

Chapter Twelve

Great Expectations and Small Events

A. A Normal Day in the Life of a “*Hasagowiec*”¹

On 28th June 1944, the Jewish population of the Apparatebau camp numbered 3,681 people.² These were men and women in whose hands was the fate of production. They knew who these bullets were killing. But, in the grey routine of daily hard labour, who had the strength to confront moral questions?

“All life was spent with one and only thought: food and food...”

“In the ‘Colony’, there was a German dining room and, next to the camp, there was a pigsty. There was always an empty tin hanging next to me. I found an arrangement and when they poured buckets with leftovers from the dining room into the trough, I would steal a little into the tin...”

“We lived like animals, not like humans. After all, now we are robots, we work without thinking, the main thing is to live and survive. We are afraid of death. That’s how we live.”³

Day after day thus passed... And, again, they rise at five in the morning. The same trumpet that was in the “Small Ghetto” can be heard in every corner of the camp.

Today is a gloomy day. Tired and sweating, they get up from the bunks. Dawid curses the bedbugs that did not let him sleep. Chaim walks slowly, his behind still hurting from the twenty-five lashes which he had received a week ago. The line for the latrine is already forming - they barely have time to get there.

So maybe they should take a shower? The water from the taps is very cold, though... Jurek hesitates. But they have already hinted to him that he... So, he quickly takes off his shirt and rubs his face and body. He has no soap, but the water is wonderful! It’s a good thing that he managed to “arrange” a new rag for a towel yesterday.

They must hurry, the *Kapo* is already saying: “Line up! Quickly!”

The groups are arranged. Here are the women. In the last row stands Salusia Altman, twelve years old, with her mother.

“Mother was afraid before every headcount and tried to make me grow up... and she would pad my flat chest with pads. Sometimes, during the rollcall, one of the pads would slide down,

¹ “*Hasagowiec*” – “HASAG man” a nickname for HASAG workers in the “Small Ghetto”.

² Pietrzykowski, W obliczu śmierci, p. 80

³ Zylberglajt, YVA, 0.3/6564.

and so a single breast would grace my chest, causing those standing next to me to have strange convulsions, in a bid to stop themselves from bursting into laughter.”⁴

The headcount is carried out by Zylberszac and his assistants. The final report on the number of workers, today, is received by Stieglitz. This is not good – he always has a new madness in his head. If, God forbid, he catches a prisoner who is late, he orders him to throw his hat onto the roof of the barrack and then take it down. And he will add a punishment of twenty-five lashes.

The headcount is over. The groups leave through the gate into the factory grounds and disperse among the various workplaces. Here is Bolesława Proskurowska working on a bullet control machine. She is thirty years old, married. She has something to think about while she works - yesterday she sold her ring, for which she received 200 złoty from the Polish broker.

It is a joke - the ring is worth ten times as much. But what to do? Go complain? Hunger was bothering her so much and her husband even more. And a loaf of bread in the factory costs at least 60 złoty (outside it cost 20 złoty).

So, her husband sold his coat and got a windbreaker from a warehouse with all the seams undone. It needed to be repaired. She had a needle, but where would she obtain thread? The boxes with the bullets are wrapped with ribbons, which are stolen and then unwound to make thread.⁵

But there is no time, because it is already 9:00. A canister is brought with the “coffee”. They distribute it quickly, because the break is very short. They also receive a quarter loaf of bread. And work again. Only once in twelve hours is it allowed to go to the toilet. Today, for some reason, the *Meisters* are indifferent and do not pick on the workers. They chatter and seem anxious. The prisoners have no idea what has happened. They must fulfil the quota.

It is 12:00 and the siren sounds for the lunch break.

Izrael Zylbergajt has hidden a slice of bread in his pocket. He runs to the nearby “Infantry” building, where his younger brother works. He wants to give him the slice. They are still talking when the siren sounds to end the break. At that moment, the forewoman suddenly appears, “Are you still here?” and slapped him. Izrael stands for a second like a stone - had he hit her back, he would have killed her. But he controlled himself and ran to work. One needs to live...

For lunch there was “sole soup” again. Rut is unable to eat the questionable liquid and gives it to a neighbour in exchange for a chunk of bread. Ester leaves the soup for the evening, now she takes advantage of the break to run to the latrine. There is a tub there and she can wash her shirt. Hurry! The siren is already sounding to end the lunch break! But she is out of luck: as if from under the ground, “Pietrucha” appears and gives her a blow to the head, “*Los! Schneller! [Move! Faster!]*”

⁴ Sara Ben Tzvi, YVA, 0-33/6912.

⁵ Testimony of Bolesława Proskurowska, YVA, 0-33/6837.

Another two hours have passed. Almost three hours. God, four more hours! When will the accursed twelve hours will be over!

*Day after day I work
In production for twelve hours.
Have you seen how, between the machines,
The hours slip by, as slippery as a snake?
How they shriek in the morning gloom,
And flow one by one;
Heavy, brown and long;
Twelve in number – the quota of hours.
Day after day, the same quota for each one.
How they screw, turn round, round and back,
Stomping, sawing, stamping.
How stickily they pass,
With our sweat and blood;
With the efforts we made and our longing for that place.
Twelve full hours,
Always a fixed quota.
Twelve for each one, the daily quota...⁶*

(Author unknown, translated from Polish into Hebrew by Rut Sztern)

At 17:00, soup is brought again from the kitchen. The same soup is eaten in a hurry and they return to the machines. The head spins, the tick-tock of the machine is anaesthetising. Each prisoner is with his own thoughts, each with his own personal tragedy.

And Róża Bloch remembers again, as if it were only yesterday. It happened in February 1943, she was still in the “Small Ghetto”, alone, with no one left. Her parents, her brother – they were all deported. To where? One day, the former neighbour suddenly appeared. He told her that he had escaped from Treblinka, where he had met her brother, and offered to escape together. But he did not want to escape, because he was sure that his entire family had perished, so what was there for him to live for? He did not know that she, his sister, was still alive - “And that haunts me all my life, I always think about it, to this day.”⁷

⁶ Felicia Karay, *Shells and Rhymes, HASAG-Leipzig Women’s Camp, Yad Vashem Heritage, Tel Aviv 1997, p.84.*

⁷ Róża Bloch, YVA, 0-33/6860.

Here the 19:00 redeeming siren is sounding. The machine is not shut down. The night shift comes in and the workers each arrive at their own machine. Only then does the day shift line up on the side, the *Kapo* counts them all and they finally go out. The men have also returned “home”.

The barrack is immediately filled with the spirit of life. The crowding disturbs everyone, until they settle down on their bunks. Everyone is busy with their work. The shouts fly from one corner to another. It was forbidden to talk all day, so at least now they are finally allowed to open their mouths.

And there are a few things that must be done during the short evening. Szmul tries, on his own, to repair the straps of the clogs that were torn along the way. Cwi has procured two potatoes and wants to make soup from them on the cooker. Dawid finishes mending a shirt which, in its previous incarnation, was a rag for cleaning a machine. Tomorrow, he will sell it.

Several men are gathered around Chaim’s desk. He has something to tell - his Polish neighbour managed to whisper to him that Hitler had been assassinated!!!⁸ That’s why the *Meisters* whispered nervously! The Evil One, may his name be obliterated, remains alive – but this is good news! And the Russians are approaching the Wisła River.

Immediately, the voices of those arguing are becoming louder - the Jews of Łódź, who are more optimistic, believe in the approaching redemption.

A few weeks ago, the foremen handed out postcards to them so that they could write to their relatives who remained in the ghetto.⁹ This is a sign that they will remain alive. But the people of Częstochowa are more pessimistic. What are you happy about, fools? They are concentrating the Jews here, in order to eliminate them all.¹⁰ The voices fall silent, fatigue descends on everyone, tomorrow is another workday. And the *Łódźers* did not know that the liquidation of the Łódź Ghetto had already begun back in June.

In the women’s barracks, the noise is deafening. Crowding, pushing, chatter, shouting, gossip, stories about the day’s events. There is the option of going to the bathhouse with the *Kapo*, which is good – we must wash our heads now. With what? With caustic soda - it burns the hair, but there are no lice.

The group leaves, including thirteen-year-old Ilana. Poor thing, she has just experienced her first period, and it is really terrible. In the barrack, everyone is busy with their own affairs - Miryam and her sister Mila are preparing dinner, Rut is already engrossed in a new book, which she received from her Polish friend and Hadasa suddenly has the “muse” and she feels compelled to write. There is a pencil, and a form, which she stole from the ward, serves as paper.

Outside, it is raining. So, it is better to write about the sun – why not?

⁸ Attempted assassination on Hitler took place, unsuccessfully, on 20th July 1944.

⁹ Testimony of Herman Binem, YVA, 0.3/8755.

¹⁰ Brener, *Resistance and Destruction*, p. 81.

“It seems as if the white walls of the house have become even whiter. The gates, that open to the arriving youth, seem to smile. The grass is prepared, inviting and calling, ‘Sit down and rest’, and the sun sends down its warm rays, one after another.

“‘Come to me’ – the nostrils open to absorb the air and the eyes blink from so much light, but slowly they open. The covenant with the sun has been made. ‘Come to me, I will warm you.’

“And they walk... walk with a measured step, one, two, three, four, to stretch, to straighten up. The youth are walking. Those, who were not warmed by the rays of this sun, raise their eyes to the sky, wanting to grasp, with their hands, the big golden ball. No children, you will not get there, the sun is too high, your hands are too small. Look, here the golden ball is hiding, disappearing behind the clouds.

“The clouds, for you, are lower than the sun. They are lowering even more. They turn to you. They surround you on all sides. And the sun seemed as if it wanted to mock us, peeking out for a moment from behind the clouds to disappear again and let those who thirst for this sun wait for it for a long, long time...”¹¹

(Hadasa Wizenberg, HASAG 1944)

What is the symbolic meaning of this vision? Is the sun, peeking through the mists, the hope for freedom, liberty, suffocated by clouds of gloom and despair? Perhaps...

¹¹ Hadasa Wizenberg, “To the Sun”, YVA, 0-33/7147.