

C. When “The American” Met “Pietrucha” ...

If a behavioural scientist had visited the *Apparatebau* factory and was looking for a group of people most suitable for research on the subject of mutual relations, he would certainly have chosen the team in the large *Rekalibrierung* hall.

It is doubtful whether he would have been able to catch one of the *Meisters* because, most of the time, they were wandering between the halls. Among them was Wili Niziolek, a short, stocky man with a frightening appearance – and it is most doubtful as to whether that imaginary researcher would have dared to ask him, “Excuse me, *Meister*, what is your attitude towards the Jews?”

This is the question that twelve-year-old Ilana asked herself. Her duties also included cleaning the department’s office. The office had glass walls, so that the *Meister* could see all the workers. Once, after work, with her friends, Ilana went to look for rotten potatoes or skins from which to make soup. A Jewish policeman caught her and gave her such a slap that her face swelled up. The next day, she came to clean the office and Niziolek asked what happened to her. Ilana lied that her tooth hurt. But the *Meister*, who saw everything, went outside, caught the policeman and beat him murderously saying, “Tomorrow, you will have a face like you gave that girl!”

Niziolek saved Ilana in the July selection. Sometimes, he would bring her a slice of bread and order her to eat it right away, so that no one would see. Ilana often asked herself, why was he so kind to her?¹

To others, Niziolek did not show the same generosity. When he caught prisoners doing forbidden laundry in the hall, he dealt them blows in abundance. Among the Jewish overseers there, the most important was Józek Lisek, who occasionally collected “donations” from his group and, together with Niziolek, held a feast. Is it any wonder that his friends did not tolerate him?²

Among the German supervisors associated with the *Rekalibrierung*, “*Marchewka*” (Polish for carrot), a tall blonde, was well-known. She was, for some time, probably a supervisor in the “visual inspection” department. Details about her are unknown.

In contrast, Helga Panier, the famous “Pietrucha”, in charge of the “*Putzmaschinen*” department, gained immense “popularity”. During her time, changes were made to the team of assistants - the chief supervisor, Małka Gutman, was transferred to work in the office and, in her place, “Pietrucha” assigned Genia Monhajt.³

¹ Testimony of Ilana Chrust, YVA, 0.3/8258

² *Churban Czenstochow*, p. 261

³ Lustiger, *The Ups and Downs of Life*, p. 399.

Małka, a secondary-school graduate, who stood out for her extraordinary beauty, made a rapid career in the factory - from peeling potatoes, she rose to the rank of supervisor and, when the *Meister* (probably Matthias) discovered that she knew German, he obtained permission for her to work in the office.⁴

In fact, in almost all department offices, the Germans kept Jewish women as secretaries (as we saw in the case of Staubitzer, they were not always just secretaries). In her testimony, Małka Gutman tries to obscure the fact that she was also a supervisor. She actually gained a reputation as a kind-hearted and decent girl.

When Genia Monhajt rose to power, things changed. According to the general opinion, Genia was evil. Before every Christian holiday, she used to hold a “fundraiser” and confiscated the second ration of bread that the prisoners received once every two weeks. In exchange for the bread, she bought gifts for the boss. That was not all.

As mentioned, from time to time, the *Meisters* were ordered to conduct a selection in their departments. Then Genia listed especially those who had money. Of course, the poor were expelled from their place. Bela Sandler testified,

“Once, together with Rut, we knew it was our turn. So, we went to Genia’s barrack to ask her not to send us. She rejected our request but, in the end, we stayed. Someone told us that ‘Pietrucha’ herself removed us from the list, claiming that it was doubtful that two girls would manage in a new place. Since then, we were not included in the selections anymore.”

According to the description, “Pietrucha” was a very tall blonde, white and pale like the angel of death, with a prominent nose and chameleon eyes. They gossiped about her, that she had once been a housekeeper for Jews. Her moods depended on factors over which the prisoners had absolutely no influence.

Małka Gutman says:

“She would send me to another ward, to a man she wanted to talk to. I went to him and he didn’t want to come and he said, ‘She is a *honte* (a whore)⁵, who can’t be thrown out of bed. Tell her I don’t want to come.’

“How could I say such a thing to ‘Pietrucha’? After all, I would be the victim. So, I said, ‘He can’t now, because he has an inspection’. Half an hour later, she sent me away again. I went and came back alone.

“But ‘Pietrucha’s’ patience also ran out, ‘Get him right now!’

⁴ Testimony of Małka Gutman, YVA, 0.3/10701.

⁵ “Honte” is a Polish colloquial expression meaning whore; loanword from the French *la honte*, viz. disgrace.

“I came to this *Meister* and begged, ‘Do me a favour, she’ll beat me if you don’t come.’ So, he agreed and came with me.”

Who was the wanted man? It was Alfred Schulze, the night-shift supervisor in the “visual inspection” department, which is next to Helga Panyr’s department. Everyone knew him by the nickname “The American”. According to his version, he had lived in the United States for a long time and returned to Germany following an exchange deal between the two countries. Helga Panyr’s pursuits of “The American” did not go unnoticed by the curious eyes of the girls.

Frida Herszlikowicz relates:

“The *Meister* treated us humanely. He was an intelligent and noble man. Although he was in his fifties and she was much younger than him, she courted him, even when he openly disapproved of her.

“‘Pietrucha’, from the department under her control, would follow us. She would walk like a snake and suddenly appear from behind and strike fear into us with insults and slaps. She would occasionally send the workers to the Ukrainians’ station to be punished with whippings. She did not forget to say that these were the workers of the ‘American’, whom she hated. When our *Meister* found out about this, he took care of their release. He showed contempt for ‘Pietrucha’. He did not like her interference in the affairs of the departments, and another day he even insulted her by shouting.

“And when our *Meister* went on vacation, she took advantage of the opportunity and would send us more often to receive whippings... and stood under the window of the station in order to better hear our screams. She derived great pleasure from it.”⁶

It is reasonable to assume that this imaginary expert in behavioural science would have had no difficulty in diagnosing “Pietrucha” as a nymphomaniac with sadistic tendencies, who apparently found erotic satisfaction in hearing the screams of her victims.

The case of the “American” seems more complicated, as he boasted of long service in the Nazi Party and, on the other hand, it was evident that he was dissatisfied with the Nazi methods of repression - his behaviour showed aversion to them. According to rumours, he would call this or that prisoner into the office, start shouting and swearing at him and, at the same time, secretly hand him a sandwich.⁷

In the “visual inspection” department, there was a table about twenty metres long, and on both sides of it sat women, who inspected the casings, which were passing on a moving belt, behind which was a mirror that magnified the image of the casing. The operator checked there there was no scratch or stain on the casing.

⁶ Herszlikowicz, *The Many Faces of Death*, pp. 90-91.

⁷ Testimony of Małka Baran, YVA, 0-33/6859.

If there was a defect, she had to throw it into another box, on which a note with her name was stuck. This way, it was possible to check how much “waste” each worker produced. The boxes, with the casings for testing, were provided by a young man, Izrael Zylberglajt:

“I had to put a box next to each woman, so that she would not lack casings for work. If I didn’t have enough and she was left without bullets, I got a slap or a kick. So, each time, I put eighteen boxes on a cart and ran from place to place.”⁸

Schulze followed Izrael’s work and must have wondered where he got so much strength for such a slender man. Once, he asked him where he came from and what about his family.

“I was afraid to talk about Treblinka, I was afraid to say, ‘You destroyed my family’. So, I said that they sent away my parents and sisters and I never heard from them again, to which Schulze replied that they had apparently been sent to another camp and they would return. But it wasn’t long before he might have learned about Treblinka.

“Once, on a night shift, he began to speak about the situation and what had happened before. After a short while he added, ‘The German people are a cultured people and do not engage in murder - it is mere propaganda.’”

That is until the selection came in July 1943. During that selection, Schulze saved the life of Marysia Lewkowicz. He witnessed the horrific spectacle of children being collected in trucks to be taken to the killing field. Izrael continues his reminiscences,

“We felt that he had changed since then. We felt it and we saw it. Along with this, he was a member of the Nazi Party. And since then, it happened more than once that he came, said, ‘Gut Morgen’ and the sandwich he was holding was passed to me.”

Schulze treated women well. He never shouted and often shared his dinner with one of the girls and, occasionally, allowed them to sleep while working.

The strange friendship that had developed between the *Meister* and Izrael Zylberglajt was put to the test, when Schulze’s son once came to the factory with his father.

“He was fourteen years old, in a shiny Hitler Youth uniform (Hitlerjugend). And I was pushing a cart with boxes, which weighed thirty-eight kilos. Then he passed me and said to me in German, ‘Los!’ (Hurry up!) I looked at him and said to him, also in German, ‘Get out of here, will you?’ And he ran to his father and complained that I wanted to hit him. And I knew that I had made a mistake. Then Schulze came to me and slapped me a few times. ‘Are you going to yell at my son?’ I apologised. And the next day he brought me a sandwich again.”

Were all of Schulze’s good deeds the result of the shock which he felt when he learned of the fate of the Jews? But the latest episode proves that, knowingly or unknowingly Schulze did not see Izrael as his equal: You, a poor Jew, dare yell at a German?

⁸ Testimony of Izrael Zylberglajt, YVA, 0.3/6564

Thus days, weeks, months passed. The girls, working in different departments, learned how to rest while working. Henia Lustiger and her three friends at the table knew how to talk so that no one else noticed. They even learned to play “intelligence” games using this method.

The end of the corridor, in the corner of the hall (where the toilets were), became a “club”. Here you could not only eat or smoke a cigarette, but also mend clothes and take advantage of the half-hour lunch break to wash under the tap. And the gossip that went on there!!! Not only who was with whom, what happened with each other’s money and who got beaten. There were also dramatic events that were not recorded in the testimonies and, if they were, it is not always possible to learn from the different versions what the truth was.

This was the case with *Meister Herr*, a tall, thin man in his thirties who was nicknamed “Giraffe.”⁹

In early 1944, he simply disappeared - until his body was found. It was said that he had received a draft order for the Eastern Front and committed suicide. Such an explanation did not meet the needs of the time and rumours flourished.

The summary went something like this:

One day, several of the most beautiful girls in the department were not up to the task, and *Meister Herr* decided to punish them. He ordered a barber to shave their heads so that a swastika mark would remain on the crown. Someone took care to convey this news to Director Lütt (according to another version, Lütt happened to arrive with a delegation visiting from Berlin at the time). Lütt called Herr and, in the presence of everyone, shouted at him, “You will not make a circus out of my factory!”¹⁰

This means that he had two good reasons for committing suicide - the insult to his honour and the Eastern Front.

⁹ Chrust, 3/8258.

¹⁰ 0.3/9459, YVA testimonies: Moneta 0-33/6845; Julia Babiacki