

D. And What About the “Cousins”?

A more complicated problem was the relationship without marriage, that is, “cousins”.

Young men, who had an additional source of income, including clerks, overseers, craftsmen and “traders” of various kinds, did not wish to abstain and sought companionship, in exchange for material support. In other words, they were also among the “providers of assistance”.

This phenomenon was known in all mixed labour camps of men and women. The “cousins”, in terms of social origin, came from all strata of society. For older women, who lost their husbands and found a “cousin”, it was easier physically and mentally. As for the conditions of lack of privacy, everyone became accustomed to it, since “that’s what all the women did”.

Not all of them.

From the testimonies, we learn what the torments and dilemmas of girls aged sixteen-nineteen were, who, in terms of age and beauty, were the most “sought after”. They grew up in wealthy homes and were educated in a traditional and conservative manner, even if, on the surface, the family seemed liberal. Sex was taboo and they barely knew how children were born.

For the most part, these were former secondary school students, spoiled, educated and - according to Halina Barkani’s version - also snobbish.

In one day, their whole world fell apart and, suddenly, they were left alone in a cruel world, without support and without protection. Is it any wonder that they succumbed to the hunger, cold, hard work and, above all, loneliness?

The girls, themselves, addressed the phenomenon in different ways.

Miryam Zalcberg, who was forced to give up light work in favour of two “wives” of the supervisors, writes indignantly about those who:

“... sold their bodies in exchange for food and clothing, who took police officers, overseers, *Kapo* men, cobblers and tailors as their “husbands”.

Hanka (last name not listed) thought differently:

“I don’t want to remember all those things, all that debauchery!”¹

She arrived at the camp late and, when she saw how life was here, she said:

“I won’t be able to stand it.”

¹ See Chapter Eleven, Section IV.

But she was a beautiful girl and, immediately upon her arrival at the camp, one of the residents of the “circus”, Jankiel “Furman” ([Yid.], coachman), began to court her. He was indeed a coachman. Hanka moved in with him and lived in the camp in noticeable comfort.

Halina Barkani says:

“I am not here to judge Hanka. Everyone fights for their lives in their own way and in every way of coping, there was also a measure of heroism.”

Some decided otherwise. Marila Halperin says that she was always hungry, unable to eat the soup. And her feet were full of wounds.

“Why is it that others have soap, a towel, and I don’t... And there are girls – you can’t blame them – who for bread, soap or shoes, sleep with people, and that’s it. I don’t! And I’m completely barefoot. What will be?

“Yesterday I received a note from the shoemaker’s to receive wooden shoes. I went to the shoemaker’s and gave the note to some fellow. Then he looks at me from top to bottom and asks, ‘What do you need wooden shoes for? I’ll make you boots. You’ll have plenty of bread and everything in abundance. So why not?’

“I ran away after he told me that and cried. On the way I met a friend, I told her what happened, so she burst into tears and said, ‘It’s a shame that he didn’t offer it to me!’... and so, I was left without shoes.”²

Halina Barkani was more fortunate:

“I was working in construction and my shoes were completely torn apart. One day, I met a childhood friend of mine, who worked in the boot workshop. He saw my plight and brought me a new pair of shoes. I didn’t want to accept them, claiming that I had nothing to pay for them. In the end, I took them, on the condition that I would pay for them after the war... The shoes lasted, the fellow did not...”³

So, it is no wonder that the saying circulated in the camp: “A doctor is no longer enough for her, she needs a cobbler!”

Public opinion in the camp was mostly indifferent – they had become accustomed to the phenomenon.

Why were there still those who said “No!?” The reasons were various - fear of an unfamiliar experience with a strange man, fear of pregnancy (there were many cases), shame and hesitation - what would people say? After all, the war would end one day. She would want to get married and then someone would come and say, “She was such and such!”

And of course, a large dose of snobbery, “What have I got to do with the likes of this cobbler?”

² Marila Halperin, YVA, 0.3/9886.

³ Barkani, *Duography*, p. 134.