

B. “19th July 1943” – Zygmusz Rozenblat’s Story¹

“It was a hot summer day. I liked this kind of weather because my job, which was keeping geese and chickens, required me to be outside. It was a rare pleasure to leave the camp even for a few hours. Somehow the air you breathed outside the barbed wire fence was different. You could also hear news about the war, all good recently, and maybe even return with some valuable food.

“Today, such an opportunity arose for some volunteers for the ‘burial group’. Dadek Weksler and his friend loaded two boxes into a truck. When the second box was lifted, I watched the people climb up and sit on the floor, while the *Werkschutz* man sat on a stool and the truck moved forward.

“On this hot July morning, work was as usual. Only a few Germans were around. I walked slowly following the line of geese and chickens, which I was tending for the German foreman Niziolek and two of his friends. I was lucky to get this job. With my winged friends I was allowed to go outside the barbed wire fence.

“Besides me, there were thirty-four other boys, between the ages of twelve and fourteen. Thanks to the intervention of Director Lütt, during the liquidation of the ‘Small Ghetto’, we all came to work in this camp. On the orders of Director Lütt, a *Jugendliches Kapo* was formed, ‘The Youth Kapo’² – headed by a white-haired German Jew, whom we called ‘The Old Man’. We all knew that, being in this labour camp now, was a gift from Heaven, because we were aware of what had happened to eighty other young men, who had been loaded onto the trucks. They and two thousand men and women from the ‘Small Ghetto’ were taken directly to the Jewish cemetery and shot.

“So, we thanked God that we were alive and knew that we would live in fear as long as we lived. We, the children, wanted to work, but would the Germans give us a chance? And why us? How many times did I ask myself this – just because I stood a little on this side and not on that side? I had time to think about my sad future and I had time to dream in the green fields by the creek, where I would take my geese and chickens.

“I approached the intersection where the street, where the explosives depots, the camp kitchen and, later, our barracks were located, connected to a wider street, which served as a loading dock for the ammunition wagons manufactured in HASAG. The *Rekalibrierung*³ department turned onto this street.

“When we first came to the camp, my mother was assigned to the ‘machine-cleaning teams’. Her work was easy and she always found time to arrange something special for me to eat when we met in the evening. At the same time, my job was to collect and arrange empty bullet boxes. Josek Feier was my

¹ Sigmund Rolat. 20th July 1943, YVA, 0-33/6775 Rolat’s story appears here in an abridged version, translated into Hebrew by Mara Zilberberg, with several corrections to the content, including the date. Most of the testimonies list 19th July as the date of the selection.

² In the Apparatebau camp, the term “Kapo” also referred to a small group of workers (thirty-forty people) and also the Jewish head of the group.

³ This refers to the bullet casing refurbishing plant, which will be discussed later.

partner. Josek had been my friend since childhood. During the many *akcje* in the 'Big Ghetto', we had hidden together in the same places. Our friendship grew even stronger, when both our fathers were deported in the first *akcja*. Both of our brothers joined the same underground movement and died side by side. Now we relied on our mothers.

"One day, Foreman Niziolek saw us loading the boxes and, after a minute or two, he called me over and told me to report immediately to the new coop that had been built behind the back door of the hall. I also found out that I would no longer belong to the 'Youth Kapo' and, instead, would be included in one of the men's Kapos in the department. I saw this as a promotion.

"A few days later, my mother managed to get a transfer to the *Rekalibrierung* department. She did this to be closer to me during the day and so that we could eat together next to her machine. I will never forget the strawberries which she bought me, for my thirteenth birthday, from a Polish worker. It was a royal meal. But, when we ate at the allotted time, we were given threatening looks by Mrs Koch,⁴ the representative of Foreman Niziolek. She was a small blonde woman with an ample bosom, a prominent nose - quite pretty. She walked about in tight sweaters and with the arrogance of the *Herrenvolk* [Ger., master race]. Her husband was an officer on the Russian front.

"About a hundred metres down the street, on the other side of the *Rekalibrierung* hall, was a huge rotating platform for turning locomotives and carriages from track to track. Often, when I walked with my group, I would watch the carriages. Now the *Werkschutz* pushed me aside and I quickly retreated.

"Now I saw that lights had been installed on all the walls surrounding the siding. Many metres of cables covered all the paving stones and the electricians were toiling to connect them to a multitude of naked bulbs. The area, which was usually full of carriages and trucks, was surrounded on three sides by building walls and opened to the outside road only by the platform track. Something was happening there and I did not dare to guess what. Were the people walking faster, their steps more nervous?

"As I was bringing my flock into the coop, I felt a twinge in my stomach and ran to the nearby latrine. Inside, I had to push through a crowd of people, all anxious and tense. 'We knew this was coming', someone said. 'They should have known that there were too many unfit-for-work types here.' He was cut short by Szlojme, whose younger brother Heniek belonged to the 'Youth Kapo', "Shut up, you know-it-all!"

"With the others, he turned to Dudek Weksler, who answered Moniek Dauman's pointed questions, 'I tell you, the whole cemetery is infested with SS and Ukrainians. Two SS men wouldn't even let us near the gate.'

"Did they say anything?', Moniek asked.

"No, not to us. They ordered the *Werkschutz*, who was travelling with us, to throw the coffins by the road and get the hell out of there. The *Werkschutz* was just as scared as we were. We drove away in a minute, but we sneaked a look over the wall.'

⁴ Koch is a fictitious name - the real name is unknown.

“Moniek did not want to tell me what Dudek Weksler had seen. On the other hand, the last few years had equipped me with enough understanding to guess what might be happening in the busy cemetery. Fear and guesswork complemented each other. Now I wanted to be near my mother. Looking carefully to my right and left lest the guard stop me, I walked in the direction of her machine hall. But tears welled up in my eyes when I saw the empty bench next to my mother’s machine.

“Mrs Feier, Josek’s mother, who worked nearby, whispered to me in secret that my mother, worried about all the rumours, had gone to look for me. ‘I told her that it would bring her trouble, leaving the machine like that, but she didn’t want to hear it.’ Mrs. Feier continued working, her eyes looking at me from the side. ‘I told her that there’s no need to add more trouble, because we know Mrs Koch. She’s looking for your mother. She’ll hate any Jewish women, who doesn’t look like it says in the Nazi books.’ (My mother was much taller than Mrs Koch).

“I sat down on the crate and cried. All my fears came out again. I knew now that, naturally, what had happened to the eighty children that day, a month ago, would happen to me. But I still hoped against all odds. I wanted to live just a few more hours because, if I lived for those hours, I would continue to live, and who knows, maybe I’d survive the war.

“Mrs Koch appeared at the main entrance, returning from the directors’ meeting, just as my mother came running from the other direction. Ignoring the German’s direct gaze, my mother ran to me and put her arms around me. How much I loved my mother and how good it felt to kiss her tear-stained face.

“We expected the worst from Koch. Instead, inexplicably, she just gave us a dismissive half-smile and left. Mother smoothed her long black hair, while her large eyes rested on me confidently, calming my fears. ‘Mum will take care of you’, she said. Five minutes later, the loudspeakers announced that the selection would take place that evening at ten o’clock.

“For a long time, the Jews of Częstochowa believed the stories which the Germans had fed us about labour camps in the East to which the Jews were supposedly being transported. Treblinka was beyond our understanding. But what happened in our cemetery, within our earshot, when the ‘Small Ghetto’ was liquidated, could no longer be undone by hope.

“There was nothing abstract or unreal in the beatings and suffering of those chosen for the pending death trucks. The Germans did not even pretend to be deporting to the East. As the trucks were leaving one after another, we all knew their destination. The sounds of machine gun fire continued for hours and we could no longer cover our ears. We were sick from so much fear and paralysed with pain when the clothes of the victims, still warm, were returned for them to be sorted.

“What Dudek Weksler saw brought us back to the last *akcja*. We knew that, in a short time, the machine guns would be working again. We knew it would happen and we knew how. The graves were

already excavated. How many this time and for whom? I could see the guns pointed at me ... and the end.

“Not all of us would die that night. In fact, most would survive. That was clear from the act of selection. It depended on age, appearance, health, the type of work and the whims of the sorters. Moniek Dauman, a healthy young man, whose master had seen him working hard from dawn until dark, did not have to worry much. But the chances of my friends at the ‘Youth Kapo’ seemed close to zero.

“Following the announcement of the selection, people turned away their heads whenever they unexpectedly met one of the young men. Themselves uncertain about tomorrow, they could not bear the sight of the boy straining to the limit of his strength, and all in vain.

“A patch of grass and two narrow ditches were used by the Jews of HASAG for eating and recreation before the barracks area was completed and surrounded by a barbed wire fence. After workhours, the place filled with men and women looking for some fresh air. When my mother and I approached the area, we found it fuller than usual. It seemed as if the entire population of the camp wanted to enjoy the rays of the sun, to enjoy the softness and greenness of the grass, to prolong the warmth they felt when they were near those they loved.

“As usual, my mother wanted me to eat and offered me the tastiest morsels - it is very important to eat today, so that we will have strength for what lies ahead. She was very relaxed, not worried. After all, she said, it was a miracle that I was the only one chosen from the ‘Youth Kapo’ and that Foreman Niziolek liked me.

“The doubts, the worrying questions, the frightening descriptions disappeared, because she had eliminated them one by one. She had such faith that I would pass the test today and that I would survive the war and be able to testify to what I had seen. Her voice never broke for a moment and, only when we were preparing to leave, did she pack up the leftover food, saying, ‘We’ll save this for tomorrow’.

It was almost dark when my mother and I arrived at my group. Moniek Dauman came up to us and I could feel that my mother was happy to see him. Moniek had known me for many years. His broad shoulders were my support. We slept on the same bunk. To me he was a giant. His open face exuded trust and he was the only young man among the hundreds of people working at *Rekalibrierung*. No one spoke ill of him.

“My mother shook his hand and then placed it on my head. ‘He’s yours’, she said. ‘You’re everything he has when I’m there.’ She pointed in the direction of her Kapo. ‘Please, oh please, you must look after him!’ She wanted to say more, but her eyes were shining with tears. She put her arms around me and hugged me, kissed me twice, stroked my hair and walked, without turning, to her group.

“The policemen were already whistling. *Los, verdammte Juden!* [Let’s go, damned Jews!], shouted the dwarf Stieglitz, the deputy commander of the *Werkschutz*, a monstrous creature, with small legs and a huge head.

“*Line up! Line up!*, the Jewish Kapos echoed. A last hug and my aunt Tonya left her husband Michał. Husbands and wives parted ways and ran to complete their groups. ‘He’ll keep his chin up’, Szlojme said to his younger brother in the ‘Youth Kapo’. No parting words were spoken.

“*Achtung!* A deathly silence fell over the entire area. The commander of the *Werkschutz*, Hermann Klemm, appeared at the far left and began the review. Smiling, he stopped next to one man and quickly brought his rod down on the unfortunate man, who was being led into the hall. The first victim had been chosen.

“*Achtung!* The evil Stieglitz yelled again in his voice. Dr Brettschneider appeared, whom even his German friends feared. The scar on his face flashed with bright lights as he began to speak in a monotonous voice,

“Jews! This is a labour camp integrated into the overall war effort of the victorious National Socialist Reich! You had the right to join this effort. You were ordered to work, to work and, in doing so, perhaps you would justify your existence. You did not do it. You failed. You belong to an inferior race.

“We know that there are few among you who want to work, very few. And we know that there are many pretenders. We know who they are and we will root them out. But there will be no second chance. From now on, you will deliver what is expected of you, or else – all of you will go. We have no time for nonsense. Work and work hard and then you will live.”⁵

“In rows of five and in numerical order, the Kapo groups were to advance towards the terminal. Each row was to go up onto it and stop. There, foremen and their deputies stood, surrounded by the guards of the *Werkschutz*. The foremen could choose any Jew they wanted. No objection was allowed except by Director Lütt. The right of choice was also given to the commander of the *Werkschutz*, Klemm, and his deputy, Stieglitz. The chosen Jews were crowded into a large hall with windows that formed the left wall of the empty alley. From this passageway, they would board the waiting trucks. Those, who would pass through, would have to enter the alley itself.

“The selection was not carried out according to any method - a few rows of five passed unharmed and, in the next row, three or four were selected. Questions or pleas led to murderous blows. Two Ukrainians then dragged the body into the passageway.

“Here and there, the smile seemed forced - Foreman Niziolek was rather grim. Director Lütt, on the other hand, seemed detached from what was happening around him. Kapo after Kapo went up on stage and addressed their masters. With each step, I became increasingly more afraid. I was no longer sure that the older Kapo combinations were really an advantage. Sometimes, the people in my row changed places, because they thought it was dangerous to stand next to someone who draws attention.

⁵ The speech was reproduced from memory.

“Only Moniek’s constant presence and the soothing words, which he uttered, kept me from bursting into loud tears. An hour passed and the Germans were satisfied that everything had gone according to plan. The SS representative, *Sturmbannführer* Klipsch, was also pleased.⁶

“Then it was the turn of the ‘Youth Kapo’. It was especially touching to see the determined step of the children, their bravery and the tension that radiated from them. The fits of laughter stopped on the platform. Several of the Germans turned their heads to the side. Stieglitz pushed the seven full rows up to the platform.

“Only then was the ‘Old Man’ allowed to report. His voice was heard loud and clear, ‘Kapo forty-two, all thirty-four men present’. Another minute of silence. With his arm, the commander of the *Werkschutz* pointed in the direction of the passageway and then we heard - unbelievably! - Director Lütt’s voice, ‘The Kapo passes!’ All eyes turned to the commander. His face was distorted with anger. He approached Director Lütt and spat out in a shrill whisper, ‘*How dare you? This is sabotage!*’ But [as for] the ‘Old Man’, he did not pass.

“The news spread from ear to ear in seconds. Just imagine – all the children had passed! I pictured my mother, when she found out that my previous group had passed, while I was still about to be examined as fit – a ridiculous little boy between two grown men.

“Only one group separated us from the platform. We watched the previous group - each row hesitantly rising to centre stage. Now, a slight nod of the head or a German arm determined whether you would live or die. I prayed that more time would pass before our turn came. Now the end was seen. As I came closer and closer, a numbing calm took over me. I felt nothing.

“From a distance came the brief report, ‘Kapo fifty-four, all thirty-nine are present’. The round platform is now empty. Moniek whispers, ‘*Stand up straight!*’ Our feet pull us forward. I look straight ahead. Another step – *clop, clop!* We are now walking on wood. We stop. A second lasts so long. I dare not breathe.

“Foreman Niziolek is now in front of us. His eyes rest on me. Still the same second. His arm takes us through. ‘Pass!’ – he trumpets with his voice. Long steps now, the footpath stretches out at our feet again. I have passed, I have passed, I am alive. Suddenly my identity returns to me. I felt the light breeze; I saw the stars. I looked around and recognised faces - the smiling Dudek Weksler, Josek Feier and next to me, his hand resting on my shoulder, Moniek Dauman.

“The alley was full. The crowd in front had reached alarming proportions. Men, women, and children pressed and fought to be on the outer edge and follow the progress of the selection. With bated breath, they waited for their relatives and prayed, with an invisible lip movement, that they would pass.

⁶ Klipsch is a fictitious name, the real name is unknown.

“The excited husband, whose young wife had just come into his arms, happily stepped back, making way for two other tense and worried Jews. The women’s *Rekalibrierung* Kapo began its journey. I begged Moniek to let me stand in front. I was safe and all my attention went to my mother. Moniek managed to elbow his way to a vantage point in front. Another friend saw me shaking and reassured me more than once. ‘There is no reason – no reason in the world – that your mother should not pass.’ And Dawid laughed at me, ‘I never knew you were such a mother’s boy. Can’t you be without her for a few more minutes?’

“And then it happened. My mother, the tallest in her row, stood on the platform. She stood at the far left, next to my aunt Tonya and Mrs Feier. One second and another. A sharp, guttural female voice, too far away to distinguish in words. But what the sound conveyed was clear. Moniek was on alert, Dudek Weksler came closer to me. Something was wrong. I knew it instinctively and awaited it with anxiety.

“Mrs Koch had now come into view. It was her voice that we heard. She was wearing a wine-coloured suit and well-polished boots. A riding whip in her right hand. She turned arrogantly toward the row of five helpless women. She stood in front of my mother, her legs slightly apart. Moniek must have guessed what was coming, because he tried to turn me around. He tightened his grip on my arm, but that didn’t stop me from seeing the raised arm and the whip. Could I see the pain on my mother’s face from this distance? My mother did not flinch. Mrs Koch backed away a little, the commander of the *Werkschutz* was now next to her and she pointed with her whip in the direction of the horrific passageway. And this is where the five women went.

“Only a moment passed. The terrible threat of what was going to happen to my mother overwhelmed me. My eyes filled with tears as I turned to Dudek and Moniek, pleading, asking them to do something. What could they do? They promised to try as soon as the selection was over, as soon as the SS team left. ‘It will be too late then’, I cried. ‘It has to be now!’

“I begged them to let me speak to Foreman Niziolek, to fall on my knees and ask, to beg for my mother’s life. They did not move. I began to cry uncontrollably. Only madness and hysteria can explain what happened next. The hall, where those condemned to death were kept, had large windows facing the platform. They were at least a hundred metres away and there was no light in them. But I saw my mother’s face in one of the windows above. I saw her more clearly than in broad daylight.

“In a louder voice than I ever had in my life, I screamed, “*Mother, Mother!*” It was a scream from my heart. The Germans heard it. All activity around the stage stopped. The Jews heard it in every corner. Did my mother hear it? The hum of voices stopped abruptly. You could hear a pin drop in the oppressive silence that fell. Seconds passed. Rising silent tension.

“The commander of the *Werkschutz* appeared before us with his limp. The spotlight followed him slowly, as he turned towards us. Moniek turned back, Dudek and the others helping to drag me with them. All movement ceased as Klemm stopped halfway between the Germans and us. As usual, one foot in front of the other, he aimed for the most dramatic effect. His hat tilted slightly to the side, steel-blue eyes piercing, Klemm spoke, emphasising each word with a pause, ‘A Jewish child has just asked for his mother. It was a heart-rending cry and I want to help him.’

“The pause was longer now and the spotlight turned towards the Jewish crowd.

“Did I hear correctly? There was hope, a wonderful hope, a miracle wrought by my love! Klemm spoke again, ‘I would personally free his mother, if the boy, who had called out mother, would now step forward and identify himself’.

“He waited, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. I was excited, laughing through my tears. I trembled with joy. I had saved my mother. I jumped to run forward, to shout, ‘It was me, it was me!’ But I didn’t jump. The words wouldn’t come out of my throat. I saw nothing. I was no longer standing.

“Rolled into a helpless bundle, I was stuck between Moniek’s legs. They seemed like walls of steel. Dawid, his whole weight on me, held me back. In front, the pincers were closed by Dudek Weksler, who had set himself like a rock in front of Moniek. Why, why are they doing this to me? Don’t they understand? I must save my mother. I must not let this opportunity pass. I bit with all my might the hand that covered my mouth. I tasted blood as the hand withdrew, but immediately another hand pressed my mouth even harder.

“The next moment – it was Josek Feier, who was pushed and ran towards the commander of the *Werkschutz*. People held their breath as he announced, ‘It was me. I called her, I want my mother!’

“Klemm smiled broadly, ‘Well, you’ll have her, you’ll have her!’ He grabbed Josek by the collar of his shirt and the back of his trousers and threw him towards the two approaching Ukrainian guards.

“On that July night, four-hundred and eighty men and women were shot because they were Jews. My mother was among them, as was a child, who was not yet thirteen-years old, Josek Feier.”