

## C. They Killed and Also Took Possession

In February 1942, the “Father of the Jews” arrived in Częstochowa. Who was he? It was Captain Paul Degenhardt, who called himself “*Vater der Juden.*” [“Father of the Jews”]

He was a short, dark-skinned man, born in 1895 and the son of a craftsman, who grew up in a large family. Back in the time of the Weimar Republic, he enlisted in the district police (Schupo), but his brilliant career only began during Hitler’s time. Following a series of positions in occupied Poland, he was promoted to the rank of captain in 1941.

In Częstochowa, his dreams came true - he, an average man, without status and without education, became the master over the life and death of tens of thousands of people and illustrated, in his own persona, the well-known phenomenon: how, in a criminal regime an ordinary person becomes a criminal himself. Jews, who were afraid to pronounce the devil’s full name, called him “*Der Vater*”, the father.

And indeed, Degenhardt proved to be a man suitable for his position. Within two weeks, he managed to send nearly 40,000 Jews to Treblinka. He was given command of sixty Schupo men, 240 Polish policemen and the Jewish police in the ghetto. To this must be added auxiliary units of Ukrainians and Latvians, who were called “*Die Schwarze*” (“The Blacks”) by the Jews because of the colour of their uniforms.

Degenhardt was subordinate to the SS and police commander in the district, Dr Herbert Böttcher, and often received direct orders from him. In the summer, preparations began for the first deportation. Böttcher appointed Degenhardt as commander of the deportation operation and also made him responsible for organising living conditions for the Jews, who would be selected to work in German factories.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that Böttcher, for his part, received appropriate instructions from Wilhelm Krieger, in light of his commitment to supply the HASAG company with 8,000 Jewish workers.

The day of judgment arrived.

The ghetto was divided into five zones and five large deportations were carried out - each time from a different area. The first *akcja* began the day after Yom Kippur, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1942. Everything was ready - all the streetlights were already turned on at night. The ghetto was surrounded by increased forces of Schupo men, Polish police, gendarmerie and auxiliary units. At the train station, the death wagons were stationed. The trap was closed. Jews who tried to escape through the roofs were immediately shot.

At 04:00 a.m., Degenhardt informed the Jewish police that the residents of the first zone, which included the streets Garibaldi, Kawia, Wilson and more, must report to the *Metalurgia* factory gate at ul. Krótka 13, where a work permit inspection will take place, and a decision will be made on the spot as to who will be deported.

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<sup>1</sup> Urteil in Strafsache gegen Paul Degenhardt, YVA, TR-10/585, I, pp.16,19

Panic ensued in the ghetto.

People ran to look for relatives, began to prepare rucksacks and bundles. Everyone tried to wear the best clothes and shoes, to hide well a few gold rings and a few banknotes, to take *tallis* and *tefillin*, as well as some food. After all, people were going to labour camps in the East...

In the meantime, groups of workers gathered near the ghetto gate to go to work on the night shift, among them the workers in HASAG-Raków and HASAG-Apparatebau. But, with gunfire, "the blacks" directed them to the *Metalurgia* factory yard. At the same time, thirty Jews were sent to ul. Kawia to dig pits for mass graves.

At 6:00 in the morning, the Jewish police began going through the apartments: Come out, please! Leave the keys at the front door, take your packages and leave, quickly, quickly!!! "The blacks" and the gendarmerie helped to expel the residents from their apartments. Those who resisted were shot on the spot. Among them was Hans Zilberberg, a well-known boxer, who attacked the gendarmerie and beat them until he fell from the killers' bullets.<sup>2</sup>

Jeszajahu Landau also lived on ul. Garibaldiego, with his wife Ester and their daughter Lili. He held the required work permit, as did his neighbour, the lawyer Rozensztajn, who was also married and had a young daughter.

"The two families left and walked side by side. The commotion was great, shots rang out in the air and, the closer we got to the collection point, the more the shouting and disorder grew... and we both held our identity cards and, next to each of us, were our wives with our daughters in their arms. In front of us, we saw a group of gendarmes, busy checking identity cards and directing people in two directions. We felt that we were both being directed to the right and our two wives were directed to the left... Without any prior communication, we both changed our steps to walk with our families.

"At that moment, the gendarme aimed the gun and fired several shots that hit Rozensztajn, who collapsed, wallowing in his blood and, with a thud, pushed me in the direction of the *Metalurgia* gate... There was already a group of men here, all of them close to losing consciousness, screaming like myself from the difficult experience of separation from their family..."

Towards evening, Jewish policemen came and related how "the blacks" led the terrible march of 7,000 people to the train station, amid incessant gunfire. Before being squeezed into the wagons, the victims were ordered to take off their shoes, which were collected by Polish policemen.

Hundreds of murdered Jews were buried in mass graves that had already been prepared on ul. Kawia.

Not all Jews went on the "Transport". Some sought salvation in a makeshift bunker or in a hiding place in an attic. The next day, policemen went out "hunting". Anyone found was shot immediately. And there were also those who survived.

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<sup>2</sup> Kromołowski, *Wspomnienia...*, pp. 486-490