

E. How will we save our children?

The second *akcja* was on 25th September.

This time, the Jews were gathered in the Nowy Rynek. And, again, the same horrific scenes were repeated. In general, it passed quietly, perhaps because the Jews had lost any remaining hope.

Degenhardt was interested in the proper course of the *akcja*, because of Herbert Böttcher's presence. For Böttcher, this was not his first participation in the deportation and, in return for his achievements in maintaining the "security" of the Radom District, he had received a medal of honour from the Reich authorities.¹

This time about 8,000 Jews were sent to Treblinka and about 300 survivors were pushed to *Metalurgia*.

After the first *akcja*, all the parents in the ghetto already knew that the greatest danger lurked for the children. Some sought a way to save them, but not at any cost.

Jeszajahu Landau's little daughter went to die, because her grandparents refused to give her away to a Polish family. Pinkus Ajnhorn stopped his little son, Roman, from going with a Polish lady, who had agreed to hide him.

There were also cases of self-sacrifice on the part of the Poles. During the deportation, the Rozenblat family found refuge with relatives, but Elka, a devout Catholic who was the caregiver of the twelve-year-old Zygmusz [ed: later, Sigmund Rolat], whom she loved with all her heart, refused to leave the family apartment under any circumstances.

She waited for her Zygmusz, until she was caught and sent to Treblinka. The father of the family, Henryk Rozenblat, was also sent to Treblinka. The disaster prompted the eldest son Jerzyk to join an underground movement, and for Zygmusz, his mother found him a hiding place at her workplace in a furniture warehouse (*Möbellager*), where other children were also found.²

¹ Zeznanie biegłego Zygmunta Glogiera, Proces Herberta Böttchera, YVA, JM/3573, p. 602

² Rolat, Jakby to było wczoraj... YVA, O-33/6775, pp. 2, 5

As Leon Zylbersztajn, uncle of Zygmusz and Jerzyk Rozenblat, testified:

“Amongst the many people, men, women and children, who were found in the furniture warehouse, were also my wife and my eldest son, Niutek, eight years old. We had to be very careful, and so we lived in constant fear.

“I would like to mention one personal detail - my son asked his mother why she gave birth to him before the War? It would have been better for him to have been born after the War.”

Even before that, Zylbersztajn had hidden the child in a bunker in his factory. During the Great Deportation, everyone, who was hiding there, came out, leaving there only his sister-in-law Tanya and his son Niutek.

“I went there with my group, accompanied by a German guard... I took my sister-in-law out of the bunker and gave my son a pill to sleep. I thought that, if I survived the deportation, I would wake up the child.

“After two days, I found another opportunity to go to the factory and, to my great regret, I saw that the child was no longer alive. I made a coffin and asked the German for permission to bury my child. But when I took the child, I noticed that he was alive! With great difficulty, I brought him to the furniture warehouse...

“Shortly afterwards, there was another selection. The parents tried all kinds of ways to save their children. Again, I gave my son a sleeping pill, because I had to go to deportation. Degenhardt selected my wife and me for death, but the German, Karl Werner, who oversaw the warehouses, took my wife and me back out, because he needed me as a mechanic.

“After the selection, I learned that my son had been taken out of the house while he was sleeping, and I never saw my Niutek again. The other son too, five-year-old Zygmusz, also went through torment. I tried to save him with the help of Christians, who were hiding Jewish children for money.³

In the third *akcja* on 28th September 1942, all the residents of the old age home were murdered, and in the fourth *akcja*, all the children from the orphanage were sent to the wagons. Together with them the director of the institution, Rywka Warzecha, and the educators went to their deaths.⁴

On 7th October, judgment day also came to the “White House”. This time, Degenhardt changed his tactics. Instead of deporting everyone to *Metalurgia* and making a selection there, he decided to make it in the courtyard of the house.

More than two hundred people gathered there, including Pinkus Ajnhorn, with his wife Sara and their sons, Jurek, seventeen, and Roman, eleven.

³ Testimony of Leon Zylbersztajn, YVA, 0.3/4380.

⁴ Auerbach, *History of the Jews of Częstochowa...* p. 123.

During the selection, Sara pushed Jurek into the group of survivors, saying, "One of us must survive". Jurek did not understand what she meant at first,

"And suddenly I understood what was happening... Not they, the parents, but I must decide my fate... Should I separate from my family of my own free will? I want us to be together, regardless of what happens next."

and, in a moment, he returned to his previous place.⁵

The Ajnhorn family was saved. Degenhardt chose 19 victims out of 190 residents, thanks to the intervention of Mrs Mosiewicz, a *Volksdeutsch*, who had many businesses with craftsmen of "the house".

Meanwhile, in the same houses that had been evacuated from the Jews, the robbery of Jewish property began, which was wonderfully planned and organised. Gangs of all kinds - gendarmerie, Schupo police, Gestapo, *Volksdeutsche* and ordinary Germans, as well as the "blacks" and Polish policemen, roamed the abandoned apartments, frantically searching for valuables and money, and robbed everything of value.

Alfred Kromolowski, who was an eyewitness, recounts in his memoirs as to how, under the guidance of the German Karl Lindemann, the supervisor of Jewish shops, all the goods were removed from them, which were later sold at half price to Poles.

Hundreds of trucks and horse-drawn carts transported furniture and equipment from every apartment in the twenty-eight streets of the "Big Ghetto" to warehouses on ul. Garibaldię. Pictures and works of art, bed linen, lamps, porcelain and crystal were collected in special houses. Each warehouse was supervised by a Schupo policeman, and Jews, men and women, worked here.

After items were sorted and cleaned, they were sent to Germany. What was left was sold at bargain prices to Polish buyers, of whom there was no shortage. In their eagerness for the loot, the Germans did not shy away from desecrating the dead - after the carts brought the bodies of the murdered to the mass graves on ul. Kawia, the looting Germans stormed them, searching for diamonds in the clothes, pulling gold teeth out of their mouths and even cutting off fingers with rings.

As the deportations progressed, it became clear to the Jewish police that the Germans would reduce their numbers. One day in October, a roll call was held of all 250 police officers, who were divided into two groups - the first were adults with families, and the second were single and married people without children, who were also divided into two - those destined to become police officers in the "Small Ghetto" in the future and the others, who were suitable for labour. In the end, about 200 police officers were sent to Treblinka with their families.

⁵ Einhorn, Wybrany aby żyć... pp.103-104

On the holiday of *Simchas Torah*, the fifth *akcja* took place.

At the *Metalurgia* and in the women's concentration camps, Degenhardt conducted a selection and many of the adults and children were found and sent to their deaths. That day, at noon, completely unexpectedly, in the area where the "Small Ghetto" was being established, all the workers were gathered and the Schupo Officer Rohn took all the old people, children and the weak out of the ranks.

Estera Epstein wrote:

"This was the most terrible *akcja* of all. It was then that I lost my dear parents... In the evening, a small group of broken people was about to return to *Metalurgia*, with tears of despair in their eyes, who did not yet know that there, a second tragedy awaited them, and that they would search in vain for their children, their spouses and their parents."⁶

At the end, Degenhardt ordered Dr Dobrzyński, the chief physician at the hospital on ul. Przemysłowa, to eliminate all the patients by lethal injection. If he did not obey, he would execute the entire staff.⁷ The doctors carried out the order... and what were they supposed to do...?

The liquidation of the Częstochowa community and the looting of its property took five weeks. Tens of thousands of Jews perished in Treblinka.

And so, the tragic circle closed. In her speech in memory of the Jews of Częstochowa, Estera Epstein delivered eulogies about the "happiest of ghettos" that, in the autumn of 1942, perhaps became the most miserable...⁸

⁶ Testimony of Ester Epstein, YVA, M.1/E/513, p. 11.

⁷ Szlojme Waga, *The Fifth Akcja, Sefer Częstochowa*, p. 115.

⁸ See Chapter 2, note 2 Przemowa E. Epstein