

XXVIII

The *Akcja* [Operation] of 22nd September 1942

The assurances of the *Judenrat*, the Germans and all the other sources still could not calm all the Jews. The bad signs, promising the contrary, were too evident.

As a result, many people did not sleep on the night after Yom Kippur, but stayed up in their homes. The night was very dark. As always, the streetlights were turned off due to "*Luftschutz*" [anti-air-raid protection]. But the people, who were awake, were astonished when they suddenly saw, through the windows, that all the electric lamps lit up all at once, just as brightly as before the War. All of a sudden, the *Luftschutz* had become unimportant. An electrician from the municipal electricity facility drove throughout the ghetto streets and inspected all the power lines.

I went out onto the balcony of my home, from where one could see the whole Aleja, deep into the New Market [Nowy Rynek]. I perceived divisions of a military formation, hitherto unknown to us – short, stocky fellows, wearing very long coats, with rifles on their arms. Besides them, there were also gendarmes. They marched into the ghetto in groups, stopped at the gate of each building and left one or two of their men, thus stationing a watch. Beneath my balcony, at the ghetto boundary, two gendarmes with helmets on their heads remained standing. A little further, already on the "Aryan side", two others were standing. In the middle of the Aleja, patrols of gendarmes and Ukrainians marched back and forth. In the stillness of the night, different military commands could be heard from the further ghetto streets - "*Right!*", "*Left!*", "*March!*"

Someone stopped in front of our gate and rang for the watchman to open up for him. None of the tenants were sleeping any longer. We turned our gazes to the gate. It appeared that a Polish policeman had come to summon the Jewish assistant manager [viz. deputy] of the police and several constables, who were living in the building, that they should immediately report to their police station. To our questions as to what was happening, we received no reply. He was agitated and voices continued until daybreak. All of a sudden, we saw a great mass of Jews, with packs on their shoulders, being herded by the Germans to the square, where the gendarmes had yesterday had held their discussion.

We, the residents of the Craftsmen's House, were seized by fear. We gathered together, several families in one residence and, from time to time, stole a glance out the window. We saw how Gestapo men, with the *Totenkopf* insignia on their hats and uniforms, with drawn pistols, were continuously herding new multitudes of Jews to the square.

The *akcja*, accompanied by shooting and yelling, stretched on in this manner for several hours. Suddenly, we noticed a Jewish policeman entering our building. Yesterday, he had left his wife here with relatives. A few of us ran down to him, to the flat which he had entered. We saw him standing and weeping like a small child. He told us that horrible things were happening in the ghetto. When the Jewish policemen arrived before dawn in the police

station, they were given a command from the *Hauptmann* [captain] of gendarmerie Degenhardt, who was in charge of the entire *akcja*, that they were to accurately carry out the instructions which they would receive. Whoever did not comply with the command would be shot on the spot. The first task, which the Jewish police received, was to go to all the Jewish homes in the streets that would be indicated to them, and to tell all the Jews - men, women and children - to come out in groups onto the street and proceed, in lines one behind another, to the New Market Square [Nowy Rynek]. They were only allowed to take small packs with them. The dwellings were to remain open, with the keys in the door. Whoever hid would be shot.

The *Hauptmann's* command shook the hearts of the Jewish policemen and their faces turned pale. They sensed the sorrowful role they had to carry out, but nevertheless set forth to fulfil the task. It appeared, however, that the Jewish police was not completely relied upon. The ghetto streets were filled with gendarmes and Gestapo men, who entered the dwellings and drove out the people, searching everyone's pockets and shouting, "*Give money, diamonds!*" and taking anything of value.

The elderly and sick, who were unable to walk, were shot on the spot. Those were the shootings that we had heard from early morning on.

The policeman told us that he had led his mother out of the house, because she had ailing legs and could not walk on her own. But, as he was taking her down the street, someone seized him from behind and flung him to the ground. He rapidly got back up on his feet and saw a murderer holding a revolver, pointed at his mother. He was only able to scream out "*This is my mother!*", and three shots immediately rang out. His mother collapsed and quickly gave up her soul. He carried her into a courtyard and hid her in a small garden, covering her with branches. The policeman, once more, burst into tears and left.

At about three o'clock in the afternoon, the Jewish policemen, who lived together with us in the Craftsmen's House, arrived. They looked tired and broken. After they had composed themselves a little, they began telling us what had happened in the ghetto.

One recounted how small, beautiful children, aged between three and eight, who on the previous day had been given over to the Poles on the "*Aryan side*", for fear of the *akcja*, and for whom great sums of money had been paid, in order that they should be hidden, were driven back out by the Poles. The children, frightened and confused, ran in all directions. But the Germans and Ukrainians already did not allow them back into the ghetto, but chased them into the square, where masses of people were herded together. The children cried and screamed, but no one looked at them. The masses of thousands of people were chased by the German and Ukrainian murderers with sticks and revolvers, so that the children were simply crushed and trampled under the feet of the pursued people.

The *akcja* encompassed the streets Garibaldiego, Wilsona, Krótka, Kawia and part of ul. Warszawska. It was decided that, in the first *akcja*, 7,000 Jews would be gathered and sent away.

Degenhardt, the *Hauptmann*, stood in the market square with a baton in his hand like an orchestra conductor and contemplated the multitudes passing before him. When he noticed a healthy young man or a beautiful young woman, he pointed with his wand and the person indicated was immediately taken from the row and placed to one side. This meant - remains. Those saved were forced to relinquish those closest to them. This needed to happen quickly. No goodbyes were said. Tears streamed down cheeks, eyes stared sorrowfully, children wept, women tore at their faces - but everything happened very quickly. The murderers kept "order", pushing and shoving, and shouting with wild voices, "*Schnell, schnell!*"

The *Hauptmann* ordered that the Jewish doctors and their families be placed in a quarantine area, and that they remain there. He also ordered that the wives and children of the Jewish policemen be transferred there. The unmarried doctors and policemen sought out girls close or acquainted to them and took them into the quarantine area as their wives, thus rescuing them from being sent away.

The large mass of people was led by troops to the Warta coal train station, where gendarmes in railway carriages were already waiting for them. An order was given that "all Jews take their shoes off their feet, and lay them aside". Immediately, great mounds of shoes, each pair tied together by its laces. Then a command was given, "Enter the carriages!" Pushing, congestion and pandemonium ensued. The carriages were overcrowded - a hundred and more people were crammed into each railway carriage. The gendarmes and Gestapo men plundered in the carriages, too. They searched the better-looking people and took whatever they could only find.

The *prezes* of the *Judenrat*, after great efforts, managed to receive permission to have his wife brought to the office of the *Judenrat* and, in this manner, to save her. But, when he went to bring her there, he found out from a Jewish policeman that she had already been loaded into a railway carriage. He ran to an officer of the gendarmerie, who knew him, and asked him to help him extract his wife, citing the authorisation which he had received from *Hauptmann* Degenhardt. The officer took him to the railway carriages and freed his wife. As she was leaving the carriage, a former lady neighbour tossed an infant child into her arms, and she brought it away with her. Everyone stretched their hands out to the *prezes*, pleading - "*Take me with you - I am weak - my heart will not withstand this overcrowded carriage*". But the wide carriage doors, on their small wheels, were slid shut by the gendarme, and entreaties were, all at once, silenced. All the other carriages were also closed and the train moved from its place.

The few dozen people, whom the *Hauptmann* had ordered be left behind, were taken over to the shop.

The electric lights, that had been lit in all the streets all day in honour of the great celebration of driving away the Jews, were shut off. The carts with the 7,000 pairs of shoes drove off from the carriages to the German storerooms, and *Hauptmann* Degenhardt let it be known that the *akcja* had been completed.

* *
*

When people in the ghetto found out that those saved had been taken to the shop premises, everyone sought means to enter there.

In the buildings of the streets, bordering ul. Krótka, where the shop was, Jews hacked through walls and cut through the fences at night silently and made exits to ul. Krótka. There, they bribed the Polish policemen, who were guarding the shop with the Jews that were there. If the constables were decent men, they let the Jews in for money and, if not, they shot them in front of the shop's entrance. The way to the shop therefore entailed great risk.

Following the *akcja*, the streets in the ghetto were guarded day and night and the gates of the buildings were locked. Often, the Jews behind the locked gates called out to the Jewish policemen passing by and asked them to be taken off to the shop, in order to be saved from being sent away. But the police did not have the right to do so. Besides that, there was not a large number of Jews in the shop, and were they to bring new ones there, the constables guarding the shop would have noticed at once.

The people locked up in the ghetto found out that, in the German *Quartieramt* [Billeting Office], where the large storerooms with the Jewish furniture were located, the Jewish workers had not been allowed to go home after work on the day of the *akcja*. This was taken to mean that the chief of the *Quartieramt* had wished to keep his workers from being deported. So, people hacked through walls and climbed over garden fences, during the nights, in order to get inside there. Those, who after much exertion, made it inside, had to hide from the German chief. Men, women and children lay about on the bare ground and put up with everything in order to save themselves from being sent away.

Secretly, the Jewish policemen said that, on Friday 25th September, three days after the first *akcja*, a second *akcja* would take place, when the train that had taken the Jews away would return empty. They also communicated that none of the local representatives of the regime had any authority over the Jews anymore, except for one - *Hauptmann* Degenhardt. The *Stadthauptmann* had requested his Jews for necessary work - the *Hauptmann* had not allowed it. The munitions factories had wished to retain their Jewish workers - the *Hauptmann* had refused. The Gestapo was also not getting any Jews for work. The *Hauptmann* had become the sole lord and giver of orders over the Jews.

The Craftsmen's House, at Aleja 14, was also closed and guarded like all the buildings in the ghetto. The craftsmen in that house went about pained over the fate of their close ones in the ghetto, and also worried about their own fate. None of the Germans we knew, who had earlier comforted and assured us that nothing would happen, showed themselves after the *akcja*. None of the clients - German or Polish - were let into the building. But we knew that they had come up to the house and explained to the gendarmes standing guard that they had materials with the craftsmen, which they wished to take before the Jews were sent away. But no one was let in to us. Through the window, we saw the clients hanging about in front of the house.

The nights are dark, but the ghetto is brightly illuminated. We hear shooting and we already know that each shot signifies that a Jew had been shot while attempting to cross the street, while opening a gate, while climbing over a fence somewhere and the like. In the ghetto, no

one sleeps, no one takes off his clothes for sleep. There begins to be a lack of food, one helps another. We cannot eat at all, for the misery. Thus, time passes, until Friday, 25th September.