

C. And the Railway Cars are Running Again

“On Monday, 15th January 1945, we were woken up, as usual, by the sound of a trumpet and everyone went out for a rollcall. The SS men still appeared and with them, the Camp Elder, Goldstein. They still beat and kicked when they were not given an accurate report on the number of prisoners.

“In the evening, when we returned from our work in the city, we found a completely different camp – during our absence, transports of hundreds of people had been taken out of the camp. This mainly affected married couples, who held on despite the many troubles. It was clear to them that the time for separation had come...”¹

There is no doubt that this was the most tragic day in Henia Lustiger’s life. Until now, everything had been bearable - the hunger, the rollcalls, “Pietrucha”. None of this mattered, because she knew that, in the evening, she would see Norbert:

“One more evening, one more night, and it will be our night...”

But even this paradise ended when the permission to sleep in the warehouses was revoked. This was not yet a disaster for the couple in love. They still believed that, together, they would be liberated. But cruel fate willed otherwise.

The blame was all on the rumours about blowing up the factory, which the Germans deliberately spread in order to encourage people to join the transport.

There was no end to the arguments in the plumbers’ warehouse. The Russians were already approaching, what to do? And what would happen if the factory was really mined? Until the Day of Judgment arrived, on 15th January.

The day began like usual, as always. But the prisoners noticed the absence of several *Meisters*. The rumour spread that the entire technical team was sitting on their suitcases [TN – *siedzieli na walizkach* - Polish idiom meaning ready to leave at any moment].

The prisoners stand by the machines, not knowing what to do. The noise of the planes and the echoes of the explosions are heard again.

Two SS men appeared at the rollcall yard. Goldstein received an order to wake up all the men from the nightshift, most of whom worked in the infantry department.

¹ Dawid Koniecpoler, YVA, M-49/E/2075. According to some other testimonies, the great evacuation began on 14th January.

During the rollcall, Director Lütt appeared and began a speech - all the prisoners will be transferred to another camp in Germany, to protect them from the approaching Russian murderers. They will have good workplaces and nothing bad will happen to them. In the new place, they will be given a shower and new clothes. They must obey the instructions and prepare to depart.²

Confusion and panic spread among the people, who do not know what to do and how to react. In the plumbers' warehouse, the tables have turned - it is certain that the factory is mined! Staszek, the head of the group, believed that, tomorrow, the women would be sent to that new camp and that there they would all meet.

When *Meister* Braunschweig heard that they wanted to go first, he was very surprised. These unfortunates do not know what Buchenwald is. Norbert barely had time to say goodbye to Henia and urged her to try to travel on the next transport with her friends. There, in the new camp, they will meet.³

The chaos continued in the camp. Symcha Moneta recounts:

"There were about eight people in the warehouse - we went down to the basement. We heard that they were bringing railway cars into the camp and loading people, department by department. There was quite a mess there. People came, ran away, hid. We didn't know what to do, because a rumour had spread that the Germans were going to burn the factory.

"In the end, we decided that we would also go to the train. We were just leaving the warehouse door, when we encountered *Meister* Uhlig: 'Where are you going!?' And we answered, 'To the train...' 'What?' – Uhlig became furious – 'Quickly go down to the basement and hide, the Russians are already here!'

"We obeyed him and went down. Through the opening we saw, how the Germans and Ukrainians were crowding next to the lorry."

But most of the men had nowhere to hide. They were preparing clothes and victuals for the journey, running to relatives and friends to say goodbye. Those, who were married, came to the women's barrack for a last hug.

Adam Sztajnbrecher's group was directed to the train by the *Werkschutz* so quickly that he did not even manage to say goodbye to his wife.

The transport put many prisoners in unexpected situations, such as the overseer Heniek Hofman - his *Meisters* wanted him to stay together with the workers, but the people in his department, who were selected, were requesting that he travel with them. And Hofman went along with the comrades...⁴

² Brener, O pracy przymusowej, p, 60

³ Lustiger, *The Ups and Downs of Life*, p. 408.

⁴ Einhorn, Wybrany aby żyć, p.161

They say that those, who remained in the “Cyrk” and in the construction department, are now being collected for transport. Dawid Sandler works there and is undecided. He is not on the list of those leaving, but what will happen to his friend Goldberg, who lost an arm in a work accident and the overseer Birenholc has registered him for transport!? But, when Dawid turns to him with a request to remove Goldberg from the list, he receives an answer that this is the *Meister’s* order and there is nothing he can do. What did Dawid do? He took his “*pekelech*” [Yid., bundles] and, together with Goldberg, they boarded the wagon.

The *Werkschutz* count the people, pushing them hundred after another hundred towards the gate, from where they have to walk by foot to the train.

The two Bender brothers are also dragged here. They pass near a hospital and see Dr Szperling with his beautiful wife Gina. Benjamin recalls that Szperling is a family relative, but Szperling shows no desire to help them. Suddenly Gina appears, bringing them a few portions of bread for the journey. Now her conscience is clear.

Berek walks on, lost in thought, but his younger brother Jurek is all agitated. What is this? The Russians are already here, and we are walking like sheep? Why don’t we run away? But his brother refuses to risk it, “Have you gone crazy? You see, everyone is walking.”⁵

Was it possible to escape on the way to the train? Juda Jedliński replies:

“I went with everyone. Standing there on the road was a girl, with whom I worked, who called to me, ‘Come out, come to us!’ I said, ‘I’m afraid, they will kill us.’ There was no problem escaping. There were two *Werkschutz*, and almost two thousand people. No one escaped.”

The three Opatowski brothers from Łódź, who were added to the transport, also did not want to depart.⁶

The prisoners soon noticed that the overseers from Częstochowa were trying not to register their townspeople for the transport. Menachem Liberman also saw this, as did Mordche Goldsztajn, who came from Skarżysko. But he, unlike the others, decided not to move.

They can blow him up along with the factory:

“Through the window, in the distance, we saw explosions and fire, fires [all around], and all of us in the barrack prayed that it would continue, that it would not stop...”

When they were driven outside, he managed to escape during the crowding together with his friend Leibisz Rosenblum and they hid in the barrack.

⁵ Bender, *Glimpses*, pp. 110-112

⁶ Testimony of Mieczysław Opatowski, YVA, 0-33/6807.

Where were the others hiding?

Kalman Chęciński found a hiding place in the basement of his Polish friend Szikora's house. Michał Lajzerowicz, who worked in the kitchen, hid his brother in the storeroom and his sister in the Germans' lavatory.⁷ Binem Herman, who knew nothing and was unable to hide, came to an interesting conclusion. In his opinion, "it is possible that there were Jews, who had contact with the Germans, who knew (about the transports) in advance".⁸

And it was important to remain calm like Kromońkowski. When he heard about the presence of his brother Heniek's department, he broke into the Labour Office, found an armband that was used by the office workers, put it on, snatched up some papers from the table, and thus, disguised as a "labour orderly", he approached one of the *Werkschutz*:

"We urgently need a locksmith, because the door to the bread warehouse has been locked. We cannot find the key and we must distribute bread to the passengers!"

Alright, responded the *Werkschutz*, and let Heniek go. Together with Alfred, they both left for the nearest barrack. In the afternoon, the wagons moved. First, they were directed to the Warta and Częstochowianka camps, where other Jews were about to join them.

In Apparatebau, in several departments, the Jews from the dayshift remained. The Germans remembered that, in the summer of 1944, there had been a Soviet offensive, which had been stopped on the Wisła River. As a result, even though HASAG was able to evacuate all the equipment and the camp at that time, this had affected production, because the new Russian offensive had only begun at the beginning of winter.

HASAG's management feared a similar situation in Częstochowa. The evacuation had not yet been completed. It seems that Orenstein and Brener's version is correct - due to a shortage of wagons, the Germans decided to postpone the women's transport until the next day. At night, no one slept, rumours went racing about. A few SS men, *Meisters* and *Werkschutz* still remained. The night was very cold and dark, and stillness all about.

Calm before the storm.

⁷ Lajzerowicz, YVA, 0.3/6744.

⁸ Binem Herman, YVA, 0.3/8755.