in Halle (1911–1912), Berlin (1913), and Oxford (1913–1916), and then lectured on modern history at Oxford (1916–1917) and at the University of California at Berkeley (1917–1920). In the United States, he supported the movement for Poland to regain independence, and worked for the inclusion of Upper Silesia in the Polish state.

After Ehrlich's return to Poland, he taught law at the university in Lwów. He specialized in international public law and state law (1920–1939) and lectured on the interpretation of treaties at the Academy of International Law at the Hague (1927–1929, 1962), and on international law at universities in Prague (1929), Iași (1934), and London (1937). In 1927–1928, he was a judge at the International Court of Justice in the Hague.
During World War II, Ehrlich went into hiding; captured by the Germans, he was freed by a unit of the Home Army. After the war, he lectured at Jagiellonian University in Kraków between 1945 and 1961. He was also active in the permanent Tribunal of Arbitration at the Hague. An expert on Polish-German relations, he served as an expert witness at the trials of Nazi war criminals, and was on the High Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland. His formulation of the doctrine of individual responsibility for crimes on the territory of the Polish state was accepted as a general principle by the International Tribunal in Nuremberg.

Ehrlich educated many generations of Polish lawyers. He formulated the Polish doctrine on the topic of legal title to formerly German territories annexed to Poland after World War II. He continued to be active as a scholar through his last years, writing a three-volume work about the role and significance of the works of Pawel Włodkowic, a fifteenth-century Polish lawyer.

Beginning in 1947, Ehrlich was a member of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences. His numerous publications include Gdańsk. Zagadnienia prawno-publiczne (Gdańsk: Legal-Public Issues; 1926), Prawo narodów (International Law; 1927, 1932, 1948, 1958; the first Polish textbook on international law based on judicial practice), Interpretacje traktatów (Interpretation of Treaties; 1957), and Prawo międzynarodowe (International Law; 1958).
After receiving a Master’s degree, Joseph was hired by Prof. Ehrlich as a junior member of his group. He wanted to pursue an academic career. Started working on a doctoral...
Joseph wanted to pursue an academic career. Started working on his doctoral project under Ehrlich’s supervision. His interests were focused on the theory and philosophy of international law.

Prof. Ehrlich suggested a topic that had become of significant importance after the horrors of WW I, but had not been thoroughly explored by scholars: namely, the question of responsibility of war criminals.

There were two important “cornerstones” in the jurisprudence of the Western Civilization: *Nulla crimen sine lege*, and *Nulla poena sine lege poenali*: there can be no crime committed, and no punishment meted out, without a violation of penal law as it existed at the time.

There was no legal basis for punishing many war crimes, even though they were obviously horrendous crimes…

Joseph did not anticipate that in a short time he would go through “practical exercises” in war crimes….
With my Mom Jadwiga (then a fiancé), shortly before WW II

An interesting detail: I am pretty confident that my Father and Jan Karski knew each other: Karski was also Ehrlich Master’s student. Joseph graduated just one year after Karski.

My Mom was a Chemistry junior in 1939. They did not plan to get married before her graduation – but they wed in October 1939 to get a Polish, not a Soviet marriage certificate.

Lvov was in the part of pre-war Poland annexed by the USSR.
In the Soviet-occupied Lvov, Joseph, laid off from his university job, secretly continued working on his doctoral project, meeting Prof. Ehrlich in a private apartment. After Hitler invaded USSR in June 41, Prof. Ehrlich went into a hiding. Joseph hid his materials in his father’s house in Dobromil.

In December 1941, my sister Barbara was born. To support the family, Joseph started working as a shoemaker.

He joined the Union of Armed Struggle, (ZWZ) the largest Polish underground resistance organization. In April 1943, he was arrested by Gestapo. The photo shows him with Barb, just days before his arrest.
In Lvov Gestapo prison, Joseph thought in despair of whether he would be able to withstand tortures and not to reveal his resistance organization links.

To his surprise, he was accused of belonging to another resistance ring. The Gestapo man kept interrogating him about people he had never heard about. Although he was badly beaten, he could not reveal anything!

Surprisingly, in Hitler’s secret police there was still some trace of lawfulness. Not being able to prove anything, they decided to “use only a precautious measure”, and sent Joseph to the Majdanek concentration camp. Which, in practice, meant “a delayed death sentence”.
5. Jewish Resistance
Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

By the end of 1942, the 50,000 Jews remaining in Warsaw Ghetto knew what fate awaited them… They chose to die with dignity. On April 19, 1943, the Uprising began. The Jews held out against the overwhelming SS force for 27 days…

Mordechai Anielewicz, the first commander (killed May 8, 1943)

Dr. Marek Edelman, the last Uprising Commander (he survived, died in 2009)
In the days of the Uprising, about 42,000 Jews were deported from the Ghetto, most of them to Majdanek and several “satellite” camps (Trawniki, Poniatowa).
On August 2, 1943, there was an uprising in Treblinka death camp. 600 Jews managed to escape (only about 40 survived until the war end).

In the Sobibor death camp, there was an uprising on Oct. 14, 1943, led by L. Feldhandler, a Polish Jew, and “Sasha” Pechersky, a Russian Jew with military experience. About 150 people reached the surrounding forests; about 50 of them survived the war. The photo below was taken at a reunion of the escapees at liberated territories.
6. Reacting to the increasing Jewish resistance, Heinrich Himmler issued a letter (details in this Web site):

To:
Higher SS and Police Leader Obergruppenführer
and General of the Police Krüger
Kraków

The Jews in the Lublin District have developed into a serious danger. This state of affairs must be cleared up once and for all. I have charged the 'unit Globocnik' with the execution of this matter. The Higher SS and Police Leader East, and the SS and Police Leader Lublin, are requested to assist Globocnik with all resources at their disposal.

(Signed) Heinrich Himmler

On October 19th, General-Governor Dr. Hans Frank convened a special security conference in Kraków, at which the Himmler’s letter was read. It was the consensus of those present that decisions had been made to finally eliminate all the Jews in the Lublin District.
Jedno z masowych grobów.

Skazanci w Lublinie.
7. Joseph’s story – the following months:
In spring 1943, he contracted typhus, a dreadful disease transmitted by human lice. Typhus was the main killer in Hitler’s concentration camps, of those who were not marked for direct extermination.

Joseph recovered from typhus, but was very weak. The “lifesaver” for him was the Operation Bagration.

“Bagration” was the code name of the Soviet summer offensive in 1944. Brilliantly planned by Marshal K. Rokossowsky, a military leader of great talent, who only seven years before was a Gulag prisoner. The offensive begun on June 22, and the advance was incredibly fast. In mid-July, the artillery fire could be clearly heard at Majdanek.
Several transports of Majdanek inmates were sent to Auschwitz, but by mid-July the railroads stopped operating.

On July 23, the guards panicked and lead out a convoy of 700 remaining prisoners (about the same number was left in the camp). The convoy was harassed many times by low-flying Soviet bombers (which made no harm, just scared, but they kept disorienting the guards.

In the havoc that ensued, Joseph and 26 other inmates were able to escape after the night fell.

The family was reunited in September 1944.

A year later, Joseph defended his doctorate at Jagiellonian University (Cracow), where Prof. Ehrlich re-created his team after the war.
Majdanek Trial (end of November, 1944) of the six guards who did not manage to escape on July 23. Joseph was an important witness at the trail.
My Parents at Barbara’s wedding in August 1965.

My Father never fully recovered after his illness at Majdanek which badly weakened his heart. In the mid-1960s, his health started alarmingly deteriorating. He died of a massive heart attack in January 1968.