

Chapter 16

The Frozen Liberation

A. Bombs of Redemption

Tuesday has arrived, 16th January 1945.

“It’s 5:00 a.m. The moonlight is vanishing and rays of light are breaking from the east. The new day is awakening. But who amongst us is paying attention to the beauty of nature, to the sunrise? We feel the terrible frost... What will the new rays of sunshine bring with them? What have the murderers prepared for us? Today, the only ones who have gone out to work in the city are the bakers, preparing the bread for the camp.”¹

That same day, after the train with the men had left, Henia and her three friends decided to follow them.

When the selection process began at the factory the next day, Henia approached “Pietrucha” and announced that the four of them were volunteering for the journey. The line for the wagons was already forming in the yard. Henia writes:

“When I saw who was standing in line, it made me feel bad. There was no one from the HASAG veterans, only the women from Skarżysko and others with a shabby appearance...”

Suddenly, Aunt Miryam approached her:

“What are you doing here? The Russians are already entering Częstochowa! I asked Norbert not to go! You must run away from here!”²

The girls took her advice and managed to avoid the queue. And when they were pushed back into the group of deportees – it began!! Booms and thunder, loud explosions were heard!! The air strike on the city had begun - the thunder of the bombs shook the earth. The *Werkschutz* were fleeing and the prisoners were scattering as well. Among them was Miryam Chen, along with her friend and sister. But, in the chaos prevailing around her, she lost them and, when after the bombing the order was given to return to the lines, she returned, and then travelled away.

“The ‘American’ *Meister* (meaning Alfred Schulze) travelled with us. Once, the train stopped and he handed us bread and drink.”

Flora Marder, thirteen, was more fortunate. She heard that there were people from Częstochowa who were looking for poor children and were paying them to travel in their place.

“I already wanted to go with a friend, but when we joined the transport, some Jewish overseer stopped us and said, ‘Innocent children, go back!’”³

¹ Koniecpoler, YVA M-49/E/2075

² Lustiger, *The Ups and Downs of Life*, p. 412.

³ Miryam Chen, YVA, 0.3/9616; Marder, 0-33/1874.

The “blessed bombing” saved several more girls, including Bruria Bejski. However, Felicja Sztajnbrecher and Bluma Goldberg also travelled.

“We travelled for a week, freezing cold, half a loaf of bread. The conditions in the wagon – indescribable. There are already dead people.”

The *Werkschutz* were arranging the lines again. The next group also included the workers of *Meister Willi Nespethal*. Well in advance, he had arrived at the factory drunk, took his girls to the bread warehouse, and gave them each a whole loaf.⁴

The women’s train set off on the morning of 16th January. According to the testimonies, some were directed to Ravensbrück and some to Bergen-Belsen.⁵ The chaos in the camp continued. Arje Edelist recounts:

“When we received news that the Red Army was already on the outskirts of the city, with my brother, I immediately fled from the barracks area to the factory area, due to rumours that, in other camps, the fleeing Germans were burning down the barracks with their occupants.

“In the hall, I climbed onto the window-sill and, from there, I watched the management’s living quarters building. I saw how the Germans were getting into the cars and driving away. It was clear to me that this was the end and we had to think about what to do. I returned to Father, who was in the barrack, and we agreed that we should look for a hiding place.

“At that time, the Germans had set a train near the barracks area and began pushing people into the wagons. Father, my brother and I were not far from the train. My mother and her sister, with her husband, were not with us. We understood that they were hiding, but we did not know where.

“While walking tightly and slowly towards the train together with the crowd, we heard Stieglitz shout, ‘Get on the train. The Russians are coming and will murder you all. Whoever gets on the train will be saved!’

“We told ourselves that we must run away, immediately... we encountered Aunt Sara with her two children and implored her to run away with us. She did not agree. We reached a compromise - Auntie and daughter Hanka went to the train and son Dolek went with us... In the meantime, we learned that my mother, sister and her husband were hiding in the kitchen and they informed us that we should try to reach them.

“It should be noted that there was no difficulty in escaping from the entrance to the train and, despite this, over a thousand people entered. Father, brother and I managed to reach the kitchen in the evening. And, so the whole family sat hidden until 4:00 am, on 17th January, when we were released.”

At the camp, they already knew that the Russians were at the entrance to the city and everyone was looking for a way to salvation, either by hiding or by escaping. So was Marila Halperin.

⁴ Bluma Goldberg, YVA, 0.3/9667.; Igelberg, 0.3/7704.

⁵ According to the testimony of Miryam Chen and Halina Barkani, part of this transport was directed to Bergen-Belsen. See: Halina Barkani, *Duography*, p. 142.

“During the selection, the warden approached me and said, ‘Since you are alone, you are going to transport. Go outside.’ I didn’t know that the Russians were already close but, at that moment, I decided, I wasn’t going. To my friend Róża Bloch, the warden also said that she would go, because she was alone. We hid in a primitive toilet. The cold was below zero... In the evening, when we went out, it was pitch black.”

Dora Szternberg also failed to show up for the selection and ended up hiding in the camp’s carpentry workshop. Her friends were already there and a consultation began - should they escape or not? Among those planning the escape were also Dr Sierota and his wife, Hanka. Sierota had secured a pair of surgical scissors in advance and, at night, they cut through the fence and went outside.

According to Symcha Moneta, during the day, the *Rekalibrierung* workers were driven out by the *Werkschutz* to the square. Among them were also Moniek Dauman and Zygmunt Rozenblat. Suddenly, a Jewish administrator, Tadek Fisz, approached Zygmunt:

“Your uncle Leon told me to inform you not to go anywhere. Find some hiding place and wait for him.”⁶

Zygmusz listened to him and began to retreat, certain that his friend would follow him. But the *Werkschutz* had already managed to push Moniek towards the wagon and separated them. The chaos continued in the square. At first, the Jewish supervisors also helped, but suddenly the panic increased. Many fled back and Icek Kadziło, too, called on people to flee and hide in the factory. Nevertheless, some of those gathered were pushed into the wagons. This was probably the third transport of men that was sent to Gross-Rosen that day.⁷

Hundreds of prisoners still remained in the camp, for whom there were not enough wagons. The bombing was still ongoing. Dawid Konieczpoler describes the bad mood that had overtaken everyone:

“Just yesterday, there were so many of us, and maybe half remained. And now our thoughts are focused on receiving a portion of bread and watery soup... After all, today we received no bread at all!

“In the meantime, an encouraging rumour has spread – that the kitchen is sending canisters with soup to the factory departments. We will be able to restore our spirits a little...”

Where did those, who were still in the camp, flee to and where did they hide? Sara Edelist fled immediately after she heard that the Russians had entered the city. Together with her were three other girls. First, they wandered around the camp and then found a place to sleep with a Polish acquaintance. Dorka Szternberg and her friends Bronia and Roma also decided to flee at night, but they had no address. After they passed the gate, they saw a horse-drawn cart carrying several Jews, and it took them also.

⁶ Oral testimony of Zygmunt Rolat.

⁷ *Churban Czenstochow*, p.274

After a while, they alighted:

“We stood there terrified and unable to believe that we were free. We knocked on the door of one of the cabins. A Polish farmer opened the door and let us in... To this day, I remember the heat that spread from the cooker and the hot soup, which enveloped us with indescribable sweetness...

“Two days later the farmer came and announced, ‘You can return to the city – the *Moskale*⁸ have captured Częstochowa.’”

There were other brave girls, who decided to escape. Róża Czaryska and several other girls slipped through the open gate and had the address of a Polish acquaintance, where they could spend the night. But, the next day, they were faced with the bitter truth - there was nowhere to go.

The same question faced Sierota and his wife. After they went out through the hole in the fence, they found some dark basement, where several Poles were hiding:

“When they saw our red-coloured clothes, they immediately kicked us out despite the intense cold. In the end, we arrived in a very poor suburb. Here some old man received us: ‘You can stay here’ – and he even brought us potatoes, which we cooked for ourselves. A few hours later, his son appeared, ‘It’s all over! There are no Germans. Come and plunder!’

“He brought Sierota to the Germans’ huge food warehouses. Sierota took bread, sausages, sardines, wines, but he did not have the strength to carry the full sack.”

Meanwhile in the camp, the final campaign was drawing to a close. A rumour had spread that Director Lütt and the rest of the staff were leaving the factory. In the distance, tongues of fire were seen rising into the sky. These were incendiary bombs, which had hit the barracks at the edge of the factory. Towards evening, Commander Herman arrived with his *Werkschutz*. Once again, everyone was ordered to gather and head towards the gate. The prisoners went out to the square, but did not move towards the gate.

“How can human instinct influence the masses to resist in times of danger? The Germans beat and pushed the masses, but to no avail... The people clung to each other and retreated back into the camp.”

Herman called out, “Children, come with us!” He announced that the factory was being abandoned and whoever wanted to live, should come! But only a few listened to him and turned towards the gate.⁹ Some say that most of the camp’s “prominent ones” went with Herman.

In his memoirs, Koniecpoler wonders about a phenomenon that is strange, in his opinion, why, despite the departure of the superiors, were the *Werkschutz* personnel so eager to remove the remaining prisoners from the camp and transfer them to camps in Germany? It seems that they were afraid of being left without employment, lest they be drafted to the front.

⁸ *Moskale* is a Polish nickname for Russians.

⁹ Koniecpoler, see note 1.

They were also officially functionaries of HASAG and hoped to receive their pay after fulfilling their duty. And why should Jews be rewarded with release? And if they did not transfer the prisoners to another place, what would they do with them? Thus, it happened that hundreds of Jews moved on foot in the direction of the Stradom train station.

According to Brener, there were 400 people¹⁰, while according to Ilana Chrust, there were 1,600. Ruben Munowicz estimated that there were between 800 to 1,000 people.

“On the way, there were those who escaped, entered the houses of Poles. The guards only thought about how to save themselves. There were two *kapos* there, who knew that the Russians were already here, and did not tell us.¹¹”

Herman’s group also included Alfred and Heniek Kromolowski, as well as Henia with her friends, who were gathered along the way. But they all managed to escape and return to the camp. No one saw them, because it was already completely dark all around. Not a single electric light was on in the yard.

How long did the perplexity and running about looking for a hiding place last? It was already after midnight.

“On a snowy January night in 1945, some strange silence settled over the entire camp. The beams of the projectors went out. Outside, there was complete silence. Slowly, the people woke up and peered suspiciously out the barrack windows. None of the sentries were standing there. On the other side of the river, which bordered the camp, figures were seen hurrying, almost running, carrying bags or bundles.

“Something was happening and we did not know what it was. Carefully and slowly, one of the women dared to open the door of the barrack. At that moment, a deafening, thunderous noise was heard and thousands of lights illuminated the white snow and the darkness of the night. No one was to be seen outside the camp. The people went outside; some went scouting, to see what was going on. They heard that the Germans had fled and the Russians were approaching the city – we were saved!¹²

There were other girls who did not lose their resourcefulness. Bela Sandler says:

“When the German supervisors finally left the production hall, about 150 women remained. A few SS men came and kicked us out in the direction of the wagons. Suddenly, a Soviet plane appeared and the Germans fled. We did not know what to do. Then Herman appeared and began trying to persuade us to go with him to Germany. Some left. Rutka Sztern and I went to sleep.

“When I woke up, the Ukrainians had disappeared. The guards behind the fence had disappeared. We burst into the kitchen and entered a large boiler for cooking soup. Here we sat quietly until the morning. Suddenly we heard a man’s voice that shouts, ‘You are free! The

¹⁰ Brener, *Resistance and Destruction*, p. 88.

¹¹ Galster, YVA, 0.3/7965.

¹² Ben Tzvi, YVA, 0-33/6912.

Germans have fled!' I recognised the fellow and opened the boiler's lid. When he saw us inside the boiler, he burst into great laughter and helped us out."

The prisoners broke into the bread warehouses.

"Everyone got half a loaf, but my friend Marysia brought a whole bread – not a slice, and not a quarter. We saw a full loaf of bread, which had been a dream for years."¹³

This was the best accompaniment to the liberation that had finally – arrived.

¹³ Chudin, YVA, 0.3/6628.