

## IV

### More Mortal Fear

The days that followed dragged by for us in our barrack prison, as heavy as lead, and were filled with painful waiting. If, sometimes, we had a peaceful day, on the following day, we had the previous hell, once again.

The reason for this was, that the soldiers in the barracks were changed every day. After spending one night, the military divisions would leave and new ones arrived in their place. It sometimes happened that soldiers from Austria or Czechoslovakia arrived. In those cases, the attitude of the soldiers towards us was a more humane one. The military, who came from Germany, on the other hand, treated us brutally and tormented us at every opportunity.

On one occasion, late at night, several military men barged in on us. Shining torches into our faces, they inquired of each one, "What are you?" Replies came, "Manufacturer", "Doctor", "Lawyer". Only one, a Jew with a long beard, responded to the question posed, "*Uhrmacher*"<sup>1</sup>. They asked every person in this manner and entered the adjacent room, where the Poles were. Fifteen minutes later, they returned to us and one of them positioned himself at the centre of the hall and said, "I am the commandant of this city. I warn you, you wicked Jewish people, that if, in the city, any crimes are committed against us Germans, you will all be stood up against the wall." They exited with heavy steps and the door was locked.

The rest of the night, none of us slept anymore. Fear engulfed everyone. We contemplated the peril that was looming over us.

The following morning, when we had begun climbing down from the tables after a sleepless night, a *Feldwebel*<sup>2</sup> came in to us and declared, "Tonight, two non-commissioned officers failed to return from town. When your wives come to you with breakfast, you are to tell them that, if our two men are not found by twelve noon, you will be shot."

The news hit us like a bolt of lightning. Everyone was seized by mortal fear and, when the door was later opened and the command was given, "All out!", for us to go receive the breakfasts which our wives had brought us, a few individuals wished to abstain from taking the food, in order to avoid the agony of delivering such bitter tidings to their family members. But even now, each of us, down to the last man, was driven out, with shouts and violence, from the hall to the tennis court.

When our wives heard the news, a great lament went up. A few of them clad themselves in fortitude and went to the commandant. But they soon returned even more distressed - he repeated to them that which he had told us a few hours earlier. The hour had also come when the women were forced to leave us and, this time, parting company was more terrible than before. Children wept bitterly and women fainted and the military men, who were observing

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Ger., "watchmaker"; perhaps the point of this story is that he used the German word.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Non-commissioned officer with a rank equivalent to sergeant in the British Army.]

these scenes, made slashing movements across their necks with their fingers, with expressions of mockery, and yelled, "*Bald kommt ihr Weg!*"<sup>3</sup>, by which they meant "*We will soon make an end of you!*"

Our closest ones were forced to leave us, and we were led back to the barrack hall under an increased guard. The soldiers, whom we met on the way, cast insults at us and threatened us with their fists. Apparently, the military in the barracks knew about everything. Our guardians barely brought us back to the barrack hall in one piece.

We entered our imprisonment hall crushed and despairing. No one touched the parcels of food that had been brought. Who could eat today? If the two soldiers were not found, it would be the end of it all. But there was one man who, despite everything, bore himself differently from everyone else. This was Gerszon Preger z''l, a manufacturer well-known in Częstochowa. Also at the tennis court, during the tragic scenes all around, when everyone said goodbye to their wives as if for the last time, he had not wished to speak, at all, with his wife about what awaited us. Upon returning to the hall, he sat down at the table like always and began to eat. Once he had finished eating and had cleared the table, as he always did, he turned to us with the following words:

"This is how things stand with us - it is not within the power of any of us to alter our situation. We must, therefore, take things as they will come. I shall live as long as I am destined to and I believe that this does not depend on the murderers who wish to annihilate me, but in what fate has in store for me."

All of us envied him his fortitude of character.

The Poles in the room next door were experiencing the same mortal fear as us. They asked the soldier, who was guarding them, to help them procure a priest prior to the execution. The soldier passed this on to the office, but the request was denied.

At half past eleven, the door was opened and two soldiers entered. Everyone instinctively moved as far away from the door into the hall, as if wishing to avoid being the first to be taken to the execution. The soldiers entered deeper into the hall, where all of us were huddling together, and called out to us, "You are lucky. Our comrades are here - for now, nothing will happen to you."

All of us breathed more freely, as if a heavy stone had been taken off our hearts. Our joy was even greater when we, once again, met with our wives at the tennis court. They had already heard the good news from the guard at the gate. Some of them had already found out, in town, that the soldiers had turned up. As it emerged, they had spent the whole night with women of the streets. For the time being, we had been saved. Our cold-blooded friend also showed a tear of joy. He had triumphed. He had been right - he would live as long as he was destined to.

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<sup>3</sup> [TN: Ger., lit. "Soon comes your way", which is a way of saying "You'll soon be gone".]