

The Last Twenty-Four Hours in HASAG

1.

On the morning of Tuesday, 16th January 1945, the HASAG-*Apparatebau* [HASAG - the acronym for a German metal goods manufacturer *Hugo Schneider Metallwarenfabrik Aktiengesellschaft*] no longer had the same face which it had a day earlier.

On Monday morning at five o'clock, we were roused from our beds, as usual by the trumpet, and everyone went outside to roll-call. The SS officer and the Jewish camp leader, Goldsztajn, who had been brought here from the liquidated Płaszów-Kraków Jewish concentration camp, still slapped and kicked [people] for not reporting accurately how many "*Häftlinge*" [Ger. detainees] the *kapowy*¹ (group leader) was taking out to work, or for not marching straight, etc. That is how the day would start at the newly-instituted "Jewish Concentration Camp Częstochowa", as our factory camp had been called since 1st January 1945. The work groups, which worked in the city, were let out of the camp. One could have thought that the day was going to follow its normal course. It was only later that it first emerged that, on that day, the number of Jews in the four munitions factories of Częstochowa had been decreased by four thousand souls.

In the evening, when we returned to town from work, we came upon an [totally] different camp, where everything had been packed up. The fear and panic is indescribable. On the following day, Tuesday, all the women were to be sent from the camp. This meant a new "akcja", a fresh "segregacja" [segregation] - with the sum total being fresh, Jewish mass-graves in some concentration camp. This was particularly distressing for the few Jewish couples, who still remained together despite all the troubles and pain. They knew that the last hour had come for their life together - which [now only] consisted of seeing one another from time to time. Who can express the profound sorrow of these people? No one even dreamt of seeing the other in [this] life ever again. The few Jewish mothers, who still had their younger or older children with them, experienced the same tragedy. Trembling with mortal fear, they waited to be torn away now - in [just] a few hours - from that which was dearest and most sacred to them. But their arms drop down [to their sides]². Some of the men disregard the prohibition against being inside the women's barracks and stay with their wives and mothers during the last hours, and a mournful, choked weeping and heartbroken sighs are the chords of this sleepless night.

The great and cruel powerlessness against the refined murderers of Jews hangs above everyone like a heavy, black cloud. At about one o'clock in the morning, the security guard, the cripple Stieglitz, arrives and announces that the women are not travelling and that, tomorrow, is a regular working day. But who believes him?

2.

Tuesday morning, five o'clock - we assemble in the camp square. No roll-call takes place. The SS officer comes and goes away. It appears that he has no clear instructions. Their Jew, Goldsztajn, who is already holding his doggish paws [up] in readiness to strike the "Hunde" and "Schweine" [dogs and swine], as he calls the Jews, is forced to have a little patience. In the meantime, he tears his porcine

¹ [TN: Polonised version of the German "*kapo*," inferring "the one who is the *Kapo*"; this term was commonly used in Poland.]

² [TN: Viz. they lost all hope of saving them.]

throat out screaming and bawling at us - the tortured and battered. Thus passes the night of horrors of 15th-16th January 1945.

The moon slowly fades. Bright rays break forth in the east. The day awakens. But who among us, slaves, is looking at this glorious spectacle of nature? We do not even sense the chill in our bones from standing in the frost, half naked, for over two hours. We are governed by the fear of what these rays of day will bring us. What do the evil spirits, with the name "Germans", have in preparation for us?

Apart from the bakers who bake bread for us in town, no one is allowed to leave the camp. Everything is in a tense state of waiting. By the time daylight spreads across the horizon, the camp square is almost empty. Everyone has gone into the barracks to warm their limbs a little. Suddenly, a command - the camp square must be cleaned. The mass-murderers are all fastidious about [everything being] "sauber und rein" [clean and pure].

The director of the factory, Herr Litt, arrives with all the factory's foremen. The square is quickly filled with the Jewish slaves, who are driven out of the barracks. Everyone carries their bundle [of personal effects] with them, just in case. It emerges that the factory is being reorganised, with a smaller "tenancy". Working hands are taken from the available "human material" for the different departments of the huge munitions factory. It is an outlandish scene [to see], how shadows of people whose entire lifeblood has been sucked dry by hunger and blows, by nakedness and resignation, are rushing to work at the "*Munitionsbetrieb*" [Munitions Enterprise]. [But] what is the surprise, if losing one's workplace means being sent away with the transport?

The German foremen drift about. Each of them chooses his number of working hands. The rest are immediately surrounded by the *Werkschutz* guards (factory police), and long rows of women are already formed, which are taken at once away to the train. Our commune has been shrunken even further. Yesterday, some 1,800 men left our camp, [and] today - about 1,300 women. We send them off with a little bread and tinned goods - and, after all, Jewish children, maybe, [just] maybe, you will yet see a free world. In the meantime, you are travelling to the Oświęcim death camp. And the hangmen are already preparing for their victims.

3.

A thought momentarily flares up in [the mind of] the HASAG Jew, who lives in a constant nightmare.

One asks oneself, "The great Russian offensive has begun. There are rumours that Kielce [and] Włoszczowa have been conquered - the victorious Russian army of liberators is already marching a few dozen kilometres from the city. Has this band really no more important work than to occupy themselves with Jews? The [railway] carriages, which must "roll for victory"³, are being used for the hated Jews. What is actually happening here?" But there is no time to dwell on this.

The selected workers go to their work. There is not even time to mourn for our sisters and brothers, who have been torn away. Yesterday, we were more than 4,000 Jews in the factory. Today, there are not even 2,000 of us. But who thinks about that? Those in hiding create new workplaces for themselves, in order to be able to receive the bread and soup rations that are given out.

The spirits are very low. Today, already no bread has been distributed. In trade, a two-kilo (five lbs.) loaf of black bread, that is smuggled in by the Poles, costs a hundred *złoty*. But who can permit

³ [TN: "Räder müssen rollen für den Sieg!" (Wheels must roll for victory) was a 1942 Nazi propaganda campaign of the state-owned Deutsche Reichsbahn railway company.]

himself this indulgence? We are, therefore, gladdened by the news that the kitchen will, in fact, be giving out lunch. The wooden pots are carried all around the factory. And the workers/slaves - hungry, deprived of sleep, exhausted from the agony and sorrow - gulp down the soup. All of a sudden - *Crash! Crash!* - an aerial attack on the city, so unexpectedly. Bombs fly in the air. They explode with a primordially wild roar. The air literally shakes. We feel how the entire horizon moves. Not far from the factory, an incendiary bomb explodes and the barracks, that were only recently built, are already standing in flames. Everyone is in a tumult. The factory immediately comes to a halt. Rumours spread that the German foremen are leaving the factory, [and] that Director Litt and Major Sauer, the chief of the SS and of the concentration camp, are standing at the ready with their small hand-luggage and waiting for a means of communication. What has happened? Have the mass-murderers [simply] been frightened by the bombardment, or are the liberators truly already so near, that they are all being forced to flee already? Who can know that? We, behind the barbed wire, certainly know nothing. We just rejoice in the terrible explosions [and] in the gigantic flames that we observe. For us, the tortured, it is all the same either way. Each of us would prefer to die by a bomb rather than push such a life [along]. We know, for certain, that the mass-murderers will not let us out of their bloodied paws. As a result, the potent tremors have absolutely no frightening effect on us. On the contrary - we are governed by an intense desire that the shaking should be all the stronger and more resounding and that we shall all perish.

Not far from the factory, a railway line stretches out towards Germany. We watch how German soldiers run up to a locomotive and stop it, jumping aboard in terrified panic. We do not believe our eyes. Is the German Army really running away?

Alas, you, the HASAG Jew, cannot think about this for long - even on this historic day of 16th January, when a new world has arrived to obliterate all that is evil and horrible, which has hitherto raged freely. You, the enslaved creature, are already being led away by the greater and smaller murderers - the leader of the *Werkschutz*, Hermann, [and] his agent Stieglitz, with an entire horde of *Werkschutz* guards. All us Jews are driven into the camp. It becomes evident to us that the last act is nearing. Each seeks out his closest ones, in order to spend the last hours or minutes together. We repack our rucksacks and only take the bare essentials with us. Others do not wish to take any bundles with them at all - for what? It only takes a moment before we are all already standing lined up in the camp square.

The day goes by. The sky shrouds itself in the colour of dark lead. It seems to us as if Nature does not have the audacity to illuminate so much sorrow and pain. Everything is turning grey from the difficult night approaching - from that night that is yet to bring so many surprises to us, those who have experienced so many tortures. Before our very eyes, they took away and shot our dearest and nearest - 40,000 Częstochowa Jews. We watched, on 3rd January 1943, how the two heroic Jewish young men, Izio Fajner and [Mendel] Fiszlewicz, fell upon the murderer Roon with weapons in their hands. This was at the moment when Roon wanted to send another hundred Jews to Treblinka and [had] twenty-five Jews shot in the square. On 20th March 1943, the *Judenrat*, all the doctors and all the remaining Jewish intellectuals in general, with their families, among them forty small children, were shot before our very eyes. We witnessed how, on 26th June 1943, during the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto", the mass-murderers shot some 800 Jews, and then the same amount again on 25th July. In that same period, the two camp leaders, the German *Schutzpolizei* officers Laszynski and Köstner, on a daily basis, shot and burned, on special pyres, dozens of Jews.

And here we stand, once more, looking our murderers in the eye and wordlessly asking ourselves, "What else have they devised for us? What refined tortures or modes of death have they thought up for us tonight? Who knows?"

4.

The command "*Antreten!*" [Line up!] is given. My eyes meet Dr Szperling's. "Is this our last act?" "Yes, friend, our last act!" We all stand, lined up, with our little knapsacks, awaiting further orders.

Suddenly, the moon shines forth in all its glory and illuminates us, the children of mankind. We do not know how this is to be interpreted. Is this its last farewell from us, or an omen of some news - [of] something unexpected for us?

Meanwhile, another command thunders out – "*March!!!*"

We bow our heads. Everyone takes one more look at the square. We shall never see it again. As sorrowful as life has been for us here, it will be even harder for us there, in the new, unknown camp.

We do not reach the exit gate. "*Back to the barracks!*" - a new order thunders out. We go, like herded sheep.

Word reaches us that street battles with the liberating Red Army are taking place in the city. A Jewish coachman says that he has personally seen Russian tanks in town, [and that] he himself has travelled with Germans - over [the bodies of] dead Germans. And all this is happening while we are behind barbed wire at the very edge of the city, guarded by the greatest murderers, by the basest of hangmen.

At about nine o'clock, the *Werkschutz* leader Hermann, an SS officer, and the *Werkschutz* guard Doroszenko enter the camp and order everyone out on the square, marching with them. All assemble in the square, but no one wishes to proceed towards the exit gate. Whoever has not seen this cannot imagine how the human instinct dictates an entire mass to protect itself in a time of peril.

The Germans roared wildly – "*This way, left, to the gate!*" They hit and shoved, and it was to no avail. The mass pulled back from the gate, clumping together. The *Werkschutz* leader pleaded, "*Children, for your own good! This way, left, to the gate!*"

The battle of the instinct of the tortured against the torturers was amazing. In that moment, no logical reasoning was possible – but, driven by the survival instinct, we resisted exiting the camp.

5.

All of a sudden, the dark horizon is torn by flashes of fire and explosions that make the air shake. The booms thunder incessantly. The echo of the first explosion has not yet died down, and already there is a second and a third. We look about. We no longer hear or see the Germans. It appears that they have left. But our camp has also been decreased. The fiends have managed to snatch away several hundred Jews. The rest are uneasy - what if they return?

The bombardment does not stop. We already make out distinct artillery shots. Vigorous flames already appear from the city, rising high into the darkness like beacons for the hapless, as if calling, "*Tear down the barbed wire!!! Out, to freedom!!! We Pillars of Fire⁴ shall lead you, enslaved man, to your freedom!*"

⁴ [TN: Ref. to Exodus 13:21: "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night:"; said of the former Israelite slaves in the desert.]

And thus, as if pushed by this very call, a group of "*Häftlinge*" [detainees] make the decision to break out of HASAG and go to the freedom before them.