

## *Obławy*<sup>1</sup>

The greatest plague in all the ghettos were the *obławy*. Jewish men were not safe on the streets because, at any minute, they could be captured by uniformed or plain-clothes Germans for unpaid forced labour and, in addition, to also be beaten. The insecurity of going about in the street, the wearing of the badges of shame, throwing the Jews out of their homes and imprisoning them in a ghetto, taking away their personal freedom, material possessions, rights and honour - [all this] was a system planned by the Nazi regime, in order to make the Jews feel worthless and to force, upon other peoples, the idea that the Jews were lowlier creatures.

The first *obławy* in Częstochowa were conducted by uniformed and plain-clothes Germans. Once the *Judenrat's* Employment Bureau and the Jewish police were established, the mission went into Jewish hands. The Jewish police were those who captured Jews for forced labour and for deportations.

During the period of the "Big Ghetto", taking Jews for forced labour was conducted by way of written summonses. Everyone received a request to present his/herself. Those who could, bought their way out of it. Those, without the possibility of doing so, but also did not wish to go to work for the Germans, hid - [they] did not sleep at home and, during the day, avoided the police so as not to be captured in the street.

In the "Small Ghetto", the *obławy* made life bitter. A large number of the inhabitants in the "Small Ghetto", first of all, created hideouts for themselves in order to avoid being captured. The purpose of these *obławy* was mainly to catch workers for HASAG-Pelcery and HASAG-Raków. These were the worst workplaces. The labour was arduous, the regime unbearable and the workday long. And, on top of all that, the *Werkschutz* and overseers beat the Jewish workers.

Mondays were the worst days in the "Small Ghetto. Those were bloody days of various *akcje* on a smaller or larger scale and, for that reason, on Monday, almost everyone went to work in the HASAG factories. Every day, the number of "devotees" of going to HASAG decreased - people began hiding. With the night shift, it was even worse. On Monday night, everyone who was required to do so went to work, because they were issued the night legitimations – [the] red or blue armbands and the certificates for that week during which they were working night shift. After receiving the armbands and certificates, the following day, the number immediately halved and, every night, fewer people would go to the work. On the last night, viz. Saturday night, only a few individuals went. All the rest hid for two reasons - the first was passive resistance, the lack of desire to work for the Germans, while the second was to retain the legitimations and armbands because, on Saturday night, they were required to return everything.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: The word used in the original is the Polish "obławy", which denotes both manhunts and round-ups. Due to the ambiguity of this term, in the forthcoming chapter we have retained the original Polish "obławy".]

Because of this, very often on Saturday evenings, there were large *obławy*. Then, Jewish police caught anyone they found. Those were mostly those who had returned from a hard day's work, and they were then forced to continue working for the whole night in HASAG. Those, who had hidden, went to work on Monday and, in order to avoid all kinds of repressions, they gave themselves a different name and went to work in another department. This phenomenon continuously repeated itself like a vicious circle.

One of the largest *obławy* in the "Small Ghetto" took place on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1943. The prelude began on 7<sup>th</sup> March. On that day, twenty-five professional workmen - painters, carpenters and metalworkers - were sent away to [the] Bliżyn [forced labour camp]. On 19<sup>th</sup> March, the Jewish police carried out a large-scale *obława* and detained 200 Jews. On the following morning, on 20<sup>th</sup> March, when the work groups went to work, Ibischer, one of Degenhardt's deputies, took another 100 Jews out of the groups. They sent away the 300 captured Jews to Bliżyn.

The transport from Częstochowa arrived in Bliżyn on Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> March 1943, at six in the morning and, there, the real hell began. The transport was received by an SS officer named Ronczka, the camp commandant [SS-*Oberscharführer* Paul] Nell and the Jewish camp chief, Minberg. Ronczka was a sadist. He handed out murderous beatings and made the Jews perform punishment exercises, during which he placed heavy stones on each one's head. He broke one person's hand and shot another because he tried to escape.

The working and living conditions were very hard. They worked in a stone quarry, slept 300 people to one barracks and the daily food rations consisted of 18 *deka* [180 grams] of bread and a watery soup. The rollcalls were held at five in the morning and lasted two hours, after which they marched to work. The treatment was bad - all the overseers beat the inmates during work and, for that reason, the Częstochowa Jews systematically escaped from work and the camp. For each one who fled, another was shot. One certain Saturday, seven Częstochowa Jews escaped from Bliżyn, for which seven inmates were taken from the rollcall, led off to the forest and shot there.

The bad sanitary conditions, strenuous labour and permanent hunger caused a typhus epidemic, which cost the lives of 800 inmates.

The Soviet front began to approach and the Nazi authorities felt unsafe. As a result, the evacuation took place. On 29<sup>th</sup> July 1944, the men and women separately, heavily guarded by the SS, 85 inmates to a railway wagon, were transported to Oświęcim. The images of the Auschwitz death camp shook everyone. All were shocked by the gas chambers and the permanently smoking four crematoria in which the bodies of the gassed were burnt.

A lengthy procedure of torments immediately ensues. Everyone is driven into the bathing facility. They wash with cold water and all are shaven - both men and women. Their garments are taken and all are given camp clothes - striped inmates' uniforms (the so-called "*pasiaki*") - as well as wooden shoes. Everyone is tattooed (a number is branded on the left arm).

The treatment was brutal. Everyone gave murderous beatings, starting from the *Stubendienst* (barracks orderlies) and ending with the camp commandant.

They slept in wooden barracks, 660 people to one barrack. The 660 individuals were divided into twelve sections, which consisted of fifty-five inmates, including one section leader. Every section was made up of six bunks<sup>1</sup>, each with nine people.

Each bunk had its leader, whose duties were to dole out the food which he received from the *Stubendienst* already in portions, and also to [see to it that] the group slept together.

The smallest unit was the bunk. The bunk leader was subordinate to the section leader. Six bunks, viz. 55 people (6X9=54 individuals plus the leader), formed one section; twelve sections (12X55=660 people) made up one block [i.e., barrack]. The block was managed by a block elder, who was assisted by one scrivener and one block orderly, who was called a "*Stubendienst*". Their main duties were to beat people murderously, see to the cleanliness of the block, keep records of [who was] sent to work and to prepare the rollcalls.

The rollcalls were one of the greatest plagues - standing in the frost for several hours before going to work and after work. In the first days, when the newly-arrived groups did not yet go to work, there were rollcalls from morning till night to conduct various procedures - medical check-ups, hygienic controls (they were checking whether anyone had lice) or simply punishment rollcalls - because the parade ground had not been swept properly or a quilt in a block was badly laid on a straw sack and other suchlike offences.

The well-known Cześćochowa cantor, Cholewa, also went through all these calamities. During the High Holidays, he performed prayer services, which were accompanied with tears by all those present, as they remembered the bygone normal times and their annihilated families.

In the winter offensive of 1944-1945, the Soviet army broke through the local section of the frontline, nearing the camp. The SS men ran about as if deranged and, at half past twelve midnight, they woke up all the inmates for another evacuation - nobody knew to where. The transport was taken across Czechoslovakia and Austria and arrived in Kaufering<sup>2</sup>, Bavaria. There, they were billeted in the fourth camp. From Kaufering, some were sent seven kilometres onwards to Landsberg, to a seventh camp in the woods.

As the Americans approached, another transport was sent on foot to Allach [in Munich] and, from there, to Tyrol. As they were marching there, on Lag Ba'Omer, Tuesday, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1945, the entire transport was liberated by the American troops in Buchberg, next to Wolfratshausen.

In all these camps and evacuation transports, many Cześćochowers fell from absolute physical exhaustion, hunger, cold, tortures and shootings. Among others, the cantor Cholewa [also] perished.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: The word used throughout the original is "bukse" (plural form: "buksn"), possibly related to the word "box"; we have not found this word, or a similar one, in either Yiddish, German and Polish dictionaries or in other historical sources, but it is obvious from the context that the author is referring to the multi-tiered bunks that were used in the Auschwitz barracks.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Kaufering was a system of eleven sub-camps of the Dachau concentration camp located around the town of Landsberg am Lech in Bavaria, which operated between 18<sup>th</sup> June 1944 and 27<sup>th</sup> April 1945.]

This is a brief summary of the pain that those Jews, captured in the *obława* of 19<sup>th</sup> March 1943 in the Częstochowa “Small Ghetto” went through.