

## The Role of Częstochowers in Treblinka

The place, where millions of Jewish lives were torn apart in a cruel and sadistic manner, where Jewish dreams and desires were torn apart [and where] the screams and wails of those tortured to death were silenced in a single stroke - this place, which was called Treblinka, was located in Poland, seven kilometres from Małkinia [Górna]. Treblinka was set up in 1941 as a labour camp. The trees of a forest were cut down and they began building barracks and facilities and to assemble machines there. None of the workers had a clue as to the purpose of assembling the machines. No one could have imagined that the German technicians would think up such a demonic means of gassing and burning people.

The first tests were carried out in January-February 1942, whereupon the mass deportations from Lublin, Warsaw and the entire region immediately ensued. The bestial German Nazi murderers embarked on a rampage upon the lives and property of the Jewry in Europe.

The belongings, from the first transports annihilated in Treblinka, were sent off to Germany. The German authorities sent the items back because they had not been sorted. This fact drove the hangmen in Treblinka to employ a larger number of people to sort the belongings of the murdered Jews. As fate would have it, this work needed to be carried out by unpaid labourers – namely, those not permitted to leave the camp, so that the murderous reality of Treblinka should remain a secret to the world. As a result, from then onwards, Jews from the transports were selected to work in the two camps - №1 - the sorting camp, and №2 - the death camp.

The following individuals, from the Częstochowa transports, were selected for the work: Gerszon Prędko, Mojsze Lubling, Aron Gelbard, [Mendel] Fiszlewicz<sup>1</sup>, Langner, Abram-Lajb Bomba, Jakób Ajzner, Chaim Sztajer, Heniek Szperling, Mojsze Rapoport, Kudlich and others.

The number of Jews employed in Treblinka reached 1,250. The work there was varied. Each group of labourers had a specific function and wore special insignia. One group, which wore a yellow triangle on their trousers, served the SS and the Ukrainians, grazed the livestock and carried out various qualified jobs. These were tailors, cobblers, harness-makers, cooks and musicians. The work of the musicians was to play while the SS and Ukrainians ate. On the one hand, the last screams and wails of the Jews tortured to death, who were first gassed and then burnt, were silenced and, on the other, the SS and Ukrainians had an orchestra to play for them.

The task of those wearing blue bands was to clean out the carriages of the transports - to drag out the dead people and luggage, and then to clean up for forthcoming "journeys". The workers with the red bands showed the people where to undress and they saw to it that the items were taken to a special square. Those wearing red bands would [also] take the old, ailing and children to the "Lazarett"<sup>2</sup>. The group wearing the letter "A" worked in a barrack sorting new items.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: This is the same Mendel Fiszlewicz, who was killed on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1943 upon attempting to take the life of the SS officers in charge of the "akcja", as the author ascertains below on p.192 (see *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. II, "In the Struggle Against the Nazi Beast").]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Ger., a military hospital or infirmary - in this case, a fake one bearing a Red Cross sign, behind which the sick, old, wounded and "difficult" prisoners were shot.]

Besides these, there were also others with various insignia, who worked in Treblinka 1. Their task was to prepare the victims for the gas chambers and to sort all the clothes and personal effects brought by the Jews, who were taken to Treblinka 2 to be gassed and burnt. Other groups worked inside the death camp. They were tasked with dragging out, from the chambers, those gassed to be buried or burnt.

Each arriving transport underwent the following procedure. From the main railway line, the train would take a secondary line, which led to the Treblinka 1 camp. The terrifying truth was immediately revealed to everyone. From a distance, one could already see gigantic piles of clothes, shoes, caps and shirts, which looked like huge skyscrapers. Also, they could already sense the smell of burnt bodies. As soon as the train entered Treblinka 1 and the carriages were opened, the hapless were met with shouts and commotion, the purpose of which was to confuse them, in order that they should not be able to orient themselves as to what was about to happen. Under a hail of blows, they would be taken to undress - men and women separately. When the women were fully naked, a group of barbers would come and cut off their hair. There was a theory that the hair was cut off because some of the women hid valuables there - gold and currency. Another theory was that the hair was put towards manufacturing purposes, because it was packed into crates and sent off to Germany.

After all those who had arrived on the transport had undressed, the men were made to carry their clothes to the square. Those unable to walk - the elderly, infirm and children - were taken by the group, wearing Red Cross armbands, to the "*Lazarett*", which [in fact] consisted of a burning pit into which all the papers, boxes and rubbish were thrown to be incinerated. The elderly, ailing and children would be made to sit naked on a table and an SS firing squad would aim at their heads. As soon as they were shot, they would tumble down into the pit and be burnt.

The leadership of Treblinka lay in the hands of the cruellest murderers in the world - the men of the German SS. The Jews employed in Treblinka referred to them by characteristic nicknames. These sobriquets were necessary for people to let each other know when this or that SS officer was approaching.

One of the youngest SS men in the camp, some twenty-six years of age, was nicknamed "Lalka" ["The Doll"]. His cruelty was expressed in murderously beating the workers, hanging them by the feet to see how they suffered and staging matches between Jews, where they should beat one another until drawing blood.

The chief of Treblinka was nicknamed "The Crooked Head". He was around thirty and had a crooked head. His "speciality" was giving a blow to the nose, making his victim bleed with the first strike.

The main leaders of the camp were two older SS officers in their forties. One of them was called "The Little Beard", because he sported a little beard, and the other "The Spectacles on the Horse", because he wore spectacles and always rode a horse. They, too, stood out for their sadistic deeds.

Besides these main leaders, there was a large number of SS men who outdid one another with their cruelty.

The camp was encircled with electrified fences, densely interwoven with branches<sup>3</sup>.

At the beginning, the workers in Treblinka slept on sand in the unfinished barracks.

The workers in Camp 1 (the sorting camp) managed all right with food, because they would find foodstuffs amongst the belongings which the Jews of the transports had brought with them. Taking things was strictly forbidden, but the workers still secretly removed food products to soothe their hunger.

The situation in Camp 2 (the death camp) was completely different. The workers there depended on the food that they were given, which consisted of soup, a couple of unpeeled potatoes and a small portion of bread. Suffering hunger and working in the atmosphere of death ruined everyone physically and emotionally. The labourers died or were shot, sooner or later. Every couple of days, 30-40 people would die amongst the workers, from utter exhaustion, epidemics or by being shot. [Even] the most physically robust could not endure long in the death camp. Every few days, the number of dead would be made up for with labourers from Treblinka 1 - from the people of the transports. Thus, it transpired, like a cycle of devilry - from the transports, groups were selected to Camp 1, and from Camp 1 to Camp 2, where most of them died.

The *Częstochowers*, apprehending this tragic reality, began searching for a way out of the situation.

All hopes for the world's rectitude dissolved. The dreams, that the death camp would be destroyed by the Allied Forces by bombardment or paratroopers - in order to thus bring to an end the despotic murdering of the Jewish people in Europe - vanished.

Some of the *Częstochowers*, despite all the difficulties and being heavily guarded, managed to escape. The *Częstochowers* in Treblinka are considered specialists in extricating themselves from the claws of death. Among those who fled were Aron Gelbard, [Mendel] Fiszlewicz, Abram-Lajb Bomba, Jakób Ajzner, Mojsze Rapoport, Kudlich and others.

The former communal activist from Częstochowa, Gerszon Prędko, began to organise a nucleus, which later grew into a rebellion movement. He had lost his wife and ten-year-old son in Treblinka but, nevertheless, did not break down and remained loyal to his fighter's spirit of yesterday.

The first members of the cell were Gerszon Prędko, Mojsze Lubling, Aron Gelbard, a Jew from Wieluń and a Jew from Łódź; the first three were from Częstochowa. The cell's tasks were to 1) investigate the camp, 2) escape and 3) make contact with the outside world.

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<sup>3</sup> [TN: This was to camouflage the Factory of Death and hide it from the outside world, as Aron Gelbard explains in his article "Nineteen Days in Treblinka", in *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. II.]

The first deliberations were held in the strictest secrecy, so that even the others should not know about it, because the camp's Jewish leader - a convert to Christianity, an engineer from Warsaw - treated the working Jews brutally and gave fifty lashes for even the smallest "offence". He later mended his ways and joined the underground movement himself.

The first cell decided to send Aron Gelbard to Częstochowa to reveal the terrifying truth about Treblinka. The plan succeeded. Gelbard escaped, after spending nineteen days in Treblinka, where his job consisted of cutting pieces of twine with which to bind together the shoes of the annihilated. He fled Treblinka on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1942 and, after making a journey full of constant peril, during which he was terrorised many times by Poles, on 9<sup>th</sup> November, he arrived in the Częstochowa "Small Ghetto".

He put himself into the active service of the underground movement and related the horrifying truth regarding Treblinka - which some of the Jews still refused to believe.

Aron Gelbard maintained constant contact with his comrades in Treblinka. He sent over letters with railway workers, who took the transports to Treblinka. As a result of these letters, Mojsze Lubling, formerly the chairman of the *Arbeitererrat* in Częstochowa, founded an uprising committee, and the idea of an armed rebellion in Treblinka began to ripen. Until the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto", eight letters were sent but, due to the extraordinary difficulties of communication, only three answers came back. The first letter to Aron Gelbard, from Treblinka, written by Mojsze Lubling, arrived in the Częstochowa "Small Ghetto" in May 1943.



**Photo №10: Aron Gelbard**

Aron Gelbard was born in Częstochowa in 1913. Before the War, he had been active as a management committee member of the Needle Union and was secretary of the left-wing *Poalei Zion* Party. In 1930, he was a delegate to the [1<sup>st</sup>] Pro-Palestine [Workers'] Congress<sup>4</sup>, that was held in Warsaw. From 1941, he was a member of the underground committee. Also, in Treblinka, he did not cease his activity. He escaped, in accordance with the decision of the first organised cell in Treblinka, and arrived in the "Small Ghetto", where he engaged in technical preparations for the uprising there, maintained contact with the organiser of the rebellion in Treblinka, Mojsze Lubling, until the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto".

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: The full name of the congress is mentioned in the contemporary Yiddish press.]

Following the liquidation, he was in the closed HASAG-Pelcery camp. There, too, he belonged to a committee of five which kept in touch with the underground movement in Warsaw, led by Dr Berman, the current chairman of the Central Committee of the liberated Jews in Poland.

Other leaders of the underground movement in Warsaw were also in contact with *Częstochowers*. These were "Władka"<sup>5</sup>, who is currently in America, and Icek Cukierman ("Antek"), who lives in the Land of Israel.

Aron Gelbard is in Feldafing. He is a member of the left-wing *Poalei Zion* Party's Central Committee. He is communally active, giving lectures, writing newspaper articles and travelling frequently, as a delegate, to different congresses and conventions on behalf of his party.

Every day, more and more followers joined the initiators of an armed rebellion in Treblinka. All of them were intent on fighting. Colossal preparations were made for the uprising. By making copies of the keys to the German ammunition storerooms, the rebellion committee managed to procure weapons, explosives and benzene with which to set the camp ablaze.

The underground movement in the Częstochowa "Small Ghetto" made an Aryan ID card for Mojsze Lubling, which was sent to him so that, directly following the uprising, he should be able to hold out in the "Aryan side".

The plan of the rebellion in Treblinka was meticulously formulated. It was to begin on 22<sup>nd</sup> August [sic 2<sup>nd</sup>]<sup>6</sup>, in the afternoon, with a shot from a revolver, which was the signal for the start. It was predicted that, at lunchtime, the greater part of the SS would go bathing. The rebels were to take advantage of this opportunity to set the camp on fire, initiate an armed battle against the Ukrainian guards, cut off all the telephone and electrical wires, destroy the surrounding fences, burn the motor vehicles and then take the fight to the woods, splitting up into small groups and taking advantage of any opportunities of escape that would arise.

Regrettably, there was a hindrance to the realisation of this plan. On the prearranged date, twenty Jews were arrested, because gold and other valuables had been found on them. The SS took them to the "*Lazarett*" to be shot. It became clear to everyone that not a minute was to be lost, as searches of all the Jews in the camp could directly ensue - and the weapons and explosives might be uncovered.

The shot signalling the beginning of the uprising is fired. The predetermined plan is carried out in all its details. The Jewish rebels begin to hurl grenades, to destroy the telephone lines and to burn the cars by way of their petrol tanks, in order to make telephone and vehicular connections impossible for the SS. Others douse the camp's buildings with benzene and set them ablaze. Treblinka is in flames. There is shooting from all sides. The Jews cut through the barbed-wire fencing and take the fight into the nearby woods. The SS and Ukrainians shoot chaotically, casualties fall on both sides. The SS and Ukrainians lose their heads - accustomed to murdering unarmed people unmolested, this is something with which they had not reckoned.

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<sup>5</sup> [TN: Code name for Feigele Peltel-Międzyrzecki.]

<sup>6</sup> [TN: According to historical sources, the Treblinka Uprising was launched on 2<sup>nd</sup> August.]

The Jews split up into small, armed combat units in the surrounding forests. However, they are not only chased by the SS and Ukrainians, but also by Polish degenerates, who wish to rob the rebels, in the belief that they have taken, with them, valuable items from the sorting camp.

The vast majority of the rebels fell in heroic battle. Although two hundred did, in fact, manage to escape into the forest, only twenty individuals survived.

The meritorious activist, Gerszon Prędkie, was in his time transferred from Camp 1 (sorting camp) to the death camp, where he perished.

[Mendel] Fiszlewicz, who escaped from Treblinka, fell in battle on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1943 in the Częstochowa "Small Ghetto".

The uprising's ideological founder and practical organiser, Mojsze Lubling, fell in heroic battle in the course of the rebellion.



**Photo № 11:**

*Chaim Sztajer, a participant in the Treblinka uprising. Following the rebellion, he was active in the Małkinia woods. This photo shows Chaim Sztajer in his forest hideout.*

*It was taken by a Soviet officer on the day of the liberation.*

The *Częstochower* rebels in Treblinka who survived are Chaim Sztajer, Heniek Szperling and Kudlich. The [*Częstochowers*] who fled from Treblinka who have also survived are Aron Gelbard, Abram-Lajb Bomba, Langner, Jakób Ajzner, Mojsze Rapoport and a few other people.

**Photo №12:**

*A group of escapees from the Treblinka death camp.*

*Among them, three *Częstochower* landsleit - the first sitting on the right side of the first row is Jakób Ajzner.*

*The first two standing from the left side are Abram-Lajb Bomba and Mojsze Rapoport.*

