

D. The Escapes – Successes and Failures

The idea of escape never disappeared from the prisoners' state of being.

There were different escape routes - some were helped by Germans or Poles, while some risked their own lives. Sometimes, the escape plan and hiding place were prepared in advance, sometimes the escapee would seize an opportune moment and escape without thinking about where he would sleep the next day.

More men escaped than women.

At night, they would sneak into wagons filled with boxes of casings. The next day the loading continued, until the wagon was full of boxes and with the prisoner inside, it would move forward. At the first opportunity, the escapee jumped out.

According to the report of the SS commander and Police of the Radom district, Dr Böttcher, dated 1st August 1944, on 14th July, fourteen Jews escaped from HASAG factories in Częstochowa.¹ It was not specified which factory this was.

According to the testimony of Szymon Gelbard, the escape of six Poalei Zion activists (including himself) was planned for that day:

“We had already taken photographs, which were sent to Warsaw. We had to cross the fence from the ‘Colony’ side and we were supposed to be picked up by armed ‘policemen’, who would come in a car from Warsaw.

“But the day before that, I was seriously injured while working - I underwent surgery and the whole plan was cancelled.”²

In planning the escape, help from the Poles was of paramount importance.

The Pole Stefan Sikora helped a young couple escape through the garden located near the camp fence.³ In the testimony of Janusz Czaryski, we discover details about the noble Pole, Henryk Wróblewski who, with the help of the German *Meister* (his name is not mentioned), organised the escape of eight prisoners.

At first, they were all in a bunker and then they were transferred to Warsaw. Czaryski reports:

“We travelled there in two groups, in a truck with a double bottom, full of coal. This was during the ghetto uprising. Henryk transferred us to all sorts of places, while risking his life.

¹ Ludwigsburg Collection, YVA, 0-53 (missing signature).

² Gelbard, YVA, 0.3/1574.

³ Chęciński, YVA 0-33/6855.

“His willingness to make sacrifices in order to save us knew no boundary. He took the money to cover his living expenses from the sale of goods that were transferred to him by the brothers (probably Majerowicz – F.K.). Henryk’s help gave us the strength to endure that terrible time and restored our faith in the world and in humanity.”⁴

It is known that the German, who helped organise the escape (his name is not mentioned), was paid a large sum of money and, most strangely, the escape went through safely. The German authorities in Apparatebau did not react at all! ⁵

The most famous affair was the escape involving the two *Meisters* - Walter Horn and, of course, Wirbatz.

This happened in the spring of 1944. During one of the Monday rollcalls, it turned out that two prisoners were missing. The *Werkschutz*, standing at the gate, reported to his superiors, that *Meisters* Horn and Wirbatz had left on Sunday evening arm-in-arm with a man and a woman, and he did not see fit to be particularly precise in his inspection.

On Monday morning, Horn was arrested. Wirbatz managed to escape. It was said that a weapon was found hidden in the wall in the pair’s apartments and, in the end, both were sent to a concentration camp. According to rumours, they were members of an anti-Nazi resistance movement.⁶

Felicja Sztajnbrecher adds details to the incident:

“There was a girl named Szejgin in the camp, who had a fiancé, and *Meister* Wirbatz agreed to help them with the escape. He took the couple to his apartment, where they disguised themselves in suitable clothes. At the same time, the girl’s brother, who was a member of the French underground movement, arrived in Częstochowa from Paris. He arrived disguised as a *Gestapo* man and helped the escaping couple.”

No other source confirms this version.

The *Meisters*’ help to the Jews was not given for free, and their co-workers also thought that. During the Częstochowa trial, Spalteholz said, with open resentment, that Horn was a member of the Nazi Party and an SA man and yet he helped the Jews escape for 1,000 złoty! And when they arrested him, they found 120,000 marks on him!⁷

In response, Horn issued a statement along these lines:

“I was arrested by the *Gestapo* on 30th April 1944, on charges of helping a Jewish couple escape and for currency offenses. I helped twenty-two Jews escape from the camp but, in the end, it didn’t work out. I organised everything myself.

⁴ Testimony of Janusz Czaryski, YVA, 5797/M-49/E

⁵ Róża Czaryski, YVA, 0.3/9356.

⁶ Churban Czenstochow, p.266

⁷ Tschenstochau Prozess, p.26

"This time, my friend Wirbatz was with me. He arranged everything with the Poles, but they caught him and he told everything.

"I was arrested the next morning. They brought me to the *Gestapo*, where I was beaten murderously and they informed me that I was facing the death penalty. So, I wrote a letter to Governor Hans Frank requesting a pardon and was transferred to a special court for questioning.

"In the meantime, the Jew Wajs and his fiancée, as well as Wirbatz, were captured and questioned. I was blamed for everything that went missing in the camp. At the end, they transferred me to the Jauer camp. There, I saw Wirbatz for the last time.

"In January 1945, the prison was evacuated and I left. As for currency offenses... I had large sums of money (not mine – F.K.), which I exchanged. I had 51,735 marks, that was my money. I also had large sums of money from Jews, which they gave me to keep. I had no jewellery or gold.

"Every German (who worked at the factory – F.K.) was interested in whether there was anything to be gained by exchanging (currency). This was the situation, from the director down to the small locksmith. I did it too."⁸ (my highlighting – F.K.)

From the quoted statement, we can learn that the young couple's escape was unsuccessful. Wirbatz also vanished without a trace. And, Horn is revealed here as a man who knows how to protect his interests. On the other hand, the Jews said of him that Horn was the best *Meister* in the entire factory. He helped and never beat anyone.

From everything that is said about prisoner escapes, the conclusion is that the advice of the ŻKN leaders in Warsaw to "escape to the forests!" was unrealistic.

Only a few could be saved by escaping. The rest had no choice but to obey the decree of survival - maintain contact with the underground in Warsaw, eat the bread of shame from charitable organisations and wait and see what fate would bring them.

⁸ There, p. 54-58.