

C. My Home – Where Is It?

On the night between 16th to 17th January, German rule in Częstochowa officially ended, but this truth had not yet been absorbed by the camp prisoners. Was it true?

Slowly, the first Soviet tanks appeared on the streets of the city. Where are the Russians?

“We gathered, ten men. We knew that the Russians were here, maybe we should go towards them? We decided - we are leaving the camp.

“It was early morning. There were Częstochowa residents with us, they knew everything here. We moved forward. The first thing we saw was a dead German on the road, and there was also a dead Russian soldier. We continued walking. In the fog, we saw a tank. Which? We saw no German markings on it.

“We approached the tank, and then the lid opened and a Russian soldier emerged. He asked, ‘Where are the Germans!’ We were told that the Germans had escaped and that we - the prisoners - had just left the camp.

“We were speaking to him, and all of us, as one, burst into tears. The tears flowed. These were the tears that had been held back for five years.”¹

The soldier looked in awe. Grown men, crying like babies. How must they look. He waved at them and got back into the tank. “Forward! To Berlin!!”

If there was a family, who could cry tears of joy at this moment, it was the Edelist family, which survived in its entirety - the parents, two sons and the daughter with her husband. The son, Arje, concludes:

“It seems to me that there was no other such instance in the city of Częstochowa, and I have not heard of a similar one in Poland. True, there were cases where families were saved. But these were families, who had hidden on “the Aryan side”, or who had appeared under a non-Jewish identity, as well as families of special and excellent professionals, who had worked for the German officers.

“We had survived as Jews in the ghettos and in the concentration camp, without any special relations with the Germans and without any kind of cooperation with them.”

And the others, the lone individuals, what would *they* do?

Halina Barkani and her friends decided to leave the camp that night, come what may. Marching towards the city centre, not a living soul was about. They decided to split up into small groups and knock on the doors of the houses. After many knocks, a door opened and the frightened doorman sent them to sleep on the stairs leading to the basement.

¹ Testimony of Mordche Goldsztajn, YVA, 0.3/8952.

“When I fell asleep, the frost penetrated the bones. The tenant, from the third floor, woke us up. He brought us to his apartment, where we slept and ate. When he heard that I was Leon Szmulewicz’s daughter, he was very moved - ‘I knew your father! You can live here until you get settled’. We said goodbye cordially. Unfortunately, I don’t remember the name of the man who helped me stay alive.”²

If only everyone were like him.

Henia’s first impression of the Poles’ attitude was in stark contrast to the act of kindness of the anonymous host:

“We exited the gate... as free people, walking without the escort of the sentries. We walked slowly and looked in disbelief at the long street. In front of the gates of the houses, Poles stood and looked at us curiously.

“‘Look and see!’ said one Polish woman to her companion, ‘So many of them are still left!’

“Yes, these were the first words which I heard from the mouths of our countrymen on Liberation Day... Not an enthusiastic welcome, not warm words of sympathy, not an offer of help...

“We swallowed these words as they were being engraved deeply into the hearts of each of us – the survivors.”³

The Kromołowski brothers decided to seek help from Stefan Maksymek, a former worker in their parents’ factory. The streets were empty of people, as if the Poles had had locked themselves in their homes from fear of the Jews and Russians.

At Stefan’s they received an ice-cold reception.

“We did not even get a cup of tea. They did not invite us to sit down, and their only advice was to leave the apartment and the city as soon as possible, because the Germans might come back!”

From there, the two went to the village, to the house of their acquaintance Kupczyk who, although not enthusiastic about their visit, gave the guests hot soup and a place to sleep on the kitchen floor.

On the way back to the city, they saw carts with furniture, dishes, etc. that had been looted from the apartments of Germans.⁴ In the city, they met with other prisoners, and they all told the same story - when they came to their apartments, the Polish tenants simply kicked them out.

² “*Duography*”, p. 144.

³ Lustiger, *The Ups and Downs of Life*, p. 419.

⁴ Kromołowski, *Wspomnienia*, p. 809

Here and there, there were expressions of mercy - Hadasa Wizenberg was given hot soup and a place to sit by the cooker in one of the houses. When it became clear that she could not walk because of frozen feet, she stayed in that house for a week.

Rut Sztern expected a warm welcome from Stasia, who had worked for her parents for several years and was connected to the family. Before the establishment of the ghetto, she had taken a few things from the family to “watch over”, including Rut’s childhood gold ring. But Stasia’s husband said that his wife was not at home and gave the guests... a glass of vodka. And with that came the end of any hope to receive the ring.⁵

Much has been said and written about the attitude of Poles towards Jews returning from the camps. A closer look reveals a multifaceted picture, of a different relationship under different circumstances. A great deal depended on first impressions.

Here is little Lidia Cwynar, who was only nine years old in 1944. On the day of liberation, she went into town, with her mother, to look for help. Lidia’s feet were bleeding, because they were frozen. Some Polish woman gave her mother some rags, which she wrapped around Lidia’s feet and prepared a place for them both to sleep.

Hanka Richter was also met with humane treatment:

“We encountered one of the Poles outside the city. He let us sleep there, but asked us to leave in the morning, because the Germans could come back.”

This “warning” haunted the Jews in the first days of the liberation.

After that, the Poles no longer looked for excuses. They were afraid that their apartment, the property that did not belong to them, would be taken away from them. The Jews, miserable and bewildered, had no one to turn to. It was clear to them that the municipality or the police would not come to their aid.

Among the camp survivors were Jews from Kraków, who had decided to return to their city on foot. Irena Bruner wrote:

“The members of the group slept in different places”, wrote Irena Bruner. “One time, we arrived at some barracks. There were Poles there who welcomed us with applause. We [then] arrived in Kraków.

“Some posh-looking lady in the street said, ‘They were supposedly exterminated, and yet there are so many of them again!’

Nevertheless, they provided us with accommodation in the houses. I was in a laundress’ attic. She gave up the only bed in the house, washed my rags and dried them all night with the iron. The free world opened up to us again, with its division into good and bad people.”⁶

⁵ Rut Sztern, YVA, 0-33/6847.

⁶ Bruner, YVA, 0-33/1656.

Edit Cyrer had a unique experience. She had also decided to return to Kraków:

"I was freezing to death. I had a coat with yellow and red stripes, a shaved head and wooden clogs. I had managed to climb onto a carriage with coal, and so I travelled all the way to Jędrzejów. It was a small station. There, I sat down, exhausted, hungry and frozen. I sat like that for two days.

"Suddenly, a young Catholic seminarian approached me and brought me a cup of hot tea and two slices of bread with butter and cheese. It was Karol Wojtyła – the man who was destined to become a future pope. He is the one who saved me from certain death and brought me to Kraków."⁷

This meant, that the virtues of kindness and compassion were not gone from the world yet. And decency still remains.

The Ajnhorn family was lucky - their apartment was empty. What happiness! And Mrs Płowecka returned all the things which she had received from the Ajnhorn family for storage - carpets, dishes, tablecloths and, most importantly, suit fabrics. After all, Pinkus wants to work! Jurek Ajnhorn is restless - he wants to see the Russians. He wants to thank them! He sees several tanks by the Warta River, but the soldiers are not allowed to approach:

"I am overwhelmed with a warm feeling of gratitude... These young soldiers saved me and 5,000 other Jews. It was not the Americans or the English who did it, but the Russians.

"They did not arrive on white horses, they did not give us a hand, they did not hand out chocolate, they did not talk to us or ask questions, but it was they who performed the miracle, they brought us freedom... At least, I saw their faces."⁸

And Julia Babiacki adds:

"The Russians, if we encountered them, gave us bread. There was terrible hunger. Not everyone was left with pleasant memories of them. There were girls, who would lock themselves in apartments for fear of rape,⁹ or asked young men to live with them. After a few days, the Russians left the city – there was more war ahead of them!"

The people began to scatter. Henia went to Germany to look for Norbert, until she found him. Following liberation, it was discovered that there were some righteous people in the city, who were keeping Jews and their children in a hiding place.

Some of them were mentioned earlier. Now it became known that Liber Brener's little daughter had been saved by Polish acquaintances. But Leon Zylbersztajn was in for a great tragedy - after losing his eldest son Niutek in the ghetto, he could not find his youngest son Zygmunt, who was in hiding with a Polish acquaintance.

⁷ Cyrer, YVA, 0-33/7149.

⁸ Einhorn, *Wybrany aby żyć*, p. 168

⁹ Klein, *Not Now, Not Ever*, p. 72

When Zylbersztajn came looking for him, it turned out that the boy had disappeared. The neighbours alleged, that they had seen him crying as he was being led to the river...¹⁰ But life goes on.

Zylbersztajn and his wife took, under their wing, their nephew Zygmunt Rozenblat, who was left without a father and mother. It was not long before that they all went to Katowice, where Zygmunt began attending secondary school. For a while, Zygmunt studied in France. In the meantime, the Zylbersztajns had a son [TN: Alan] and the whole family emigrated to the United States.

Schools were opened in Częstochowa. Jurek Ajnhorn, who managed to smuggle a few textbooks into the camp, discovered that his studies at the “Bunkbed University” had value - he passed the entrance exams to the secondary school, the only Jew in the class.

Bela Sandler, Rut Sztern, Marysia Szajkiewicz and their friends also went to the school. A *Kehilla* Council was established, which helped the survivors. There were already apartments. Help was coming from Jewish organisations abroad. Jews from Russia arrived, including activists of the Zionist movements. The first “kibbutz” was organised. Many of the youth, who were left all on their own, joined the “kibbutz”, contemplating *aliyah*.

Among the survivors, 1,518 pre-war residents remained, including 1,240 natives of Częstochowa.¹¹

Over 2,000 Jews lived in the city, and they wished to continue living there. Relations with the neighbours were improving. [But] the pogrom in Kielce changed everything. Although Bishop Teodor Kubina issued a message to the Christian population, demanding that Christians not dare to harm the Jews,¹² it was too late – the exodus of Jews began in three directions:

- the youth mostly joined the ranks of *Ha'Bricha* [TN: Heb., “*The Escape*”; *underground organised effort helping Jewish Holocaust survivors settle in British Mandate for Palestine.*], trying to reach the Land of Israel.
- those who could, travelled to the United States.
- a few turned to Sweden.

Perhaps ten Jewish families remained in Częstochowa.

The Apparatebau factory scared passers-by with its empty walls. Were the barracks also looted, along with the fleas and lice?

A section of the city's history, has passed, disappeared, called “HASAG camp”.

There are no more Jews, and maybe, they will be resurrected on the pages of this book?

¹⁰ Zylbersztajn, YVA, 0.3/4380.

¹¹ Brener, *Resistance and Destruction*, p. 88.

¹² Jan Związek, Orędzie biskupka Teodora Kubiny po pogromie kieleckim, Konferencja naukowa, WSP, Częstochowa, April, 2004