

## XXXVII

### Yet Another “Akcja”

#### *The Death of Two Heroes*

On 4<sup>th</sup> January 1943 we heard from the workgroup which, as on all days, came to the Craftsmen’s House from the “labour camp”, that today all the groups had been stringently inspected at the exit gate. People, who had something to attend to on the “Aryan side”, would always tag along with the workgroup to our building. These people would sit with the craftsmen and await their Polish acquaintances, who came here (the Craftsmen’s House was the only Jewish building into which Aryans were permitted to enter). All the craftsmen’s rooms, and also the corridors, would always be full of people waiting. The craftsmen were glad to help out with what they could.

This time, however, none of these people came, because they were not let through the gate of the “labour camp”.

At about midday, through the windows of the Craftsmen’s House, we saw coal carts and rubbish wagons packed with Jewish children. They were travelling in the direction of the Polish police station at ul. Piłsudskiego. Shortly afterwards, we saw large groups of half-dressed Jews, without coats, led by gendarmes with pointed rifles with bayonets. These Jews walked with their hands held up high.

The craftsmen were uneasy. The children were afraid. No one knew what was happening. We awaited the Jewish policemen, who would come every day at lunchtime. But, on that day, they did not arrive and this increased our uneasiness even more.

It was clear that some sort of *akcja* was taking place at the “labour camp”.

Only in the evening did the policemen come home, and we found out what had happened that day.

First thing in the morning, the *Hauptmann’s* deputy, the lieutenant of gendarmerie [Felix] Rohn, had arrived in the “labour camp” and commanded that a thorough inspection be conducted at the exit, so that not a single Jew be let out of the camp along with the workers. After the labourers had marched out, it became quiet in the “labour camp” until ten o’clock. Then the Lieutenant ordered that all those remaining in the “labour camp” were to go out to the *Mały Rynek* [Small Market Square]. The Jewish policemen, on their part, received orders to round up all the children and also bring them there. When the policemen did not fulfil this command rapidly enough, the Lieutenant called them together and declared that each of them would be answerable with his [own] life should he not bring forth at least two children. With heavy hearts, the policemen set out, looking for children in the “labour camp”.

Meanwhile, all the men and women were assembled at the marketplace. The gendarmes searched through all the buildings in case someone was hiding. Those found were beaten murderously and dragged off to the Small Market.

In the market, Lieutenant Rohn surrounded the Jews with gendarmes and started selecting men and women, who were put to one side. He ordered the gendarmes to seize anything they would find in anyone's pockets or concealed in their clothing.

The Lieutenant continued choosing from amongst the people, until he came upon a young man aged eighteen, by the name of [Izio] Fajner. This young man had lost his parents in an *akcja*. The Lieutenant ordered Fajner to leave the row and join the selectees. The young man came out and shouted to all the assembled Jews, "*We've suffered enough from these murderers! We won't let ourselves be slaughtered any longer!*"

In that instant, he snatched a revolver out of his pocket and aimed at the Lieutenant. But the gun jammed and failed to fire.

Another boy<sup>1</sup> his age immediately left the row and, seeing that the revolver had not fired, ran up to the Lieutenant and began covering him with blows and punches.

This lasted very briefly. The gendarmes drew back a little and pointed their rifles at those assembled. One kicked the revolver out of Fajner's hand with his foot and fired a bullet into him. With the bullet in his body, Fajner still ran up and helped his comrade in his wrangle with the Lieutenant. But his strength soon left him and he collapsed on the ground. He then crawled on his belly to the Lieutenant, caught him by the coat and dragged him towards him, yelling, "*You murderer!*". In that moment, gendarmes fired eight bullets into Fajner and he gave up his soul.

Those assembled - about three hundred people - stood as if petrified. They immediately shouted "*Hände hoch!*" [Hands up!] at them, and everyone raised their hands up high. The gendarmes ran up to them and searched them for weapons, but none of them had any more weapons.

Meanwhile, the other young man was also shot and fell in the snow near his comrade.

The Lieutenant quickly mounted his bicycle and rode off. He returned a few minutes later with a larger squad of gendarmes.

Meanwhile, the Jewish policemen searched in all the hideouts. They hacked down doors and windows of dwellings, where they noticed children, hidden by their parents, who were at work. The children, frightened, hid deeper under the beds, in attics and in stables. They climbed into holes - but each constable was forced to bring two children and he had to find them. Through the alleys, every policeman dragged two children, who cried and pleaded, "*Wait until Mameshi<sup>2</sup> comes -s she will pay for me!*"

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: This was Mendel Fiszelewicz hy"d.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: "Mummy", from the Polish "mamusia" and the Yiddish "mammeh".]

These childish words cut into their hearts, but it was to no avail - and 150 children stood in the "Small Market", in a deep frost, half dressed, coatless, with frozen little fingers. They wept and cried out, "*Mameshi!*", in a manner that could move a stone - but not Lieutenant Rohn. He ordered his assistants to throw the children into the rubbish carts and take them away to the Polish police station.

After that, the half-wild Rohn approached the people, who were standing with their hands raised, and selected twenty-five young men from amongst the handsomest and physically most well-developed. They were lined up, four to a row, and forced to a wall next to the barbed-wire fence. There, gendarmes stood with rifles and shot them. In their last moments, each of the young men yelled at the bandits, "*Criminals! Murderers! You will lose the war yet!*" and similar cries.

Once the twenty-five young men were already lying on the ground, two gendarmes went about amongst the dead, holding revolvers, and shot the corpses once again. Afterwards, with their hands raised, the other people were led away to the Polish police station.

At the time, when the gendarmes were plundering the houses, two women - a mother and daughter - emerged from their dwelling, with the intention of making it over to the "Aryan side". They had taken money and valuables with them. But they were noticed by a gendarme, who chased them and ordered them to stand still. He fired at them and missed. The women remained standing and the robber ordered them to give him everything that they had with them. After taking everything from them, he told them to continue walking. But as soon as they took their first steps, he shot each of them twice and they fell dead on the spot.

Meanwhile, the several thousand men and women returned from their work stations. The men did not find their wives and the women their husbands, the mothers - their children. If the men were not among those shot, they were at the police station on the "Aryan side", where being shot or deported awaited them.

Heartrending scenes took place in the three alleys of the "labour camp". Women, who had failed to find their husbands at home, came to the place of execution and searched among the dead. A few women recognised their husbands and lost their minds. The entire "labour camp", behind the barbed-wire fences, was filled with wailing and screams.

In the evening, the twenty-nine tragically killed were brought to burial.

By the light of candles, in that dark and very frosty evening, the twenty-seven martyrs were laid into one large grave, next to which the mother and daughter were buried.

The burial took a long time, and the relatives of those slain and other people stood for a long time by the fresh graves, unable to tear themselves away, until they were ordered to disperse.

While the burial of the slain was taking place in the "labour camp", the men, women and children, who had been taken to the Polish police station, were being tortured there. The Polish policemen took them, one by one, to the office and commanded them to strip naked -

both the men and the women. From each one, they took whatever they only found and, in so doing, beat them murderously.

On the following morning, Lieutenant Rohn came to the "labour camp" and gave the order to fetch more children.

The *prezes* of the *Judenrat* appealed to the Lieutenant, requesting the release of several of the Jews, who were in the Polish police station, providing as a motive that these people were necessary for the work that the *Judenrat* needed to carry out.

The Lieutenant acquiesced on the condition that other Jews be provided in their place. So, the Jewish policemen captured other "less important" Jews and a few children and brought them to the police station.

The people, who were to be led back to the "labour camp" as "necessary", were standing in the yard of the police station waiting for the other "unimportant" Jews and children, who were to ransom them. Among those who were about to be released was a woman who, a day earlier, before going out to the Small Market, had hid her two boys - one aged seven and the other aged nine. When the people, who were to ransom those more "needed", were brought, her two children were also among them. Seeing her standing in the yard, they began shouting out "*Mammeh! Mameshi!*" from the cart in which they were being transported.

The mother despaired. She was free, but her children were doomed. The mother ran up to the children and they to her. All of them now stayed together to be sent away.

A similar instance occurred with a Jew, for whom the release had been obtained. While he was standing and waiting in the yard, he recognised his wife among the new arrivals - she had voluntarily presented herself to go where her husband was, unaware that he would be set free. In this case, they were now not permitted to join one another. The husband returned to the "labour camp" and the wife was left in the police station.

Once the "exchange" had been completed, the several hundred men and women and two hundred children were sent away to Radomsko, where the Jewish doctors had been sent several weeks before.

A few days later, four young men and two women arrived in the Craftsmen's House in a very sad state. These people had fled from the Radomsko ghetto. One young man was from Radomsko and the others from Częstochowa who had, several days before, been sent to Radomsko.

From the young man from Radomsko, we found out that, some time back, the General Governor in Kraków had issued an announcement to the effect that ghettos would be formed in three cities, where Jews would be able to live – because, in many cities, the ghettos had already been liquidated and Jews were not permitted to be there. One of these three cities was Radomsko.

Since, in the Radomsko region, there were many Jews hiding with peasants in the villages and living in constant fear of being given away, upon hearing about the General Governor's announcement, they began moving to Radomsko. Thus, over the course of a fortnight, 5,000 Jewish souls arrived in the Radomsko ghetto.

A *Judenrat* was established, accommodations were allotted and the Jews settled down, as it were. Craftsmen gradually began to work. The Polish populace was allowed to enter the ghetto and, in this manner, food products were brought in. This situation lasted for two months.

But, all of a sudden, the ghetto was closed. The Polish population was no longer allowed inside and no Jew was permitted to leave.

The conclusion was reached that the General Governor's regulation to set up the ghetto had been no more than a net to fool the Jews out from their hiding places. It had become clear that deportation to Treblinka was what awaited everyone.

Some had even begun to make bunkers – but it was clear that they would already not be able to extricate themselves from that net.

Following the closure of the ghetto, Ukrainians arrived, who took over the supervision of the ghetto.

One day, at dawn, the *akcja* took place. All the Jews - over five thousand souls - were chased out of the dwellings and driven, in a biting<sup>3</sup> frost, to a large square. It was to this same *akcja* that the several hundred Jews from Częstochowa, adults and children, had arrived. Along with the Radomsko Jews, they stood for long hours under the open skies, because the train with sixty carriages, that was to take them away, was late. In the meantime, the Gestapo men and Ukrainians ran about amongst the hapless people and robbed whatever anyone had. Only in the late afternoon, were they herded into the wagons.

Once the train was in full motion, a few young people set out to cut out the grille of a small window. But, inside the carriage, an atmosphere of indifference and resignation reigned. They attempted to dissuade the young people from this undertaking, but they filed very strenuously and stubbornly for hours, until the little window's grate was sawn through and the six jumped out of the carriage in the darkness of the night. Some of them fell into the soft snow, while others on timber and were badly hurt. They decided not to walk together, but to get back to Częstochowa each on his own, and they agreed to meet in the Craftsmen's House.

Thus, the six young people (eight had jumped out, but two were still missing), through much effort and after a series of incidents on the way, arrived in Częstochowa. They were ill and broken, their limbs bruised and their feet swollen. They stayed three days in the Craftsmen's House and then went to the "labour camp", where they received medical assistance. On the first days, they were forced to live clandestinely, until they were assigned to certain work stations and once more became slaves.

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<sup>3</sup> [TN: The adjective used in the Yiddish original is "burning".]

One evening, several days later, a woman with a bandaged head arrived at the Craftsmen's House. At first, we failed to recognise her but, after looking more closely, we realised that this was Mrs Braun the same who had run over to her two boys in the yard of the Polish police station. Although she could have been freed, she had not abandoned her children, but had travelled with them to Radomsko and, from there, together with all the Jews in the wagons to Treblinka.

She recounted:

In the carriage in which she and her children were travelling, there were several young people who, after long hours of work, ripped off the little grilled window and jumped out. Everyone in the carriage knew that they were travelling to Treblinka to their deaths. Therefore, all were of the opinion that, whoever had the courage, should save himself by jumping. She, too, wished to save herself - but how could she jump with two children? Yet she did not wish to leave the children behind. But people in the carriage began to explain to her that, in Treblinka, she would perish together with her children all the same, so it was better that she at least should save herself. The two children sensed something and clung to their mother. She kissed them and calmed them, until they fell asleep from tiredness.

Feeling freed from the children, the mother, once more, went up to the window, which pulled her as a magnet [does] steel. She looked out into the darkness and was seized by fear. The train was running speedily and no one knew where they were. Once more, she ran back to her children, kissed them in their sleep and again [ran] up to the window. A few people, who saw her desperation, intervened and told her that, in Treblinka, she would not be able to help her children in any manner anyway, and they pushed her to the window. Her head swam and, all of a sudden, she made a leap into the white snow.

She did not know how long she lay unconscious. When she came to, she saw that she was lying, in the middle of the night, in a desolate location. She sat up and felt moistness on her forehead. She wiped it and, by the light of the white snow, she saw blood. She put snow on the wounds on her head and tried to rise from the spot, but she immediately felt a strong pain in her feet. Her feet also had wounds. She also applied snow to her feet and, after lying down for a while, she slowly stood up and began taking one step after another. In the distance, she saw small candle flames and slowly walked in that direction. After a long while, she reached there and discovered that she was at the Rogów railway station outside Warsaw<sup>4</sup>. When she entered the station, she encountered a Polish railway official. He recognised her as a Jew and hid her in his home, where she was able to wash her wounds and bandage them. He bought her a railway ticket and put her on a train to Częstochowa. She wanted to pay him with some item of her clothing, but he refused to take anything. That is how she had arrived here in Częstochowa.

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: Although the Rogów railway station is rather nearer to Łódź than Warsaw, it is on the railway line connecting these two cities.]

She rested a little with us in the Craftsmen's House, but did not stop weeping. She felt guilty about her children.

The following morning, she went to the "labour camp". There, it soon became known that she had jumped from the wagon and had abandoned her children. Many condemned her for the deed, while others sympathised with her.

A fortnight later, I met her in the "labour camp". She wept terribly and told me she could find no peace. She constantly saw her two beautiful children before her eyes, with their little hands stretched out to her, continuously calling "*Mammeh, Mameshi!*"

The woman was despondent - she did not know what to do with herself. She had no one. Her husband had been murdered, long before, by the Germans.

Like this, we walked down one of the "labour camp's" three alleys. Suddenly, she remained standing in front of a passing Jewish policeman. She stopped him and asked, "Is your name Szladowski?"

"Yes", the policeman replied.

"Did you drag my children from under the bed in my locked apartment and take them away to the marketplace to the *akcja*?"

"Yes", the policeman replied. "And you are the mother of the two beautiful boys, whom you abandoned in the wagon in order to save yourself? I, as a policeman, was forced to do the deed - which weighs upon me till now - but how could you, a mother, abandon your children and save yourself?"

The woman cast down her head to the ground. A stream of tears flowed from her eyes, which quickly began falling onto the cobblestones of the street. She fainted and collapsed.

The policeman and I revived her and took her home.