

## B. The Doctor with the Broom

On 26<sup>th</sup> May 1943, a meeting of the authorities was held in Radom, where they discussed the health situation in the district. Those present unanimously agreed that the main centres of the spread of the epidemics were the labour camps for Jews.

It was reported that the departments in the *Generalgouvernement*, which were dealing with the matter, refused to provide rations of soap, clothing and straw to these camps. Nevertheless, the need arose to act against the epidemics, because the Germans, who were working in the armaments factories, were also affected.<sup>1</sup>

Although hospitals (*Rewir*) and clinics had been established in all the Jewish camps in the Radom district as early as 1942, they all lacked doctors, medicines, soap and disinfectants.

A similar situation existed in Apparatebau, where several doctors, who had survived the Purim massacre of 1943, had moved - Dr Szperling, a surgeon, Dr Bresler, an internist, Dr Łuński, the gynaecologist and Dr Julek Przyrowski, also an internist.

The testimonies also mention the names of Dr Green, Dr Winter, the surgeon Dr Glatter, the dentist Dr Wajsberg, and Dr Konarska. Among the nurses and auxiliaries mentioned are Szoszana Dobrzyńska, Irena Torbeczko, Sonja Kiel, Altman, Josef Lipszyc, Ruben Munowicz and others. Doctors and nurses had the right to live with their spouses in a special "doctors' shack".

A hospital was established in the new camp in Barrack № 7, with a clinic next to it. The hospital had a room for men and a room for women, with wooden beds and basic equipment. The cleanliness was exemplary. It was possible to perform uncomplicated surgeries. There were cases of abortions and births. It is not known what happened to the babies.

According to Lucy Niskier's testimony, they were drowned.<sup>2</sup> The hospital also treated those injured in accidents at the factory, but the doctors were not always able to help. When a pile of boxes fell on Frida Herszlikowicz in the warehouse, she was seriously injured in the back and remained disabled.<sup>3</sup>

The infectious diseases department was located in Barracks No. 8, in an area fenced off and locked. Over time, a small clinic was established in the "Circus" and there was also a dental clinic.

The camp's chief physician was appointed Dr Szperling, who had studied in Vienna and knew German well. He supervised all health services in the camp.

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<sup>1</sup> Arbeitssitzung am 26/05/1943, Hans Frank, Tagebuch, YVA, JM/21, no. (8 Anlage)

<sup>2</sup> Testimony of Lucy Niskier, YVA 0-33/6839

<sup>3</sup> Frida Herszlikowicz, *The Many Faces of Death*, illustrated by Yaron Golan, Tel Aviv 1998, p. 87.

A “cleaning group” (*Reinigungskommando*) was responsible for cleaning the yard and latrines, and each barracks had a designated supervisor in charge of order. With Klemm’s removal in late 1943, inmate Szperling’s position was further strengthened, thanks to the unqualified support of the new *Werkschutz* commander, Richard Hermann. Hermann, a medic by profession, was an admirer of Szperling’s, and wanted to be an assistant during operations.

More than once, a patient, who had already undergone surgery, was put back on the table so that the doctor could explain the secrets of the profession to Hermann. There were cases when, for the sake of “show”, the patients were given a double dose of anaesthetic and they died.<sup>4</sup>

Szperling was domineering and, at the same time, had extraordinary organisational skills and did not take bribes. His wife also had no influence on him. It was known in the camp that he controlled a pharmacy which was rich in various medicines and food supplements. Some were brought from the ghetto pharmacy, and some were received from the Jewish Relief Office J.U.S. (*Jüdische Unterstützungsstelle*), which began operating in Kraków in the spring of 1944, under the management of the director Weichert.<sup>5</sup> None of this reached the prisoners.

Only two medicines were available to the doctors - aspirin for fever and “Kogutek” for headaches. No wonder that the prisoners called Dr Dresler “*Der Doktor von AK*” (AK – Aspirin-Kogutek). On the other hand, Szperling placed all his treasures at the disposal of the Germans.

In the autumn of 1943, an abdominal typhoid epidemic broke out in the camp. Szperling and his doctors tried to hide it from the Germans, who were interested in eliminating - literally - every source of the epidemic. When Kromołowski became infected, he hesitated about going to the clinic, because the prisoners were afraid to lie in the “morgue” (*trupiarnia*), as the infectious diseases department was called. But the forty-degree fever defeated him.

One day, Szperling entered the ward. He did not approach the patients, but looked at the floor and determined that it was dirty. Without thinking much, he grabbed the broom, called the orderly and, in front of the astonished patients, he began to run after the unfortunate orderly, hitting him on the head and body with the broom. The orderly begged and tried to escape, but this did not help him much.<sup>6</sup>

The typhus patients were lucky, because the doctors did not give the Germans a true report and presented them as suffering from other diseases.

Despite a considerable number of deaths, the doctors overcame the plague, without the Germans knowing about its existence. The doctors treated the patients with dedication and there were other good souls, like Mirjam Morgensztern and her sister Henia, who helped with the treatment.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Brener, *Resistance and Destruction*, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow*, p.201.

<sup>6</sup> Kromołowski, *Wspomnienia*, pp. 735-749

<sup>7</sup> Testimony of Bela Motylińska, YVA 0-33/6842.

The camp prisoners also suffered from tuberculosis, dysentery and bronchitis. The women had their own worries. Jadzia Abramzon, whose young husband Izio had perished in the "Great Selection", did not recover, neither mentally nor physically. Due to complications following an abortion, she had to go to hospital. Here, Dr Winter treated her as best he could. (She was very similar to his wife, who had perished.) He only wondered how a sixteen-year-old girl had managed to go through love, marriage, an abortion and the loss of her husbands.<sup>8</sup>

Lying in a hospital had many advantages - a break from the gruelling factory work, a clean bed, good heating and, sometimes, some kind of supplement to the food.

But the peace was illusory. There was always a danger in the air that the *Werkschutzleiter* would suddenly come in with his guards and make a selection.

Natka Glazer was also afraid when, in the winter of 1944, she found herself in hospital due to a simulated attack of appendicitis. She was simply very tired and decided to be sick, in order to rest. And, indeed, Dr Szperling performed the "operation". Lying all day was boring, but what could you do! One evening, she received a letter from her good friend, Hadasa. One wonders, what did she write about?<sup>9</sup>

Good evening Natka,            HASAG, Winter 1944

I believe you are doing well in the hospital.

I remember that you are surrounded by a kind of pleasant feeling of peace without any obligation. It is so good, like at home. You can get lost in your own thoughts and forget where you are.

You know, Natka, the songs were mine. That's exactly how I felt. I had that feeling when you left, so strange. You left, and I got to the hut and there was no one there. It rained and I went for a walk.

And so, I walked and walked and I guess I didn't think about anything. I went back and fell asleep and that's exactly what I dreamed about, sleeping under your blue duvet blanket.

I meet with Dawid and Szlamek very often. I tell you, Szlamek is a dear lad.

Well, there's nothing new here. Oh, I forgot!

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<sup>8</sup> Klein, *Not Now, Not Ever*, p.61

<sup>9</sup> Hadasa Wizenberg, YVA, 0-33/7147.

There was a big sensation. Imagine that *Meister* Fasold burst into the hall with a hearty laugh out loud. For the next two hours, nothing else was discussed. Yes, you know, 500 people from Łódź should arrive, only women. The guards have probably already gone to get them. Can you imagine, Natka, can you imagine?!!! Of course not!

I'm in a "splendid" mood right now – that's how the weather affects me. It certainly suits me, doesn't it? You'll read the other letters when you get back. I hope to see you tomorrow, yes? Dr Szperling doesn't raise "specimens" like you.

Well, what else? Mr "Maniusz" annoys me very much, I have no patience for him. Dawid is ideal and Szlamek is a dear fellow. Oh, they just arrived!

Good night. Come back to me already! I don't have the energy to write letters.

Wishing you well,

Dziunia (Hadasa)

A nice letter - some gossip about *Meister* Fasold, some romantic hints, even rumours of a new shipment.

Natka returned from the hospital, but the troubles were not over yet. In the winter of 1943/44, cases of typhus in pregnancy appeared, which particularly frightened the Germans.

Following this, the Reception Office (H-Abnst) turned to the base doctor in a letter dated 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1943, requesting that he take care of the vaccination of those soldiers, who worked in Apparatebau in contact with Jews and Poles, and to also ensure that all civilians and workers in the factory were vaccinated.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, no one cared about the vaccination of the Jews. They fought the danger with the help of a disinfection plant, bathing, and persistent searches in the clothing for the loathsome lice. But these were vain efforts and there were many cases of the disease.

Once again, the doctors showed up for the fight, which sometimes ended successfully. According to Dawid Zylberszac's report, the monthly mortality in the camp did not exceed fifteen.<sup>11</sup> Some would say that is not many, others quite a lot. But the fact is that with all the shortcomings and despite the strict rule of the "King of Medicines", the camp hospital saved many lives.

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<sup>10</sup> Dem Standortsarzt, 23/12/1943, APCZ, group. 192/2, ref. 22, p. 99

<sup>11</sup> Dawid Zylberszac, ASG, 25/02/1945, AIPN, ref. 47, f. 5