

XXI

Lost Souls

In our city's ghetto streets, there were various characters who caught one's eye:

Often seen would be a man in his fifties with a venerable appearance. He would always be walking on his own, with his head cast down and a white band on his right arm. He was known by the surname Lawendel. He had surely never dreamt that it would befall him to end up among Jews. He was not a Jew at all. His connection with Judaism only went as far as the fact that his grandfather had been a Jewish convert to Christianity. Among us in town, no one had previously known that he had Jewish roots. This same Lawendel had, for many years, been the *prokurent*¹ of the Belgian Electric Company and had always been a stern and unsympathetic man when dealing with clients in his office. And, here, he had also been banished into the ghetto, together with all the Jews - where he had no acquaintances and felt alien and solitary. The tragedy that his man was living through could be recognised by his perpetual brooding and darkened features. People also say that it was his officials who had worked under his leadership for many years, who had pointed out his Jewish ancestry.

[Another one was] the judge of the [Local Department of the Piotrków] District Court [Arnold] Geisler [or Gajsler²]. He was a son of a wealthy, Jewish estate owner, [Izydor Izaak Geisler]. Judge Geisler, several years ago, [in the second half of the 1930s], converted [to Catholicism], together with his wife [Felicja née Tykociner] and child [Krystyna], in order to be able to become a judge in a Polish court. He had already, for a long time, severed connections with Jewish society and had entered the "better" Polish society. The Germans, however, sent him, from the "Aryan side" into the ghetto, where he walked with brisk steps from one ghetto boundary to the other and, everywhere, reread the same inscriptions on the large signs. He remained standing in front of the sign for a minute, spat and began to walk back again. He gave the impression of a fox that had been tricked into a cage from which he could not extricate himself.

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Often, one often saw the wife of the well-known local Polish barrister Gruczyński³ walking down the ghetto streets with the *Judenband* on her arm. Mrs Gruczyńska had converted to Christianity twenty years before in order to marry this Pole. As soon as the Germans entered our city, the lawyer understood that the right moment had finally arrived to rid himself of this Jewess, and he drove her out of his house. He married a younger and prettier genuine "Aryan" from a wealthy Polish home. The barrister's ex-wife, banished from her husband and from the "Aryan side", went about, lonely and despondent, in the ghetto streets, sometimes

¹ [TN: Pol., authorised signatory/chief clerk.]

² [TN: We have added, in brackets, several details from his biography as it appears in the book "Częstochowa Jews – a Biographical Dictionary" (Częstochowa, 2020), edited by Dr Juliusz Sętowski. Judge Geisler was born in 1894 and died in 1972.]

³ [TN: Spelt גרוטשינסקי in the original Yiddish; we have found no mention of this individual in other historical sources. The correct spelling may have been Gruszczynski, as this surname appears in the 1929 Częstochowa business directory, only not under lawyers.]

stopping her formerly acquainted Jewish women, from whom she sought a little sympathy. Her Jewish parents were also here in the ghetto, but she did not live with them, but with an old childhood female friend. The, once beautiful, woman has a darkened, sorrowful face, with eyes from which agony and fear scream out. She carries around a basket with little pieces of soap and other trifles, which she sells to the Jewish women who have pity on her, and, with the proceeds, she tries to make do, so as not to perish of starvation.

[There is also] a woman of German origin, who has led a peaceful family life with a Jew for twenty-two years. Long ago, they had been forced to leave their residence. Her husband is in the ghetto and she on the "Aryan side". Every day, she brings him a bit of food, but is afraid to go up to his flat. She hangs about here and there, until an opportune moment arises and she rushes up the stairs leading to her husband's residence. They own a factory and, as there was a danger that it would be requisitioned as Jewish property, they were formally divorced and she, the pure "Aryan", has become the owner of the factory and the rest of the property. She aids her "divorced" husband however she can, but she has to be careful that this should not be found out.

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In the street, we often see the elderly, grey, yet very elegant Abramson. For decades, he was an agent for the largest foreign raw material factories. He was much loved by the Jewish populace and the manufacturers with whom he conducted business. Thirty years ago, he married a German woman from Vienna, who converted to Judaism. They had two sons. After the Germans entered our city, their life was shattered. Abramson had not wished his wife and sons to suffer on his account and had gone into the ghetto on his own, leaving the family, as a German one. on the "Aryan side". This, too, did not come easily for them. Every day, his wife comes into the ghetto with a small pot of food for her beloved husband. Also, each son steals in, separately, [to visit] their elderly father for a hile, keenly guarding himself that no one should notice.

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Every evening, on the First Aleja, by the ghetto's border, the engineer Fajnkind stands after work at the *Judenrat's* Technical Department. He is waiting for his Christian wife, together with whom he has lived for many years. Now, he is in the ghetto and she on the "Aryan side". She comes to him every evening and they pour out their hearts [to each other] in the middle of the street. When a policeman approaches, they part as if they were strangers.

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Once, a man of about fifty stopped me in the street with a "Good morning" in German. I looked at him and saw a familiar face. I remembered that we had met at the barracks when the Germans seized Jews in the street and imprisoned them there.

We started talking about the situation and the man sighed in an uncommonly, heavy manner. I asked what was wrong with him, and he replied that such was the weight on his soul that he was compelled to pour his heart out to someone. And he told me his story:

“Twenty-four years ago, I left our city of Częstochowa for Germany, to the city Köln am Rhein [Cologne on the Rhine]. I am a good metal engraver and soon found work there. I earned well and lived very nicely.

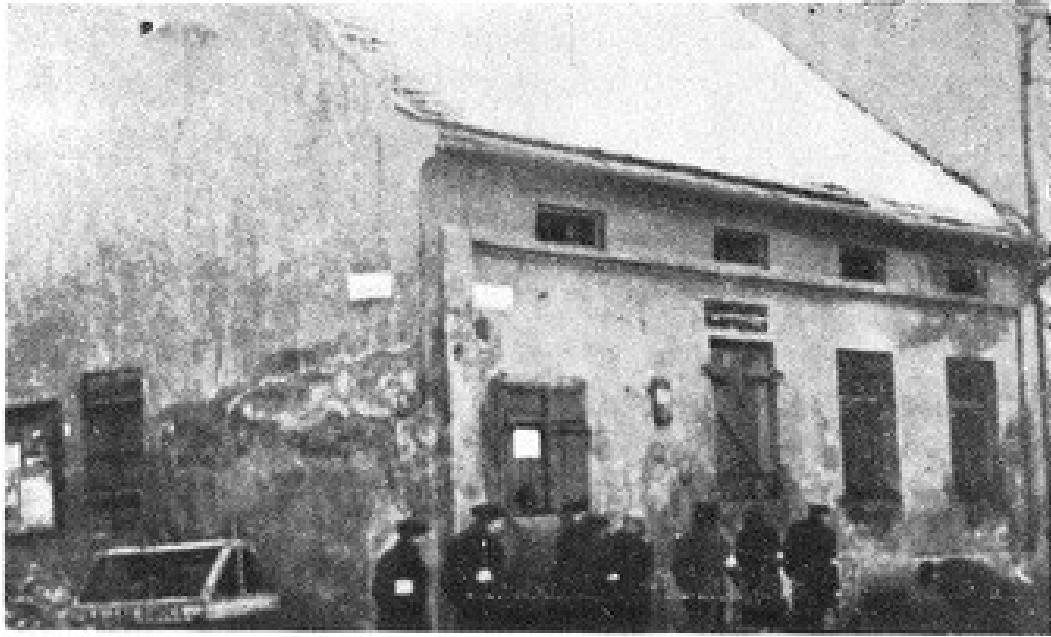
“I met a beautiful German girl, married her and led a very fine life. We gave our two sons a good education and, thus, we lived happily and contentedly, until Hitler rose to power. I then perceived that I would no longer be able to live tranquilly with my family in Germany and decided to travel back to the city of my birth, to Częstochowa. I arrived here with my family, set up my engraver’s workshop and earned well. Once more, I was living happily with my family - until the Germans came to us here.”

The man suddenly lost control of himself and started weeping in the middle of the street. Once he had composed himself a little, he resumed his account:

“When the Germans perpetrated “Bloody Monday in our city, along with my eldest son, I was taken, together with everyone, to the barracks. After two days, I was freed from there along with others. When the ordinance was issued that Jews had to wear the bands of shame, my sons and I wore them like all the other Jews. This caused my wife much agony. My children suddenly felt that they were Jews and that their mother was a German – a child of the nation which was putting them to shame and derision.

“When the law, regarding forced labour, was put into effect, the *Judenrat* sent my eldest son away to the labour camp in Cieszanów. There, at work, he was horribly beaten by the German murderers and fell dead in the woods. The *Judenrat* notified us that our son was no longer alive. My agony was great, but I cannot describe the suffering of my wife, who was in a state of shock, not only due to the heavy blow of losing a child, but also because of the strange abyss that had suddenly opened before her - she, a German, had lost her child because he was a Jew, and he had been murdered by the Germans – by her own brethren. For a while, she was in a state bordering on insanity. She would go about for whole days and nights, screaming that she was always seeing her murdered child before her eyes, and she clutched onto her second boy and clasped him to her heart. Afterwards, she sunk into depression. A heavy grief settled on our home. We would be silent for days on end, without saying one word to each other.

“One day, a German gendarme unexpectedly entered our home. It was my wife’s brother. He barely gave me a light nod with his head and called his sister to one side. They spoke for about half an hour, after which he departed, without saying goodbye to me. My wife told me that he was a gendarme and was serving in Warsaw.



Jews, with ghetto armbands, on ul. Warszawska



In the "Small Ghetto"

"From that day onwards, my wife would often go out into the street. People told me that she was frequently seen with German railway officials. Her brother also began to visit her often, when I was not at home. Until one day, she declared to me that she could not live with me any longer and that she was travelling to her brother in Warsaw.

Astounded, I ran to her and begged her not to leave me after twenty-five years of living together. My eleven-year-old boy also could not tear himself away from his mother - the German - and both of us fell at her feet weeping. She, too, was weeping, and her tears ran down onto our heads. She bent down to the ground, where my son and I were lying and the three of us embraced heartily, drenching ourselves in warm tears. Thus, we wallowed on the ground in love and in pain, until our child fell asleep from exhaustion. Then, she suddenly tore away from the spot with a wild shout of “*Stay healthy!*” and ran out of the house.

“I lost my beloved wife and my son lost his mother. Now, I wander about here in the ghetto like an animal locked in a cage, and I do not know what to do with myself and with my son.”

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Individual Jews, who were employed on the “Aryan side” by the authorities as interior designers, painters, watchmakers and other professional workmen, *Judenrat* officials and employees in Aryan firms, received individual passes from the city administration, in order to be able to leave the ghetto, during set hours in the day, to go to their workplaces. These passes were valid for one month, after which they were extended for another month, if the firm, in which the Jew was employed, issued a certificate to the effect that he would continue to be employed there. Later, the city administration limited the number of passes. Soon, there were people to be found, who procured these passes for a great deal of money. Jews, who needed to tend to their matters on the “Aryan side”, acquired such passes and thus business began to come to life in the ghetto. Jewish merchants secretly joined with Poles, sent them to other cities to buy and sell different goods. They established firms under Aryan names outside the ghetto and also in other cities. The Poles became partners in the profits. Up front, everything looked “Aryan” – but the business was factually conducted in a large measure with Jewish money and Jewish merchandise. Poles would say that they admired the Jews who, despite all the difficulties and hindrances, still carried out their activity coolly and capably.

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The German *Obertreuhänder* [Chief Trustee] of Jewish fixed asset property gave over the right to administer the Jewish buildings in the ghetto to several Jews. All the Jewish houses were divided amongst five or six Jews, who were known to the *Obertreuhänder* as people who “understood business”.

The young Kolenbrener received the finest houses under his administration and also the concession to remove the waste from all the courtyards in the ghetto, for which all the other Jewish administrators were forced to pay him a monthly fee. He set up office up in one of the buildings which he administrated, and all the tenants punctually paid rent for the dwellings, for water, for the sewers that they used and for taking out the rubbish - even though it always lay in the courtyards.

The other Jewish administrators also set up their offices, to which, at the appropriate time, Jews had to bring the rent money, which continuously flowed to the German "trustee" like a stream of gold. The Jewish administrators already understood how to work on their German chief so that none of the parties should have anything to complain about as regards to the takings. Because of that, however, the tenants were continually forced to run after them with requests that the roof be repaired, because it was raining inside the dwelling, [or] to repair the ceiling because there was a danger that it would fall down on people's heads. But the administrators did not take this to heart - they had a German chief protecting them and were afraid of no one. Each tenant was, therefore, forced to repair his own apartment and, thus, the Jewish houses became increasingly more neglected.