

PINCHAS BIRENCWAJG
COMMEMORATION OF THE YITZKOR OF CZESTOCHOWA
Montreal, 1951

Translated from the original Yiddish by Carl (Kopel) Langner, Monsey, N.J., USA

Editing by Pierre and Marek Birencwajg, Lille, Vitry sur Seine, France

...human masses have played no subjective role but rather an objective one. Yet, as I've already explained, the extermination of the Jews has never been as absolute as in the terrible years of 1939-45 under Hitler.

During this titanic confrontation between the world powers, European Judaism, which represented at the time the backbone of the Jewish people, was only considered as a kind of lubricant that would grease the fascist railcar, or as a rope on which they had to hang and martyr the sacred principles of humanism, fraternity and freedom.

This monstrosity was achieved with the acquiescence and the blessing of a so-called public opinion of the free world. Such was the case in Europe and even across the Atlantic.

Let us see now what was the fate of the close to 50,000 Jews that composed our community of Czestochowa in the first year of the war.

Bloody Monday: 3 September 1939

Already on the third day of war, this Monday was like a slap in our face by the German occupier, those dogs from the Gestapo, the SS or even the so-called chivalrous Wehrmacht. They were quick to make us understand and feel that our privileges as full Polish citizens were, from then on, over like a revolved past.

Following the slaughter of an unbelievable savagery in which several hundred innocent Jews were randomly shot in the streets like rabbits, it became clear for us Jews, that we've just lost all our rights as citizens and that our fate was from then on uncertain. A few Polish Christian citizens were also killed during the shooting. The effect was that they withheld their hate against us, for only a while, unfortunately.

After a lull, a new German regulation came out requiring us to wear 'opaski' (an armband to identify us as Jews). The idea of the German occupiers was to crush us morally and to forestall in advance any possible resistance from us. But they also wanted to avoid any 'mistakes' from their side, that is to say to make sure that, with the help of G., their murderous shootings would not shed any Aryan blood. However, despite their losses during that Bloody Monday where a few hundred of them perished, the Poles hadn't understood anything. They interpreted this as a general massacre of a civilian population. The Germans, they said, were only targeting the Jews, and therefore the Polish victims were just mistakenly shot by the German policemen. Anyway their initial feeling of terror caused by this killing quickly vanished.

At some time later, the Jews were surprised to find that the Poles had displayed on each of their windows a picture with the portraits of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. By doing so, they meant to warn the Germans: 'this apartment is not occupied by Jews', and hence to facilitate to a large extent the task of our torturers in their sadistic operations. This proved to be the case within a short time when the Polish rabble efficiently distinguished themselves during the street raids on Jews who were then taken to forced-labor camps. But as soon as wearing the 'opaski' became compulsory, this Polish 'amusement' ended since the Germans no longer needed their assistance in order to 'recognize' and catch Jews in the street, like prey.

The Judenrat

A short while after, the Germans appointed the *Altensterat*, better known as the *Judenrat* or Jewish Council. It was an organization intended for the self-government of the Jews of *Czestochowa*. But it later appeared that the Germans prepared in advance the list of the members of this Council. By establishing the *Judenrat*, the idea of the Germans was the following: why should they bother themselves to first exploit, then martyrize, and finally completely liquidate the Jewish population of *Czestochowa*? Let's have the work done directly by the Jews themselves. It is the *Judenrat* that will have to convey the German's will and their Jewish brothers will surely feel the pain.

Hence, one of the first requests of the Germans from the *Judenrat* was to announce to the Jewish community the payment of a heavy cash contribution of 1.5 to 2 millions zlotys, an awful burden which we would have much preferred not to have on us. It was an outrageous amount for our small community. Here the goal of the occupiers was obvious: to crush us financially and to prepare our future mass extermination. This would first of all allow them to starve us so as to weaken us physically, so their future exactions would be easier. However, the effects of this measure were not so dramatic. To the surprise of the Germans, we were able to resist this new constraint, armed as we were by a particular ability to adapt to our misfortunes; an adaptation acquired after centuries of all kinds of persecutions and oppressions suffered in a land where we were not sovereign.

The charity association "Toz"

Eventually, the Jewish population of *Czestochowa* had considerably increased to 50,000 souls by the arrival of Jews from the towns of *Plock* and its surroundings, as well as from *Lodz* and its surroundings. As a consequence, those emptied towns progressively became '*Judenrein*' according to the German terminology, that is to say, cleared of Jews. The massive relocations were part of the German policy of '*concentrating*' the Jewish population as a preliminary step before the railway transports to the death camps.

Little by little, we were able to create within the community some cooperative associations which relied on volunteers, thanks to a general feeling of solidarity and devotion which is so typical among a large number of us. The goal of these cooperatives, often established outside of the *Judenrat* and sometimes against its will, was to help the needy Jews. For example, they dealt with setting up popular soup kitchens and a "*Shabbat kitchen*", they gave out gifts in particular to the newcomers to *Czestochowa* arriving from the surrounding towns and villages. These people had lost all their belongings within a single night; they became poor overnight.

In particular, the extraordinary activity of the '*Toz*' has to be praised. Its head was the under very capable Dr. Walberg, lawyer Konarski, and Yaakov Rozyner. The activities of the *Toz* were absolutely exemplary and very extensive. For example, thanks to the medical doctors of the *Toz*, the frequent epidemics and infectious diseases were very efficiently overcome. They also gave help to our children. Due to their vigorous commitment a typhus epidemic was interrupted in *Czestochowa* immediately after it broke out. There was no doubt that this epidemic resulted from the absolutely terrible housing conditions; people were packed into flats. A large number of families suffered from starvation and cramped living conditions.

Funding of the '*Toz*' was from loans from wealthy and middle-class Jews; loans which were supposed to be paid back after the war had been over. In spite of this uphill struggle by the '*Toz*', mortality among the Jewish population was enormous, mainly due to malnutrition, exhaustion and the resulting decline in the resistance of the human body.

The torching of our synagogues

On December 1939, the first snow fell. Rioting Polacks, probably encouraged by 'signals' from the Germans, started throwing snowballs on Jews. This was the signal since in a few hours, the most beautiful and outstanding of our buildings was burned down: the so-called 'New' synagogue. The Germans set it on fire and completely destroyed it. The flames from the blaze could be seen all night long. They plunged us into a dark and dreadful terror. An unidentifiable premonition overcame us at the sight of this blaze. Already at the very beginning of the war, our 'Old' synagogue had been violently looted and destroyed by Polish rioters with, of course, the connivance of the occupiers.

Later on, the Germans established the 'Arbeitsamt' or Office of Compulsory Work, Jewish Section. With the introduction of the Arbeitsamt, our situation as compulsory workers changed. Previous to this, the German soldiers could arrest in the streets as many Jews as they needed on that day for a given job, while from now on, it was the Arbeitsamt's task to provide for a given number of Jewish workmen through the Judenrat. In other words, it was the Judenrat that provided the Germans directly to this workforce. But if the number of men supplied was smaller than that ordered from the Arbeitsamt, then street raids took place again with an even greater intensity.

Jews were compelled to do all kinds of forced and unpaid labor. Among the tasks, an enormous one was the regulation of the waters of the Warta River that flowed through Czestochowa and Stradomski. Such a development of the city infrastructure was of course a blessing for the Polish residents but represented a curse for our Jewish workmen. Exhausted by long working hours, starved, working in rags in particularly difficult conditions and without any prior training, they had to perform phenomenal tasks.

The 'Greater' Ghetto

In April 1941, the Germans established the Jewish Ghetto, at that time called the 'Greater' Ghetto. Jews were ordered by the Germans, to move out of their houses in town and settle within the designated walls of the Ghetto. They gave them only a few hours to do this. The Germans vehemently 'accelerated' in their way the transfer of the families. They forcibly entered the Jewish houses and looted their belongings. It was all over in due time.

In a few days, they cynically announced that with the creation of the Ghetto, the Jews had obtained their autonomy, their self-management... and that they would even have the right to 'eat each other'...

In order to maintain law and order, they established a kind of local police called 'Order-Keeping Militia'. This police force had all the negative features of a Jewish police force and obeyed the orders of the occupying forces.

With the imminent German-Bolshevik conflict, a few 'akcja' by the Gestapo took place targeting so-called 'communists'. These were actions or liquidations in the Ghetto; massive arrests followed by the ignominious and much dreaded selections. A few score Jews were seized and sent to Oswiecim (Auschwitz) where they were immediately executed.

The remainder of 1941 went by in relative calm, like the calm in a cemetery. Although from here or there terrifying rumors reached our ears. It was about killings, mass executions in the order of several tens of thousands of Jews at a time. The butchery of entire Jewish communities that had taken place in some areas of Poland. So we were gradually preparing ourselves to face terrible events which could also befall us. However, we were unable to evaluate their exact nature with enough precision...

It is undeniable that during this period of distress and uncertainty, apathy was the major enemy of one who suffers, of one who is crushed. Then suddenly, someone whispers into your ear that there is yet hope that you'll succeed to chase away this real daytime nightmare. As a consequence, your whole logical reasoning

is being pushed back into a corner of your brain. Then you reason to yourself. You think for yourself: 'maybe they don't hold anything against us, the Jews of Czestochowa. Aren't we all useful to them? We work, our city is ours, it is a quiet and renowned industrial city; besides, we live within the territory of the "Generalguvernament" (Polish territory that was incorporated into the Reich).

This is how we were trying to rejoice a little and to alleviate our anguish. Nevertheless, within a very short while, the awakening would be rude and cruel. Fatality would take its revenge as it kept in store for us tragic events which defied any logical analysis.

The beginning of the liquidation

The months of the summer of 1942 are here. According to the news that we were receiving from abroad, the furs that the Germans had looted from our houses under death threat have been of little use to them on the Russian battlefield during the last winter. The German army froze on the ground right in front of Moscow that they weren't able to conquer. At the same time, they declared a 'total war' Russia and they 'improved the quality' of their troops by releasing the worse criminals from their prisons; real German dogs.

This is the context in which the complete and integral liquidation of the Jews of Poland and Europe took place. This year of 1942 was probably the most tragic of our history, the most terrifying of our long existence of more than five thousand years, and the Jews of the Yichouv of Czestochowa carved it out in their blood.

To begin with, rumors reached us again, this time mainly spread by Poles outside the Ghetto. Each of these pieces of information was ghastlier than the other. One needs to understand that in those times, we were cut off from any contact from the external world; we ignored even what went on in the surrounding town. So what about news from around the world? How could we precisely identify what is true? How could we know if the news from the Poles were not the result of their fantasies, motivated by the wickedness and the hatred they felt towards the Jews?

The word Treblinka rang out more and more often in conversations and became the most popular word. Some Jews managed to escape from there, they came back to Czestochowa and told us what they've seen. They were escapees from the door of hell. But people didn't believe their stories, simply because they refused to do so. It is clear that if they had believed them, they would need to draw conclusions from them. This would have forced them to take action, to do something in order to save their own lives.

It is true that considering these news, we certainly had to take action. But in practice, it was absolutely impossible. First of all, the Germans were surrounding us from everywhere. We were like confined in a cage. And even if, by an exceptional luck we did succeed to get out of this trap that was the Ghetto, and reach the Aryan zone, we were at risk of being recognized by the Polacks and being caught. This then meant definitive and immediate death by shooting from a German rifle.

There remained only one way out for us; it was to die as heroes. Even in that case, however, we were unable to choose how we would die, being constantly aware that in this unfair struggle we didn't have the slightest chance to stay alive.

Nevertheless, our whole being was overwhelmed by our instinct of self-preservation; this primitive instinct, unchanged since the six days of the creation in Berechit. The keen desire to stay alive was a day and night obsession that went far beyond any rational thought. So we were panicking, running about in different directions, knocking at doors of relatives or close friends with the hope of obtaining some help. We sought 'protekcja' from influential Jews so we could obtain that precious 'Karta Meldunkowa' (presence card) –a sort of document issued by the German authorities of the Arbeitsamt. This card was signed by Schnur Frenzeland and had the swastika seal. It gave the bearer the assurance, but with oh so much illusions, to have become 'useful' to the German production machinery and that no 'harm' would befall on him ... until the end of the war.

Frentzel used to issue this kind of document generously and with a large smile, in exchange of a bottle of vodka. Then we would go happily about, persuaded that we held a real treasure; people would feel a little more secure now. Some time later, we would leave for the forced labor camps holding that document in our hand.

During this summer 1942, it was early in the morning around 5 AM, one could see people of all ages and from all origins gathering at the Nowy Rynek ('New Market' square). There were workmen, religious Jews, whose beards had all of a sudden disappeared overnight, traders, well-bred young people coming from once middle-class families and who never worked physically before. Our beautiful Jewish youth, our beloved young people; they were parked there, wearing working clothes so as to look like poor proletarian; they were all waiting to be dispatched to the various work commandoes.

The huge Nowy Rynek, which was at the end of Pierwsza Aleja ('First Avenue') was overcrowded. The German police sergeants were bustling about around us and were picking out men for work by taking them out of the line and grouped for the various 'placowki', which were specific places outside of the Ghetto where they were assigned to forced labor. People were departing with a feeling of hope, they felt more secure. However, deeply hidden at the bottom of their heart there remained a feeling of anxiety and uncertainty. Then suddenly, for no reason, an indistinct apprehension swept through the group of men with their first steps.

The deportations of Yom Kippur 1942

In the sky of Czestochowa heavy clouds hung over our heads. Lead-colored clouds, the color of uncertainty; threatening clouds. Our whole community was suddenly in danger. Then unexpectedly, one is hoping for miracles to happen and he holds on to them. Yes, you would love that miracles would save us from this endless nightmare. Indeed, pretty accurate news reach us now from the towns of Kielce and Radom; burning and tragic news considering the proximity of those places.

As a matter of fact, not everyone was pessimistic. There were Jews who indulged in the luxury of being optimistic in those sad times, but I must say that they were only a few. Their analysis went as follows: we are going to be deported to the east; over there we will perform hard work, indeed; but still the war will not last forever. Religious Jews, instead, expressed tremendous hope in the forthcoming celebration of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). But what a great deception was in store for them with the upcoming of this day; a terrible disenchantment. Nervous tension and anxiety reached a climax at that point. Many were thinking in the depth of their heart: let it happen whatever should happen, but let it be as soon as possible, and let's get it over with.

In those days, our situation was quite inconsistent. On one hand, we clearly lacked determination to take action against the tragic fate that we were anticipating and this inaction turned into a terrible feeling of resignation, and on the other hand we were overwhelmed by an irresistible feeling of self-preservation at any cost.

The first 'akcja'; 22 September 1942

This fateful day of Yom Kippur, this 22 of September 1942 has arrived, this day of a long-announced tragedy. This date will be engraved in the annals of the history of the Jews of Czestochowa. It was one of those sad days in an endless war. Early in the morning the Jews were gathered on the Nowy Rynek square; it was a huge crowd of worker-slaves dressed in rags, emaciated, among them many religious Jews. Here they were, standing still, and waiting anxiously for the good will of the Germans. Suddenly, they understood what was in store for them and this feeling spread like wildfire in the midst of the crowd. People panicked. But it was impossible to escape; the German troops, hundreds of soldiers, were surrounding them, their rifles held horizontally ready to fire. They understood in what trap they had fallen into. Soon there was an almost overall desperate rush

for salvation; to be saved from deportation. People were imploring the German executioners, grabbing them by their uniforms; on their knees they were bargaining for their lives. Then with their last strength, they attempted to run away from certain death. They were justifying their usefulness as work-able men by repeatedly brandishing the small red-colored Presence Card that the Arbeitsamt had issued them.

The afternoon had arrived, and the workmen who, in the meantime, returned to the ghetto from the 'placowki' confirmed the rumor that was already in the air according to which important detachments of SS, policemen and Ukrainian satellite troops in full battledress, armed and helmeted had entered town. Already on the previous day, Degenhardt, the head of the Schutzpolizei, escorted by his Schutzpolizei policemen, had designated a place on Kawia street (a street that bordered the Ghetto) where a huge ditch was to be dug out. Then the Hevra Kadisha, the religious Jews who took care of the dead, received an order to stand ready.

It all then became clear to us, and was beyond doubt as to the real goal of the Germans. They were preparing our imminent end. As soon as the last prayer of Yom Kippur had been sung, the prayer of the Nile, the fate of the 50,000 Jews gathered at Czestochowa was sealed. We were all condemned to die without the least chance of escaping; we were trapped.

On that night the streets suddenly became empty, and an unusual and deadly silence fell on the Ghetto. At that moment the German Bourgmestre (mayor) of Czestochowa informed us that nothing bad would happen to us, and that we could sleep in calm. But in spite of the reassuring announcement, the most optimistic among us would still not believe him.

On the night that followed Yom Kippur, the Ghetto was completely surrounded by large German armed forces and their Ukrainian assistants, all armed and helmeted. Here were the terrible SS in their black uniforms, sadists by reputation, detachments from the Schutzpolizei, Schupo, Luft-Schultz-zelner, Ukrainian fascists and the plain clothed Gestapo torturers. Then suddenly, all the houses bordering the Ghetto were lit up from the outside by powerful projectors. The intense light also entered inside the Ghetto and lit our houses. It was like full day light. The Jews who woke up in their sleep didn't immediately understand what was the origin of this sudden illumination especially since on the previous day, they were ordered to shut the light in their apartments. Then at around 4 AM, a violent burst of rifle fire broke out and the whole Ghetto jumped up with fright. At the beginning, the shooting was in the area of the Kawia and Krotka streets. This is how the killing process of our massive extermination, planned with great precision, all started. The German murderous terror went into action.

In the first step of this 'akcja', the Germans attacked only the Kawia, Garibaldi & the Krotka streets. They were first led toward the bus station, where they were separated into groups, and from there toward Zawodzie where special trains were waiting for them.

For the slightest delay, or if we didn't walk fast enough for them, they shot us without warning. This is how a few score of Jews reached supreme happiness by avoiding the hell of the railway wagons; a single shot from a rifle ended their suffering.

In the mean time, at the hastily improvised cemetery at Kawia Street, people were feverishly moving about. They were throwing into large ditches the corpses of the Jews who had been killed during this 'akcja' when they were driven out of their homes. Among them, were those who attempted to run away, the elders who didn't have enough strength to enter the wagons, the sick that were killed in their bed, etc.

... After a number of brief interruptions of a few days each, several other similar 'akcja' took place. On every occasion the Germans deported Jews street after street from among the previously untouched streets. Entire neighborhoods in the Ghetto were purged from their Jews. The deportations lasted in all six long

weeks during which time the Jews of the Ghetto lived under utter terror, extreme fear of being in turn deported. In the end, when it all ended, there remained in the Ghetto only 3 to 4 thousand Jews out of the initial 50,000 who had been gathered there as ordered by the Germans.

Our fate was sealed.

Therefore, during those days when our people were disappearing and no one was able to stop it, we could see, gathered on the bridge on the Pierwsza Aleja (1st Avenue), a dense crowd of Polacks, curious people watching from above. They looked, emotionless, on the unfolding of these successive 'akcja'. They were smiling with a smile of satisfaction.

The Barukh Hashem himself turned against us, his chosen people.

The exceptional beauty of this fall of 1942 was striking; it was simply the continuation of the summer. Beautiful sunny days. People were pushed into cattle wagons dusted with lime; the Germans packed them at 180 people per wagon. Loud screams of horror under blows from the German, children were crying, desperate supplications to the torturers begging them for salvation, last minute haggling with the German officers and attempts to corrupt them at the entrance of the wagons... Many didn't make it to the doors of the hell of Treblinka; they died on the way, by suffocation or from thirst.

Beautiful still nights, starry skies. Impossible to escape, where could we hide ? So we stayed home, resigned as to our fate, full of melancholy, and we waited for the next 'akcja' which would come as a salvation.

The verse of Toikhelke's poem says: 'Outside, the curse of death threatens us and inside the house a deadly fear glooms', or 'In the morning we say: who will remain alive in the evening ?' But these holy words even miss the main point, they are much too soft-hearted, too naïve considering the tragedy that we have gone through, we the Jews of Czestochowa and our brothers from other Jewish communities of Poland, all these small villages, cities and little towns where our whole people was murdered.

And there is no guide any more !

And there is no salvation !

There was indifference to our superhuman suffering. The sky itself was indifferent and the so-called public opinion was also indifferent. Conscience of the world, where are you !? When our children were burned alive ! Can you allow these outrageous massacres of innocent civilians !? Can you accept that almost six millions of your Jews were whipped out guilty only of having been born from a Jewish mother ? Conscience of the world, can you look at this and not react to it !?

The screams of horror could ice your blood. Shriill screams pierced the silence of the deep forests surrounding Treblinka. The tall fir trees looked on from above, unmoved by the nightmare below; they were concealing the crime from the world's eyes, according to the very will of the Germans. Our young children, what wrong had they done during their so short lives to deserve this supreme torture? The echo of their voices haunts these forests to this very day.

And what about our brothers, members of this other Jewish community overseas, the second most important Jewish community after our European Jews. Could they really not have done something to prevent this, to protect us from the murderers? It was not they who were locked up in a Ghetto surrounded with barbed wire. What did they undertake for our sake when our lives were taken away from us? But they were probably more involved about which baseball team, the Dodgers or the New York Yankees, would win the World Series that year. Wasn't this also the year when the first Walt Disney cartoons came out ?

There is one thing that we are entitled to conclude; during those months of autumn 1942, when the first smoke came out from the crematorium of Treblinka and Majdanek, it is precisely the idea of human dignity and of all moral values that had collapsed.

There was, however, a ray of sunshine on those dark and hopeless days. It is our youth who refused to accept our destruction and rebelled against German occupiers and their Ukrainian dogs. In fact only a fraction of them were mobilized but they were the most active, the most admirable ones, they were our wonderful young people of Czestochowa, all of them were idealists. They reasoned as follows: since we must die anyhow, it will happen as we stand upright, and the murderers will pay for their crimes. By their desperate bravery, they took the world to witness for its criminal complicity with the German occupier. Their courage and unyielding will to save the honor of the Jewish people and human dignity probably represented a unique case. Overcoming huge material handicaps, they fought arms in hand against hateful and sadistic opponents who were superiorly armed and trained. They had practically no chance of achieving a military victory, but what a moral victory they have achieved in this uneven struggle!

When our dear, our magnificent Fishlewicz and Fajner decided to kill this cruel guy, captain Rohn, it was almost certain that they had no hope of being rewarded with a medal and even less hope of receiving some financial reward for this brave action. No, they wanted to shed their blood only so they could protest against the deportations of their brothers, sisters & mothers to the hell of Treblinka.

There were also these other heroes, those extraordinary boys of exceptional or supernatural statures, of unprecedented courage and abnegation. They were Potasiewicz, there was the group of partisans on Wilsona street n° 34, like Rychter, Rozenblatt, Flamenbojm, Krause and Herszenberg. Their names shall ring out eternally. In fact, they had all the chances of staying alive but they refused to abandon their battle station and died in the exchange of fire. Their other partisan brothers, our heroes of Czestochowa, were Mietek Wajntraub and Frenkenberg who fell in battle in the 'Small Ghetto'. The 'Small Ghetto' was liquidated on 4 January 1943. The Jews who were spared from the deportations of the 'Greater' Ghetto had been gathered in a small area of the Jewish quarter, next to the river Warta; it was called the 'Small' Ghetto.

Then, there were our heroes right inside of the camp of Treblinka; those who organized the uprising included Langner and Henryk Rozenblatt. At the threshold of hell where their wives and children had died, they fought with the determination of hate and despair and were atrociously put to death in the hands of their torturers.

Neither shall we forget those anonymous Jews who, during the selections, had the possibility of choosing to stay alive, although at the cost of being separated from their dearest ones, but who instead chose to join with them knowing that they would enter the wagons together. They thus chose the way of certain death. They have thus satisfied their last will which was to stay close to their beloved ones to the last minute.

Everlasting glory to our unequalled heroes !

All of a sudden, a voice arose from the darkness and spread endlessly like an echo. It said:

Nekume ! (Vengeance in Hebrew)

It is the voice of our brothers Piechota and Judel Zylberberg, who disappeared without leaving any trace; they have no grave. Our cry of vengeance is so powerful that it covers the dark consciousness of our murderers and their collaborators for the generations to come.