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## A Night in the Częstochowa Ghetto

Everything that I have written, up to now, has had to do with my life in the bunkers - and this was in Będzin, in Oberschlesien [Górny Śląsk], but not in Częstochowa. I often ask myself, "Why it is that it is easier for me to write of the underground life in other places, while I avoid the horrible tragedy of my own hometown?" Is it because I subconsciously fear that my heart will explode, or because only, when I think about something else, am I able to be temporarily freed from the horrifying images which stand before my eyes and accompany me on every step I take?

And how can one write anything about Częstochowa!? Indeed, my whole lifetime would not suffice to describe even one street, one alleyway – for example, Garncarska! Where am I to find the words and years to describe what our little street looked like on the day of the *Destruction*!? I shall now attempt to describe one building - let this be the house at Garncarska 23.

It was a house just like all the small houses on Garncarska, Nadrzeczna, Mostowa, Koszarowa, Senatorska or Kozia - three tailors, two cobblers, two *stepper*<sup>1</sup>, a glazier, a carpenter, a tinsmith, a cap-maker, a bakery, a milk-man, three stallholders, a rabbinical judge, a study-hall - literally an entire *shtetl*. Almost all the girls went to the factories. The boys all went to one *cheder* - but each learned something different. One became an ardent Zionist, a second, a leader of the Bundist youth, [and] a third, a leader of the communist movement. And not only did they attend the same *cheder*, but they also played in the same sand in the courtyard, as did their fathers and grandfathers once played. And many more generations would have played in that same corner with that same sand. But I recall - yes, I well recall - that on that day, on that last day, the children - already the last children - were still playing in the sand in that same corner.

That day, everyone was in the courtyard - absolutely everyone - women, children, young [and] old. Children from other buildings came here with their dads and mums. The parents came to the old home of their youth - to the house of their parents. And everyone was in the courtyard! [It was] like the finale of a horrific play.

More than half of the Jews have already been deported from the city - street after street, house after house. It is already the tenth day since the ghetto had been surrounded. Today is again a *calm* day, because sixty carriages had departed for Treblinka only yesterday. They will only return tomorrow. In fact, tomorrow is *our* turn. There is no doubt of this. And everyone is in the courtyard, keeping silent. When someone says a word, all hear it distinctly. And every word cuts like a knife:

"Alas, the years of my youth", says a girl. "The years of my youth, woe is me!"

"And what have I lived to such an age for?", says a little, grey grandmother. "What has God granted me so many years for?"

And the children play in the sand – weak, exhausted [and] pale. The day before yesterday, the Housing Committee gave out the last food, which was made from the grime that was scraped from the vats<sup>2</sup> in the bakery. Each [received just] a couple spoonful of soup. It will soon be a fortnight since the ghetto was surrounded by murderers, so that not even a cat can get out. Night is already

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Tradesmen who stitch the shoe/boot uppers to the soles.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: The word used in the original is "bayten" (בייטן), probably from the German "Bütten" (tubs or vats). Although this word does not appear in the Yiddish dictionaries in connection with bakeries (its usual meaning is "flowerbed"), it does appear in this context in a copy of the newspaper "Forverts" from 1975, in which case it was the receptacle in which the bakery's mother-dough was kept.]

falling - the last night. Everyone knows this clearly - the little children [and] the adults. And the questions that they ask is, "Why? Why?", choking their throats.

And still, a little joy dawned, which [then] spread from house to house - the last bit of joy in the last evening before the *Destruction*. This is what occurred:

A son, unable to witness his elderly mother's grief, just told her some completely fabricated lie, to the effect that signs had come across from the other courtyard that the deportation had been halted, that orders had come from Berlin, and the latest transport had been stopped in its tracks and sent back home, and that we were already saved. And believing it thoughtlessly, like children, one repeated this to another. Each one believed, because he *wished* to believe. I, too, believed. Soon, the joy became great. We gained fresh strength - we jumped with joy, congratulated one another with "*Mazel tov!*", kissed each other and wept with happiness.

Anyone, who was [still] in doubt, soon saw that it was [indeed] true - because we now perceived the people in the neighbouring courtyard also dancing with joy and shouting "*Mazel tov, mazel tov!*" over to us.

People talked until dawn, trying to pinpoint what had brought about the redemption. One said that Berlin had ordered it, because they needed the Jews for work. Another said that, in America, they were going to do the same to the Germans - [that is why] they had been frightened.

"But why is the whole guard still standing around the ghetto?", someone asked. "Why? Because they have not received the orders yet", people immediately answered him.

They wanted to put a good spin on everything - to the last minute, they believed, hoped, [and] desired to live. But ...

At six o'clock in the morning, a couple of hundred wagons on [leaf] springs drove into the ghetto - the same ones that had made appearances before - to take the elderly and children away to the [railway] carriages and to collect the corpses (old people and children who were already unable to go out to the street were shot inside the houses, and their bodies were taken away on *risares*<sup>3</sup>). This time, they did not have to wait long - nor did they wish to do so. Let the end come already, to get it over with... For those, who travelled with the last transport, things are already well - they already got it over with ...

That is what the last day and the last night looked like in the house on Garncarska, where I was born. I witnessed it all personally and I, myself, am still unable to believe that [all] this is already no more - even though I was one of the last to leave the house, to be led to the carriages. Later, with many other young people, they took me to put the houses in order (they let us live for a short while longer for this purpose), and I was also in my own house. There were no living people to be found there - dead, there were many. Walls were sprayed with blood, windowpanes were smashed. And everything was so black, so dark. I actually saw everything myself and yet, when I think today of my house on Garncarska, I still see the old courtyard, exactly as it once was. I also see the little children, playing in the sand - in the same sand as myself played. In that same corner where I once played.

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<sup>3</sup> [TN: Presumably the same carts with springs mentioned above; the word "*risares*" (ריסאַרעס) is most likely derived from the Polish "*resor*" (spring), which is also used in Yiddish (רעסאַר), as in the beginning of the sentence.]