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In The Labour Camp^{*1}

"Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." (Dante)

The horizon is fringed by a black strip of forest. The thick, primordial woods encircle the area from three sides, cut through the main road, swallow up the paths and cast a black shadow on the peasants' huts that stand underneath it. Two sandy mounds, with the rippled ridges of wind-marks, [stand] guard from either side of the highway. The road is engulfed here by the white sand. It winds its way between the dunes and is then lost in the endless forest. By the road, at the foot of the sand-dunes, lay hidden the camp's wooden barracks.

On a cold April day, our group of two hundred and five people, [who were] caught in the middle of the street, is taken to the camp.

In the afternoon, a sickly and scanty sun shines forth. The air is permeated with dampness. The road is soft underfoot and swampy. The sadness looms over the swamped fields, over the white sand. A black terror blows from the distant woods.

All of us are tired and hungry. We were captured randomly and none of us [even] has a bit of bread with which to silence the gnawing hunger. The weak ones stop. We carry them on our shoulders and we are broken under the heavy load. Our feet sink into the white sand, which lies like a bridge between the two mounds.

A dream hovers in the barrack, over the half-closed eyelashes - a little chunk of bread. On the wooden three-tier bunks lie emaciated, exhausted bodies. It is already the eve of summer, but the nights are as cold and rainy as in autumn. We sleep in our clothes, [with] our hats pulled down over our ears [and] our shoes on our feet.

A reedy whistle cuts through the air - "*pobudka*" [reveille]. Three hundred and seventy men stand at the roll-call - badly worn shoes, tattered rags and hungry stomachs.

"All are equal, all are equal", says Zalman Furman. All *are* equal - Zalman Furman; a rabbi, a refugee from a small shtetl; a painter from Vienna suffering from lung disease; a "Tarbut"^{*2} teacher - a congregation of weakened Jews.

We are put into rows of three, shovels in hand. Off to work. We walk with stumbling steps.

Before each peasant's hut hangs a dream:
A baked potato,
A chunk of rye-bread.
And Bontshe the Silent^{*3} in his dream sees
A bun [other version: a turnip] and a carrot.

^{*1} [TN: This is a fictional story. The author was born in Częstochowa and was killed in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943. As our own version of this story has numerous misprints, we have also employed the version printed in *Między życiem a śmiercią [Between Life and Death]*, Warsaw 1955, pp.24-29.]

^{*2} [TN: Heb. "Culture"; Tarbut was a network of Hebrew-language schools established in independent Poland after WWI.]

^{*3} [TN: Character in short story of the same name by I.L. Peretz.]

We drain the water out from the swampy fields. The canals are cleared of sand. We stand in the water and throw shovelfuls of sand onto the banks. A drizzle soaks our clothes, worsening our mood. The hunger gnaws and gnaws. In the early morning, we drank a cup of bitter coffee and we shall only be given the 18 *deka* [viz. 180 g.] bread at night. A small group of curious peasants gathers on the wooden bridge. A peasant-woman casts pitiful glances at us.

A Jew wails: *"Have mercy, good people! We are fainting from hunger...a wife at home...a child...an orphan..."*

The peasants search their pockets. One has a little shag tobacco, another - a crumb of bread.

A peasant bends down from the bridge and says, "Well, little brother, we would certainly have given you - if we had any. A swampy area here, a poor one ... and bread is more expensive than gold. The Germans take everything away - eggs, bread, potatoes..."

Half an hour later, a peasant-woman comes over. She takes a piece of bread from under her bonnet and passes it to the first Jew by the bridge. The crowd stands dazed for a moment, but then they throw the shovels aside, jump across the canal - in the blink of an eye - and the Jew with the bread is already lying on the ground.

Dozens of Jews hit each other. They toss themselves on [top of each other], tumble into the sand, roll down hills and the shouting is carried loudly into a distance.

The camp security people come over from the other field. With their rifle-butts they bash. The "*stoyakes*^{*1}" [let] fly with long, flexible rods.

The screams become stronger and stronger. One gets up with a bruised head, another with a bloodied neck. We jump back into the water, we snatch up the shovels and, with distressed hearts, we throw the sand quickly.

On the bank, by the bridge, the Jew with the bread lies, weeping bitterly. The tiny breadcrumbs lie scattered on the ground. The bank becomes higher and higher from the sand heaped [onto it]. The camp's security people stand with guns at the ready.

And if someone falls away - what of it? But when, at midday, four people suddenly fell away in one go and, in the evening, we lowered them into the ground at the mound next to the camp and, in the morning, we dug eight [other] fresh graves - it squeezed at one's heart. Everyone pinched his sunken cheeks and fearfully looked at the new cemetery.

Once, after work, we found our neighbour Hirszhorn stretched out on his bunk. The cup of coffee stood half empty. The Jews gave him searching looks:

"Hirszhorn, you're giving up your *bona*^{*2}..."

"I'll outlive you all yet..."

"Brother, don't deceive yourself - you're definitely going to puff out your soul today..."

An hour later, he lay with his mouth torn open and a yellow, waxy face - satiated, calm. Four hands dragged him down from the bunk. [They] put him onto the stretcher, to be buried in the evening in the mound.

^{*1} [TN: Probably from the word "*stać*" (to stand), referring to the men who stand watching over the workers.]

^{*2} [TN: Rations card; euphemism used in the Warsaw Ghetto for giving up one's soul.]

Henceforth, every day, we already prepared fresh graves for those who would be stretching their legs out.^{*3}

The camp's security people - respected men of the underworld, residents of Kercelak [Square] and Pawiak [prison^{*4}] - have a very decent part in our camp's life. During the day, the commander of the camp, a broad, ungainly creature, would knock off half of the *prowiant* [rations] that had been allotted to us off. In the night, the *wartownicy* [sentries] robbed to the full extent of their thieving consciousness.

During the day, they would beat us murderously - at meals, at roll-call, [and] just for the sake of it - wantonly, just to show off their power.

Once, they woke us up in the middle of the night. It was a rainy darkness.

"One, two, three! Come down in your underwear, barefoot!"

"[But] we're wearing [our] trousers..."

"Undress!"

We undressed. We were led out into the wind and rain. A night-roll-call ensued. The camp's commander hit people [and] spewed out a moralistic address:

"Such and such - I'll show you how to flee - I'll shoot you all..."

The smell of *gorzałka* [liquor] in the air was palpable - his voice bellowed drunkenly.

After that, we lay until daybreak soaked from the rain. Our teeth were chattering.

Dawn came. The day came up grey. From a distance, angry, shouting voices were heard. Then, some voices beseeched humbly. "*Panie Komendancie* [Commander, Sir], have mercy. Never shall we flee again, never."

One, two, three - three shots were fired. The voices died out in the bushes, next to the sandy mound. It turned quiet [all] around - the air was rainy and grey. On the dune, two shot corpses were left lying - two brothers - one twenty and the other eighteen-years-old.

A day earlier, they had said to an acquaintance of theirs, "If Mother knew we were suffering beatings and hunger here, she would die of sorrow".

Yet, the mother never knew her loss - two children, fully grown, brazen youths - lost in one day. She did not hear their cries. Their voices tangled with the bushes and died in the grey day.

We were awoken in the middle of the night - the ill were soon to travel home.

We prepared ourselves feverishly and stood ourselves in line. The commander announced briefly, "Whoever stops on the way will be shot".

A young man ran about in the barracks. A day before, he had been beaten and, in the night, he had lost his mind.

"How can I go? Oh, how can I go, if I haven't got my underpants?"

^{*3} [TN: Expression akin to "kick the bucket."]

^{*4} [TN: Both are located in Warsaw. According to a footnote by the editor of *Między życiem a śmiercią*, p. 27, the former were criminals, and the latter were fascist prison guards.]

His voice resounded, like an evil prophecy. We pulled him into the row. He clambered onto a bunk and yelled in the voice of a madman, *"If I haven't got my underpants..."*

The commander had him brought over to him. Upon exiting the camp, we heard a shot. We never saw that fellow again.

[We marched] to a little railway station, one and a half hours' journey from Warsaw. With superhuman strength, we toiled to carry the weak. No one could be left along the way.

In one and a half hours! In one and a half hours, each one would see his wife, his children and those closest to him.

We wait for the train.

One suddenly collapses, his feet buckling under him. He remains lying, with froth on his lips.

From all sides people shout, *"He's dying! A bit of bread..."* A Christian woman passing by approaches and holds out a chunk of bread, but the commander, a Pole, thunders out, *"No Aryan may approach any Jew! Away!"*

We stand helpless. The froth was swallowed back into the mouth - the last breath - dead.

Two brothers sit on the grass. Suddenly, one of them throws back his head [and] rolls up his eyes. *"Duwid'l, Duwid'l!"*, his brother pleads, bellowing like an ox, *"Duwid'l, Duwid'l! Chaja'le will be at the railway [station] ... Rywka'le ... they are waiting for you ... just another hour and a half ... Duwid'l! Help! A little tea ... a bit of bread..."*

From the second-storey window of a brick house facing them, a Polish woman throws down a bottle of milk. Hundreds of hands reach out to catch it. The bottle spins in the air and lands on the stone bridge. A white trail of milk whitens the ground.

Duwid'l no longer wishes a chunk of bread, a little milk - dead.

Twelve dead are laid out by the railway station - twelve emaciated, famished bodies. Germans roll the cameras. The sanitary [official] writes the names of the deceased with blue writing on their stiff arms. The bodies are placed onto three peasants' carts. They are taken back to the camp, to the cemetery.

We await death, like calves to the slaughter. Another hour and a half...

And who else's feet will buckle, just like that, without a cry, to die like a dog at the doorstep of his own home, in Poland - in the camp's cemetery?

*Warsaw Ghetto,
Spring 1941.
(Ringelblum Archive, Volume 1, №1039;
"Dror" periodical, №7-8.)*
