

C. The Critical Month of March

“Winter passed and the spring of 1944 arrived. Spring in HASAG... Who among us felt that spring?! Somewhere far away, the fields wore a green cloak, buds appeared on the trees and the flowers raised their heads... The sun shone and spread gold... However, above the factory, the same sun passed without us noticing it, hidden in clouds of smoke and steam. The bustle of the machines silenced the steps of spring... Near the barbed wire fence, bits of greenery sprouted, few and tiny, like our joys...”¹

With these sad words, Hania Lustiger welcomed spring.

What wonder? She was young and longed for freedom, the sun, the big world... and actually there were already reasons for joy - that same month, word arrived that **the Red Army had invaded the southern border of occupied Poland!**

On the other hand, Braunschweig, the *Meister* of the plumbers, returned from a vacation in Germany and said that the situation there was very bad – hunger and bombing. After he left the warehouse, a bottle with the remains of vodka appeared on the table: “The situation of our enemies is bad, so we must celebrate!”²

But most of the exhausted prisoners had no strength to celebrate after the harsh winter. The cold and illness had consumed their remaining strength. At that time, *Meister* Walter Prasse had the opportunity to see the *lunch* that the Jews received in the bullet department and he was appalled.

Together with Heinz Günther, they contacted Dr Brettschneider and reported the matter. He contacted the SS, and their representatives arrived and saw for themselves what the nutritional situation was like. Prasse testified³:

“I had made some stupid remarks, and that’s why they took me for interrogation... I simply said, that the nutrition was very bad, and then it got better...”

What was behind this strange incident? Since when did the SS take care of the prisoners’ nutrition?

¹ Lustiger, *The Ups and Downs of Life*, p. 404.

² There, p.405

³ Tschenstochau Prozess, pp. 37-38

Officially, this was within the authority of the *Generalgouvernement* government, but it was based on the assumption that the factories that profited from employing prisoners must take care of their nutrition.

Until now, when a number of sick and exhausted Jews accumulated in the camp, the management would dismiss them and accept new Jews. But, by the spring of 1944, the *Generalgouvernement* had already been “purged of Jews” and their owners did not want to give up on those who remained.

After efforts, in which the new SS and police commander (SSuPF), Wilhelm Koppe, also took part, Arthur Greiser, the governor of the Warta region, agreed to allocate 1,500 Jews from the Łódź ghetto for the armaments industry... On 18th March 1944, Hans Biebow, head of the Łódź ghetto administration, announced the execution of the order.⁴ From this shipment, 750 Jews, men and women, were sent to HASAG camps in Częstochowa.⁵

The small shipments did not meet production needs, and it became clear to all authorities that the only way to increase the prisoners’ labour productivity was through their stomachs. The decisive turning point occurred on 16th March 1944:

At the initiative of Herbert Böttcher, an important discussion was held in his office, in which the directors of HASAG, Wehrmacht officers, and SS representatives participated. It was decided that “starting on 1st April 1944, the SS will take over the management of the economy of the Jews working in the army factories”, meaning that food would be supplied through the Waffen-SS unit storehouses.⁶

Böttcher’s agreement stemmed not only from patriotic reasons - at the time, the “SS Main Office for Economy and Farming” (SS-WVHA) was also interested in imposing its control over the factory camps for Jews in the Radom District, which was against Böttcher’s local interests.

Were the reasons of the SS as they were, the important thing for the prisoners of *Apparatebau* was the result of the discussions. And finally, the big day came!! The *Kapo* brings cartons with rations of sugar, margarine and jam, and – what’s that? Eggs?? The inhabitants of the barracks could not believe their eyes.: What are we going to do with eggs here? But what does the practical sense of women exist for?

“The celebration began immediately. That day was very happy in the barrack - from eggs and sugar they made ‘*Kogel-mogel*’, truly a royal dish... Everyone cracked their egg on their tin plate (or tin), and the noise was deafening.”

⁴ Eksterminacja Żydów na ziemiach polskich w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej, Zbiór dokumentu, (Warszawa: ŻIH, 1957) p. 256

⁵ Michal Unger, *Lodz, the Last of the Ghettos in Poland*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2005, p. 522.

⁶ Kriegstagebuch des Rüstungskommando Radom, 16.3.1944. MA, RW 23/18, Bl. 16

But not all of them enjoyed the delicacies, because some preferred to replace them with bread, or potatoes!⁷ They said, that the additions came from donations from American Jews... Who knew the truth?

⁷ Barkani, *Duography*, there.