

E. The Rescuers and the Exploiters

In Polish historiography dealing with factories, where Jews and Poles worked together, it is emphasised that the Polish workers helped the Jews from a sense of solidarity, without any compensation and saved them from starvation (Longin Kaczanowski, Stanisław Meducki, Piotr Matusak, and others).

The Jews, on the other hand, emphasise in their testimonies that the Poles did not give up any opportunity to get rich the easy way and squeezed the Jews out of every last penny, without mercy.

What then was the truth?

The fact is that, in every factory in the *Generalgouvernement*, where they worked together, a relationship developed between Poles and Jews, which encompassed illegal economic activity, underground cooperation and help without compensation.

It is worth mentioning here that, unlike the Skarżysko factories, where about 7,000 Poles worked, veteran experts in the production of munitions, many of the Poles in Apparatebau were former employees of the Pelcery textile factory. However, most of them became independent professionals, such as mechanics, locksmiths, carpenters, electricians, etc., and were, therefore, important to production. Several hundred also worked as simple labourers and supervisors. They were not appointed department managers and had no authority over the Jews. No testimony was given of any allegations of beatings by Poles.

The Polish women worked with the Jewish women in the “reception office”, a job that was considered quite privileged. The problem of the clerks was more complicated, because the Poles, for the most part, did not know German and usually a Polish clerk sat in the *Meister’s* office. But all the work was done by the Jewish secretary.

What was the attitude of the Poles towards their workplace?

In its letter to the OKH munitions problems officer, dated 18th October 1943, the HASAG management complains about the widespread indifference amongst the workers: **The Jews, from whom nothing more can be expected, behave in a similar way.**

The most serious problem is the Poles’ absence from work and there is a danger that if they are severely punished, they will run away altogether. They are busy with “black” work in small Polish factories, where they receive wages four times higher. They cannot survive on the wages they receive in the factory.

On the other hand, Soviet propaganda threatens the workers in the armaments factories. Hence, the constant increase in “passive resistance and covert acts of sabotage” that the few supervisors have difficulty controlling.¹

The management, of course, did not want to raise the Poles’ wages and this was also ideologically forbidden because, according to Nazi doctrine, it was obliged to maintain a low wage level and a lack of rights as a means of enslaving the Polish people.

This was the background for the integration of Poles into the illegal economic activity that developed at the Apparatebau factory and encompassed several areas:

1. Marketing illegal Jewish products;
2. Wholesale supply of food to Jewish intermediaries;
3. Retail supplies to prisoners in exchange for money, clothing, etc.;
4. Brokerage in foreign currency exchange and the sale of valuables;
5. Mediation between the prisoners and the Polish families who held their property.

Benjamin Orenstein writes:

“The qualified Jewish labourers sought ways and means to soothe the hunger and need. With the silent approval of the foremen of the various departments, the Jews began manufacturing different things to sell. This was absolutely forbidden and was considered sabotage, which was punishable by death. The department managers received bribes for not saying anything and allowing the Jews to produce different objects with the materials from the HASAG warehouses. Thus, they produced carbide lamps, combs of metal and celluloid replacements, engraved metal rings, boxes, caps, tailoring and shoemaking jobs and dyeing.

“The Poles bought the entire production for low prices and took it out with the freight lorries that transported different goods for HASAG. The vehicles had special hiding places, so that, when they were searched, nothing would be found. When they drove in, they smuggled in sacks, and took the production with them when they drove out.”²

Of course, outside they could sell everything at a great profit. Only the wealthy could engage in marketing the produce and wholesale supply because of the need for investment (paying bribes to the *Werkschutz*) and because of the high risk.

In contrast, any Pole could be a retail supplier. Despite the official prohibition on any contact with the Poles, a way was always found to give them a few zloty or a garment for sale, in return for which the Jewish prisoner received half a loaf of bread or a desired medicine. Of course, the best businesses centred around valuables. Cases of shameful exploitation by Polish buyers were common, such as

¹ An OKH, 18/10/1943, APCZ, zesp.192/2, ref no.8, p.118

² *Churban Czenstochow*, p. 258 [sic 265]

Małka Baran for example, who “sold” a gold necklace for a loaf of bread and was even pleased that she had the pendant left as a souvenir...³

In the area of mediation between the Jewish prisoner and the Polish family that held his property, the procedure was well-known - the Polish mediator received a note from the prisoner with his signature and, after visiting the family, returned to the factory and gave the prisoner what he wanted. The property guards generally did not excel in fairness. Bela Sandler says:

“I once received one-hundred złoty from a Polish woman who ‘looked after’ three of my mother’s expensive fur coats. She gave her mother her address and said that, if necessary, she would help us. I sent her a request to send me money to buy bread (the intermediary was a Pole who worked with me). I received a small amount with a warning that I should not contact her again.”⁴

All those “services” cost the Jews a great deal of money. It is known that, in the Skarżysko camp, intermediary fees were around 25% of the amount provided. It is unclear how the matter was arranged at the Apparatebau factory.

Individual cases of help and underground cooperation will be discussed later. Perhaps then we can determine which aspect stood out more, exploitation or rescue.

³ Testimony of Małka Baran, YVA, 0-33/6859.

⁴ Bela Sandler, YVA, 0-33/6882.