

XXXVI

In the “Labour Camp”

Escorted by a Jewish policeman, we went in twos, each pair behind the other, ten people in all.

We walked in the middle of the road, on the cobblestones, like horses, trudging through the mud. The Poles passing by looked into our eyes. Acquaintances no longer greeted us, but only smiled from a distance. Antisemitic strangers laughed in our faces and yelled insults at us. Grown Polish children followed us and shouted, not just at us, but also at the policeman - such insults that would have touched any other policeman’s honour.

Thus, we walked down the long-enough ul. Wilsona to its end. Here, we entered the first street of the former ghetto. This street was named Krótka. There, we saw a horrifying image. The windows of the houses in which, just not long ago, there had been Jews, stood open, the window panes were broken and the frames hung on their half-detached hinges. The wind blew, out and in, the rain-soaked curtains and roller blinds. From within, we heard how the doors were slamming open and shut. The wind raced from house to house, from flat to flat and from room to room. The gates of the houses stood wide open to their entire width and, as we passed by and gazed deep into the courtyard, we could perceive pieces of broken furniture, family photographs and portraits strewn about. Before the gates, in the street, different [religious] books lay about – *chumoshim*¹, tractates of the Talmud, prayer books and *machzorim*²; in the gutters - pots, dishes, and other crockery. The doors of some shops had been torn off and remnants of the merchandise lay strewn about inside. It was evident that these shops had been looted and only the unimportant scraps had been left behind.

Thus we, the ten people, escorted by a Jewish policeman, passed through streets where thousands of Jews had once lived, where Jewish life had pulsed, where almost every open window reminded one of friends and acquaintances - but now everything was deserted and desolate.

We did not see a single living soul. We passed the square called the “Small Warsaw Market” [Rynek Warszawski] and, again, we saw empty, deserted houses. From this marketplace, we came to the “labour camp” and stopped in front of a large gate. A *Wachtmeister*³ [police constable] appeared - a tall, fat fellow with a red face - and asked, “*Wer sind die Bummelmänner?*”, meaning, “Who are these loafers?” The Jewish policeman informed him that he had led ten men here from the Craftsmen’s House to the doctor. We found out that this fellow was the chief of the “labour camp” and that his name was Überschar. The Jewish policemen held him in high esteem. They recounted that he socialised with some of them to

¹ [TN: Individual tomes of the Pentateuch.]

² [TN: Special prayer-books for the holidays.]

³ [TN: Ger., lit. “master of the watch”, aka “Wachtmeister”; as lofty as the name may sound, this was one of the lowest ranks among the German constabulary, roughly equivalent to a sergeant, and is often simply translated as “police constable”.]

drink and eat, but this did not hinder him from shooting Jews at every opportunity and dispensing beatings for the merest trifle.

We entered through the large gate, in front of which a Polish policeman stood on the side of the marketplace and a Jewish one inside the camp.

I began walking along one of the three short and narrow alleys. I chanced upon various Jewish policemen, who eyed me with suspicion, as if they would say, "What are you doing here?". I then met a Jewish policeman with whom I was acquainted, who told me that I should be cautious, because no one was permitted to be out in the street from daybreak to five in the afternoon, but all had to be at work. Only the Jews, who worked in the factories at night, were permitted to transit the streets of the "labour camp" in the daytime. They wore special yellow bands on their arms with the inscription "night shift." If a Jew was caught in the street during working hours, he was shot.

The policeman went on to tell me that *Hauptmann* Degenhardt himself came here very often. He roams about and searches. He orders the dwellings to be opened for him and checks if anyone is hiding. Once, he found two young men in a flat - one was a night shift worker, and the other was weak, and had been unable to go to work just that day. The *Hauptmann* had ordered that the young man from the night shift be taken to the German guard and that the second one be shot.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. Therefore, I waited at the house of my policeman acquaintance until it turned five. His flat was in a building that was designated exclusively for Jewish policemen. They lived there with their families, each family in a separate room. The more respected ones lived in two rooms.

The policemen's wives were exempt from labour. They were also permitted to have small children with them "legally" (this was a "privilege"), but all were very concerned regarding the future. Every mother sought ways to send the children over to the "Aryan side". They had a premonition that the *Hauptmann* would leave no children in the "labour camp". He could not contemplate a soul who was not working. Moreover, they did not believe that he would allow those who were actually working to live. They were altogether sceptical concerning the "labour camp's" fate.

All of a sudden, I heard a noise behind the door. The wife left the house and immediately returned with a man, to whom she said, "Father, you may remain here, this Jew is an acquaintance of ours from the Craftsmen's House".

Hearing the woman call the arrival "Father", I set my gaze upon him, for I knew the woman's father well. However, the Jew had changed so much, that it was difficult for me to recognise him. Before the War, he had been the vice-president of the Jewish *Kehilla* in Częstochowa – a Jew in his sixties, with a long, broad beard. He had had a haberdashery goods shop in the city's finest neighbourhood. Now, I saw him clean-shaven, his grey hair dyed black and his broad figure as if shrunken. With tears in his eyes, he told me that he was here with his wife. They had been lying, hidden in a cellar, for entire days and nights, and they could no longer endure the hardships. I also wished to see his wife and, therefore, waited until it would turn

dark. The daughter went to fetch her and led her into the house. She entered silently. "We have to be careful [even] of our own Jews", she explained to me. The lady knew me at once, but I had to look intently until I recognised, in her, the once beautiful and charming woman. She told me that she had already become weary of life altogether. She still persevered only because her daughter wished it so, but she could no longer endure so much pain.

The two elderly people began weeping like small children. They lamented not having gone together with all the other Jews to Treblinka. Their son-in-law, the policeman, had exerted himself, with all his strength and means, to conceal them in holes and in attics. He had transferred them from one place to another, from one gate to another. He had bribed gendarmes in order to save them, until he had finally brought them here to the "new ghetto", the current "labour camp". It was impossible to obtain lodgings for them, because they were living there "illegally" and did not have numbers. They were forced to be concealed, but lived in constant fear, for they knew, after all, that the murderers would eventually burst in here and discover their victims.

It was already quite dark when I went out [into the street]. The "labour camp's" alleys were poorly lit. I came across an acquaintance, who had been a conductor of the TOZ choir. We were both glad that we had remained alive, and he invited me to his lodgings. [As] we walked through the alleys, I heard Jews crying out, "*Meat for sale! Fresh bread! Fresh rolls and bagels, sausage, herring, sugar, liquor!*"

I went up closer and saw the workers, who had just now returned from work. Now, they had become traders. They had brought all these things from the "Aryan side", where they had bought them or exchanged them for items of clothing and, here, they were selling them on. The prices were high. Sausage was manufactured in the "labour camp". We went through a spacious courtyard, [passed] over hills and holes, through back passageways and back doors. Every few steps, a Jew stood telling the buyers what one could get today. They were very vigilant in case someone, who needed to be avoided, should come along. Today, small sausages were available. Clients went in and out. Everything transpired quietly and cautiously. For the production of sausage, one received the death penalty, but the conditions were already such that they were willing to take the risk because, in any case, life was constantly in peril.

In another alley, Jews were selling trousers, coats, linen, and all sorts of clothing. These were the goods that were taken every day from deserted Jewish houses, and taken away to the large warehouses on ul. Garibaldię. The Jewish belongings, from the former ghetto, were sorted by Jews who worked like slaves. To be able to live, these slave workers - well-raised, Jewish children - risked their lives by "stealing" things, putting them on when they left work. Thus, they put their lives in peril on a daily basis, because they were, after all, "stealing" the Jewish clothes from the Germans.

I went up to my friend's accommodation, which consisted of a room with a kitchen. My eyes were immediately drawn to seven wooden and iron beds that were set up there, some propped up with planks. Four women were hanging about - it was very crowded. There were few chairs to sit on - they mainly sat on the beds.

A young man was lying in one of the beds. I asked my friend why this Jew was lying in bed – was he ill?

The patient himself answered me, “There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m lying [in bed] out of boredom”.

He was surprised that I did not recognise him. I looked closer at him and saw a man with an emaciated face, a skull cap on his head, but I could not recognise him.

Then the man said to me, “I am the local municipal cantor – [or] *was*”.

A shudder seized me all over. Was this the cantor? The cantor with his broad beard, with the long, wide face? The cantor, who would walk proudly down the Jewish streets every Friday at sundown and on Saturday to pray at the synagogue?

How different he had become - not the same person at all.

I inquired nothing of him regarding his family. I was afraid to touch a painful spot. But he himself started telling me without being asked, “I have become a bachelor”, he said bitterly.

His wife and seven children, one younger than the next, had been sent away. Now he had to look young - he was registered here as a twenty-five-year-old. The beard was shaved off, he had become very thin. A new person had grown, nothing like the previous one. A bachelor had become from a Jew who had had a wife and seven children!

Suddenly, he sat up in bed with a jerk, his face reddened as if blood had been poured in. Clenching his fists, he yelled wildly, “*The murderers! They’ve made me young! Turned me into a bachelor! Annihilated my seven children! Murdered my wife!*”

His rage caused him to tear out of the bed. He dressed hurriedly, tearing his coat in so doing. He then sat down at the table, immediately to stand up again - he could not find a place for himself.

My friend winked at me, [hinting that] I should start talking about something else with him in order that he should compose himself. I attempted to do so, but he did not relent. He was unable to forget his grief. He began pacing around the house, speaking as if to himself, “*I go every day to work – I’m a slave. I work in a factory. What’s the good of all this to me? Why am I still alive? To be a slave for the Germans!*”

Some of the other household members sat down at the corner of the table, and set bread down upon it. At the other end of the table, another couple, who lived here, were eating. The chairs were given over to those who wished to sit down to eat. Four couples and four “bachelors” lived here. In the daytime they were all at work - both men and women. At nightfall, they came together, bringing soup and a chunk of bread from the [soup-]kitchen, and whoever had any money bought himself other things in the street.

My acquaintance, the [choir] conductor, a very dear man, told me that his wife and child had been deported and that he was alone. He had grown weary of life, but what could he do? He had not the courage to make an end of himself, but he would have done so very readily.

I suddenly remembered that, at seven o'clock, I had to be at the exit of the "labour camp" to go home with my group. But it had already turned half past seven. I said goodbye to my friends and quickly went down to the barbed-wire fence, where I found out that my group had already gone home half an hour earlier. I was left with no other option but to spend the night in the "labour camp" and to leave at dawn, together with a group of labourers going to work. In the "labour camp", it was permitted to walk in the street until nine o'clock. I walked slowly through the alleys and met several other acquaintances, whom I told about my predicament. One of them took me with him and told me he would lay out a bed for me on the floor in a corner. For one night, he said, one could sleep even in that manner. A Jew can [do] anything!

I entered a large room in which six people lived - three men and three women. Young women who had been left without their husbands, and men who had been left without their wives. They had decided to get married and live together. It was hard for both the men and women to live alone. Each of them had experienced great misfortune, but the drive to live is great, and one seeks [a way] to survive.

Here, I saw a young, pretty woman who, before the War, had lived in her own villa with her husband and two beautiful children. Now, she was living in this room for six people, together with a young man of her age. Each of them was at work all day and, in the evening, the woman cooked food. They occupied one third of the room - their "furniture" consisting of a bed and a small wardrobe with a back of ordinary boards facing out to the room. This was meant to suggest a screen of sorts, partitioning their bit of the dwelling from the rest of the house.

In another corner of the room, my acquaintance "lived" with a girl, who had been orphaned during an *akcja*. He had had a wife and two children. Having formerly been a policeman, he had managed to hide his family. But, during the *akcja*, while he was on "duty", a gendarme found his family and led them away to the railway wagons. Now, he had married the orphaned girl.

The third corner of the room was occupied by a young man and his wife. The young man had always been a labourer without any specialty. His wife and child had been deported during the third *akcja*. He [then] married his wife's sister, who had remained all alone. This young man earned more than the others living with him. He had become a carter, and he transported the belongings from the former ghetto to the storerooms on ul. Garibaldi. He had the opportunity to conceal various items every day, which he brought here and gave to those living with him to sell when they went to their workplaces. They brought home money for the items or exchanged them for food products.

The three couples eat well, drink alcohol, and smoke. They wish to forget all that has been, and not think about what will be in the future.

In a fourth corner of the room stood a cooking range, which everyone used. In the centre of the room stood a large table surrounded with chairs, which was also used by all.

They told me there were rumours going about to the effect that, in the upcoming days, an *akcja* would once more be conducted. The *Hauptmann* had supposedly told someone that he was aware of elderly people and children, who were hidden in the “labour camp”. But nothing was known for certain.

That evening, I sat at a large table in a large room with the rather too many tenants for one room and chatted almost “cosily”. There was a roast goose and a litre of liquor on the table. The shutters were closed, the doors locked and, sometimes, one could actually think for a moment that people were sitting here like in normal times and entertaining themselves, albeit in a rather primitive manner, but naturally and comfortably.

These people wished to forcibly persuade themselves, and one another, that they would – and that they had – forgotten what had happened to them and around them in the last couple of weeks, and that they did not wish to think of what awaited them in the future - “They just want to live and nothing more!”⁴

In reality, however, it was completely different. Deep in each one’s heart, a heavy stone was pressing down, and it did not cease to torture for a single moment.

Once the first shot glasses of liquor had been emptied, the women took out their handkerchiefs, one after the other, and began wiping their eyes - at first unnoticeably, afterwards the tears began falling rapidly and heavily and, in the end, they wept noisily out loud.



The Nazi murderer Heinrich Köstner [aka Köster], who liquidated the “Small Ghetto” in a bloody man
(Photographed after he was arrested, when Częstochowa was liberated by the Polish military.)

⁴ [TN: From the original quotation marks, it would seem that that was what they told the author.]

“Why are you crying?”, the “new” husband asked his “new” wife, who had lost her two children in the *akcja*.

The woman stood up from the table, stumbled, and fell onto the bed with a heartrending cry, “Where are my children now?”, she screamed almost hysterically.

At the word “children”, tears ran down my friend’s eyes. He turned away to a corner of the room and began to wipe his eyes surreptitiously. He gradually shuffled towards the door and left the room, to grieve for his wife and their two little daughters. As a man, he presumably held that it was “inappropriate” to weep like a woman in front of everyone.

The woman, who had married her sister’s husband, also eventually started weeping and the whole house was filled with tears and wailing.

The roast goose was left uneaten, the liquor unfinished and everyone lay down to sleep.

I, too, lay down on the floor in a corner by the cooker. In the later stillness of the night, I heard deep sighs. When one woman sighed heavily, another did so immediately, as if in response, and then the third. Eventually the men joined in, and sighs were heard from every corner.

That is what the life of the new couples looked like.

I could not fall asleep and I listened to the slow ticking of a clock. When it struck five, I heard a trumpet, similar to the one I would hear while serving in the army, in the morning to rise and at night to go to sleep.

Everyone woke up hastily and got out of their beds. My friend took a large pot and went out into the street. He soon returned with black coffee. Everyone dressed quickly, drank a little coffee and slung wide bags with broad stripes of sackcloth over their arms. Nobody had time to speak to me any longer. Each one hastened to his workgroup.

I proceeded towards the exit of the “labour camp”. There was a great movement there. There were masses of people at the square and each one was looking for his group. Everyone was lined up three in a row - each group had a leader. The manager of the work posts stood at the gate with a paper and counted how many people were in each group. The chief of the “labour camp”, the *Wachmeister*, stood on the other side of the gate. All the Jews passing by saluted him, doffing their caps. He stopped some of the groups, when something had not been to his liking. Somebody’s bag was too bulgy. He searched a few people, gave someone slaps in the face and yelled with frenzied shouts.

Thus, several thousand slaves left the “labour camp” for various workplaces. I departed with a group of labourers that were going to the Craftsmen’s House.

* *
*

Hauptmann Degenhardt ordered the *Judenrat* to compile a list of those Jews who had relatives in the Land of Israel. People said that this would be in connection to an exchange between Germany and England. The exchange would be of Germans, who were in England, for Jews in the *GeneralGouvernement*.

Others, on their part, suspected that, with that list, the *Hauptmann* was aiming to fool the people and send them away to who knows where. Yet it was unclear. Why did he need to “fool” us with lists, if he could do with us anything he wanted anyway?

The registrations began. The *Judenrat* compiled several lists - a separate list of children who had parents there, of those who had brothers or sisters, fathers or mothers there. After that, a special list of those who had more distant relatives there.

Many people went⁵ to be registered on these lists.

Within a few days following the registration, we learned that an uneasiness was pervading the “labour camp”. On a certain day, when the Jewish policemen who lived with us in the Craftsmen’s House, came for lunch, they recounted that, after the workgroups working outside the “labour camp” had gone off to their workplaces, the *Hauptmann* had arrived and ordered that all Jews remaining at their work posts in the “labour camp” – viz. in the *Judenrat*, the kitchen, the hospital, the storerooms and the washhouse – were to report to the Small Market⁶.

Once all were assembled, the *Hauptmann* selected two hundred young men and sent them off, with Polish policemen, to the German guardroom.

The policemen were unable to say what had happened with those men. They only knew that usually people, who had committed some transgression, were sent there, and no one had as yet returned. And as the two hundred young men had committed no transgression, this was something new, and consequently a stressed mood reigned.

The men sat there, under arrest, for three days. None of those closest to them were let in to [see] them. They received food from the kitchen by way of Polish policemen. They slept on the bare ground.

On the third day, several freight vans, from a munitions factory in Skarżysko, drove up to the Small Market and the young men were loaded onto them. Two young men attempted to flee during the loading and were shot.

One week later, on a Sunday, a Pole from Skarżysko came into my house and delivered, to me, twenty letters and a personal one for me in which my cousin, who had been sent away with the young men, asked me to deliver all the letters to the wives and families of the deportees.

⁵ [TN: The expression employed here may be used to mean either “set out to” or “allowed themselves to be”; in this context, we have deemed the former more likely.]

⁶ [TN: This is the Rynek Warszawski, as mentioned above in this chapter.]

From these letters, we found out that the young men had been sent to a munitions factory in Skarżysko. Immediately after arriving, their clothes and everything they had with them was taken from them and they were given paper outfits. There, they were forced to work with chemicals that damaged the lungs, and under very hard conditions. The food was very bad and meagre and they were forced to sleep on the bare ground. Whoever fell ill was shot.

All the letter writers asked their close ones to send them money through the bearer of the letter, a Polish worker in that factory, who was free on Sunday and was therefore able to bring the letters over.

With the aid of a Jewish policeman, I provided the relatives of the deportees with the letters. The horrific reports, regarding the labour camp in Skarżysko, spread immediately. The wives and relatives of the young men in Skarżysko sent two women to the Craftsmen's House, bearing letters and money for their close ones. The Polish labourer took everything. He received 20,000 złoty for the men and 2,000 for his trouble and that same evening he travelled back to Skarżysko.