

B. As Long as We Live – We Live!

Despite its shortcomings, the “Small Ghetto” appeared like a paradise to the starving HASAG workers, who dreamed of decent accommodation in a regular bed, and they were the last ones to enter its gates.

On 23rd December 1942, nearly a thousand men and women arrived and were directed to several houses outside the residential area. That evening, a large wedding of one of the “business owners” took place in the ghetto. There was food, drink and much revelry. The “new” residents were shocked when they heard about the wedding. When Henia was finally able to meet Norbert, he could not help but mention to her, “Our life in HASAG means hunger and hard labour... and you here enjoy a life of luxury!”¹

Behind the secret of *Eldorado* was a complicated process, involving many participants - the happy ones, who worked in the *Schutzpolizei* warehouses on ul. Garibaldi, “organising” there everything that could be transported to the ghetto - pieces of clothing, shoes, small utensils, tablecloths or decorations.

Inside the ghetto, the goods were sold to the workers who worked outside. Each department in the Garibaldi warehouses had a Jewish manager who, with the help of a large bribe, acquired the consent of the German supervisor and, together with the Jewish policemen, managed to remove carts full of goods from the warehouses, which they sold wholesale to the Poles. There was never a shortage of buyers, according to the popular song: “Whoever trades – lives!” (*Kto handluje, ten żyje!*). Of course, a Jew, who was caught with the “loot”, usually paid with his head or was sent to the Skarżysko or Bliżyn camp.

The head manager of the “Garibaldi” warehouses, Karl Werner, warned against thefts, even changing the keys to the warehouses - but the next day copies were “made” and trade continued.

Business was arranged on the way. The Poles well knew the walking route of all the workgroups. The *Werkschutz* pretended not to see anything, and then the Jews, along with their goods, entered the gates of houses, where the Polish merchants were waiting. The goods and money passed from hand to hand and the transaction was completed in a few minutes.

The Jews still managed to buy some groceries in a nearby shop, which they then brought to the ghetto to sell. There was simply no choice. Ruben Munowicz, who had fled to the ghetto, was advised by the rabbi to return to Torah studies... but that was no source of income, and “*if there is no flour, there is no Torah!*” [Ethics of the Fathers 3:17]

¹ Lustiger, Pamiętnik, ch.17, p.8

The new possibilities, which had opened up in the ghetto, for the HASAG workers led to an increase in the number of “defectors”. Some shirked work and stayed in the ghetto, while others left altogether and moved to another “*placówka*” (workplace).

The Germans fought against the phenomenon in various ways. They distributed special notebooks to nightshift workers, confirming their right to remain in the ghetto during the day, and demanded that they be signed every day. At the same time, the police conducted “seizures” in the streets and bunkers, and those caught were painted with the letter “B” (Betriebsbau) or “T” (Transport) on their coats, in order to force them to return to work in Apparatebau.² Many continued to wage a “guerrilla war” against the police, preferring to take risks and live well.

Success in business became a criterion **in the social structure of the ghetto population**. At the top of the ladder were the carters, who were engaged in wholesale trade. After them were the managers of the workplaces and the police. The third class included those who had a good “job” in the *Judenrat*, in the kitchen or in the warehouses on ul. Garibaldięgo. In the fourth class were the doctors (!) and, at the bottom of the ladder, were bunched all those begging for a portion of soup...³

The constant terror, along with the uncertainty of what will be today, contributed to the atmosphere of “enjoy life because tomorrow you will die”. Parties were held for every holiday and non-holiday, in honour of a birthday, a wedding or an unexpected rescue. Cases of prostitution and debauchery became an accepted phenomenon, as did drunkenness.⁴

The Germans themselves took a significant part in the revelry. Why? Perhaps they, too, wished to forget reality – after all, by the winter of 1943, they had already seen the writing on the wall.

In this atmosphere, people tried to manage living more or less normal lives. They gathered for prayer, held holidays, occasionally read a banned newspaper and organised performances. Teenagers made acquaintances, fell in love, thought about a shared future. But, was there even room for love in this little hell?

Degenhardt gave the first answer. Everyone knew that his “housekeeper” was Helenka Tennenbaum, the most beautiful woman in the ghetto, a blonde with blue eyes and the gait of a queen. Despite all the differences of opinion about her status, some admitted that, in many cases, her intervention had saved lives. In return for her good deeds, she earned the nickname “Queen Ester”⁵.

As for marriage, according to Degenhardt’s new regulations, any couple who wanted to get married had to obtain his permission. There were those who “thumbed their noses” at the regulations, and their first love affair went ahead without permission.

² *Churban Czenstochow*, pp. 227, 249

³ Lustiger, *Pamiętnik*, ch. 16, p. 32

⁴ Testimony of Motl Berkowicz, YVA, 20/0.17

⁵ *Churban Czenstochow*, p. 24

But when Jadzia Klajn, who was only fifteen years old, decided to marry her sweetheart, Izio Abramzon, her friends organised a proper wedding for her, with a rabbi and *chuppah*, a ring, and even a feast: “We wanted to be happy, as long as they didn’t kill us.”⁶

When a rumour spread, from time to time, that the ghetto was about to be liquidated and married HASAG workers would be able to live there together, the flow of weddings increased.

Henia and Norbert did not want to wait either and were married in May 1943. The groom was interested in a modest ceremony only, but the relatives wanted something different. Why not? Do we have so many opportunities to be happy?

After the wedding, the young couple were brought to the apartment of their uncle and aunt and, here, the relatives and friends greeted them with applause. Bottles of vodka, salads and soup were already on the tables, and there was no shortage of appetite. But the feeling of joy was bittersweet: Mother was gone... Anyhow, there was still a father and a little brother, twelve-year-old Oleś.⁷ And there was still the hope that maybe – we would be saved?

But teenagers were not only busy with love affairs and caring for everyday needs. New forces were already at work in the ghetto, bringing new news – the news of rebellion...

⁶ Jean Klein, *Not Now, Not Ever!* (Pittsburgh: Seven Seas Books, 1967) p.36

⁷ Lustiger, *Pamiętnik*, ch. 18, pp. 4-5