

B. Between “Colony” and “Death March”

Dawn broke. The day 17th January 1945 had arrived – the day of liberation.

Many of those, who remained, did not yet know the news. What would happen now? Would the great explosion soon come and destroy the entire factory with its occupants? All around was peace and calm. Suddenly, footsteps were heard and a group of Jews entered the camp.

“What is going on here?? What? Don’t you know? We are free! The Russians are taking over the city!”

There was noise, laughter, commotion, shouts of joy and running about in the camp. The warehouses, with food supplies, had already been broken into. Others had broken into the weapons depot of the *Werkschutz* and the men were walking about armed with rifles or pistols. Among them was also Izrael Zylberglajt, feeling strong with a rifle in his hand. Let those damned Germans dare to return! They would have a warm welcome!

Some were looking for *Meisters* or *Werkschutz* men, wanting revenge. But there was no one, they had run away. Some men did not forget about the matter of livelihood - they ran to the factory to take leather belts off the machines. They were worth a great sum of money! And Sima Dancyger asked angrily, “How can we, at the moment when we are being reborn, do such a thing?”¹

From all the holes and hiding places, from latrines, barrels, boxes, dark corners of the factory and from under the bunks, the people emerge and reveal themselves - dirty, tired, exhausted after a day of stress, without food, without drink. They still do not believe in their salvation.

Ruba Sztul recalls:

“We have waited so long for this moment. Why do we not feel it as we imagined it? I looked at the faces around us - indifference, drooping. There were no signs of joy in those lonely people. On their faces you could read ‘With whom and for whom?’”

Alfred ponders:

“And there are those who weep – for what is the point of the salvation of a lonely person, whose entire family is lost forever?

“And we? Had we really been saved? Is this not a miracle? We are free people! We have been blessed to see the defeat of our executioners, of the murderers of our families!”

¹ Sima Dancyger, YVA, 0.3/8311.

At the gate to the factory grounds, Polish firefighters stand, looking in astonishment at the prisoners running about, not knowing how to react. The people turn in droves toward the “Colony”.

They enter the canteen. On the wall, a large picture of Hitler hangs. The prisoners sit at the tables. There is no longer a trace of food rations in the canteen, but there are some, who have brought [food] from the warehouse, eating and eating.

Suddenly, *crash!!* Someone hurls a glass at Hitler’s picture. Shards of glass scatter all around. The “bombardment” begins. Bottles, plates and glasses fly at the picture. One man tries to play the piano, while others start to smash it². The urge of destruction takes over everyone. They destroy tables and chairs, tear tablecloths, smash windows – at who will they, freed slaves, take out their anger, their rage over the years of humiliation, hunger, beatings. The piano becomes a pile of fragments.

The people break into the empty apartments. They take everything they can get their hands on. May the names of those accursed Germans be obliterated - what luxuries they had, how well they lived! And all this – the clothes, the dishes, the carpets – all of this was ours. Ours!! They try to find some suitable clothes, as they are still wearing the rags marked with red stripes.

Every now and then laughter is heard, when suddenly someone appears with Director Lütt’s festive hat on his head, and another wearing the *Werkschutz*’s hat. Taking shoes, pyjamas, underwear, soap – things that they have already forgotten the look of. The Jews sit, laugh, eat and sing.

Finally, after all the hardships, Henia met here with Aunt Miryam and Uncle Fabian. But the joy was not complete, because Norbert and his friends were not here. Rut Sztern and her friend Bela Sandler also arrived at the “Colony”. They even found “Pietrucha’s” apartment, but the cabinets were empty. Only two old blankets remained on the bed. They took them and wrapped themselves in them. Ruben Munowicz also arrived. Here, he heard that his boss, Dr Szperling, had disappeared and that his pharmacy had been robbed and destroyed.

At that time, the group of deportees from the camp advanced westward, among them the Dziubas family.

“They took us out through the back gate, not through the city. We saw fields with three metres of snow. We were five sisters and our eleven-year-old brother, Hanoch.

“We thought about running away, but there was nowhere to go. There were snow and frost all around. We saw how people were constantly trying to retreat, in order to be the last and to escape, so we were always the first.

“When we arrived at the town Harby, we heard that Częstochowa had been conquered by the Russians.

“We thought that maybe each of us would try to escape separately. But then one of the escorting *Werkschutz* came and painted a white cross on our coats. We could no longer escape. Without a coat? We were so frozen...

² Kromołowski, *Wspomnienia*, p.806

“We were already dreaming of being in some carriage, that moves, no matter where to.

“In Harby, the Germans made a selection, and Hanoch was sent to Buchenwald. The women’s transport was finally put into wagons, which brought them to Ravensbrück. The journey there took maybe a fortnight.”³

That “frost journey” is just one example of hundreds of stories of unspeakable suffering endured by victims of the death marches. Between 24th December 1944 and 20th January 1945, a total of 3,100 Jews from Częstochowa arrived at Buchenwald.⁴ Most of them were sent to the Dora concentration camp. Small groups may have been sent to the HASAG camps in Leipzig, Schlieben and Meuselwitz.

It is known that, before the deportations to Germany began, there were about 11,000 Jews in HASAG factories in Częstochowa, and about 5,200 remained.⁵ It is, therefore, clear that nearly 3,000 prisoners, mostly women, were sent to the other camps (Ravensbrück, Bergen-Belsen).

And those who remained in Apparatebau camp on that icy night of liberation, were all faced with the cruel question - where to?

³ Testimony of Rut Zajdman, YVA, 0.3/6291.

⁴ Buchenwald (NMG), NS 4-Bu, 109

⁵ *Churban Czenstochow*, p. 274