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Revenge is Sweet

(How I caught the murderer and liquidator of the “Small Ghetto”
and placed him into the hands of justice)

The sentiment of vengeance is alien to us Jews. During our long exile, we have always been opposed to the veneration of any type of physical prowess. Forgiveness - pardoning all the crimes our enemies have committed against us, and which they are still committing to this day - has entered into our blood and has moulded our Diaspora character, our Diaspora psychology.

We, the weakest of the weak, have always sought a path to life, to further existence. Within ourselves, we have suppressed all feelings of revenge.

Yet, when we call to mind our recent past - those nightmarish days when our bloodiest foe of all times, Hitler’s Angel of Death, wielded fire and sword over every Jewish community and over every Jewish house, making the lives of the entire European Jewry free for all to take - how elevated, how ethical and how sweet then becomes the feeling of vengeance for every Jew who was overlooked by the eye of the reaper, like an individual stalk during the harvest in the field.

During those nightmarish days, every one of us had [but] one wish, one desire - to survive. Not so much due to lust for life, but to be able to take revenge - revenge for our fathers and mothers, revenge for our sisters and brothers, revenge for our children and revenge for the prematurely reaped lives of our dearest and best.

When the War began, I, like many other Jews from my *shtetl*, turned up in Częstochowa, where I marched through all the local Jewish community’s *Seven Layers of Hell*.

At that time, Częstochowa was the place of refuge for “resettled” Jews from all the towns which belonged to the so-called “Third Reich”. Through these newly-arrived Jews, the Jewish community in Częstochowa grew to some 60,000 Jews. “Here, in Częstochowa”, Jews said amongst themselves, “one can still manage to somehow live”.

The ghetto period ensued. Life turned worse. The Germans regularly took Jews to various labours and also, repeatedly, levied large contributions [of money]. For crossing the designated boundaries of the ghetto, even a small child was shot. We need not even mention simply “sending Jews away” on a daily basis.

All this, however, was “not quite yet” the most horrifying. After all, one could still “live”, somehow. Grievous tidings began to reach us of “akcje” in Warsaw. The spectre of fear and horror began weighing down on one’s temples. Jews signed up *en masse* for different jobs, thus hoping to save their lives.

Until... until the greatest horror arrived – on that mournful *Yom Kippur* of 1942, on which the Jews sensed that their fate had been sealed¹.

¹ [TN: In Judaism, *Yom Kippur* is believed to be the day upon which the heavenly “Book of Life” is sealed, in which all living beings are inscribed to life or death, health or sickness, etc.]

On the morning after *Yom Kippur*, we saw ourselves enclosed by entire hordes of SS men and Ukrainians. The *akcja* in Częstochowa had begun. This tragic masquerade continued for three weeks. For three weeks, the infamous bloodhound² Degenhardt wove his “famous stick” about - left and right. This denoted “Who will live and who will die...”³

Some 60,000 Jews - men and women, children and elderly - then “paraded past” the clique of dogs, serpents and locusts that ruled over our lives. We felt powerless. It seemed as if heaven and earth had united against us.

As I went in this manner to the slaughter, I looked into the eyes of those very murderers, who were burning with the lust to uproot us completely and, from the depths of my heart, I whispered a silent prayer, “Riboino shel oilem [Master of the Universe], grant me the great merit of wreaking vengeance upon these very bloodhounds”.

Following the culling of the *akcja*, around 5,000 Jews remained alive - whom the German rulers turned into slaves. These were the times of the so-called “Small Ghetto”.

From this “Small Ghetto”, which was surrounded with barbed wire and guarded day and night by Ukrainians, Jews went out on a daily basis, under escort, to various factories and other [forms of forced] labour.

From time to time, “selections” took place. Here, a few Jews were shot, and there - the entire professional intelligentsia was taken to the cemetery, where every last one was shot. The Jews in the “Small Ghetto” sensed that this was not yet the last word of the German rulers. Something, Jews felt, was still hanging in the air – that they were still to face some hard trials to come.

There were some Jews who organised themselves in preparation for a desperate resistance. But this situation did not last long. Due to a Jewish informer and, partially, due to the irresponsibility of the young people from the so-called “partisans”, word of the Jewish resistance reached German ears and, as always in such cases, it fell upon our own heads.

A hard line was taken against the Jews. In place of the “soft” and “tolerant” Sappor, the two “famous” murderers, Laszynski and Köstner⁴ came.

It was said of Laszynski that he was the “proper butcher⁵”. Amongst ourselves, in ghetto jargon, we commented that, for the slightest offense, he “snapped⁶”.

Regarding Köstner, his right-hand man, some Jews knew that, a couple of days earlier, before being appointed to take guardianship over us, he had dressed up in old civilian clothes, pretending to be a Jew from a camp, and came to H. Zajdman’s coal storeroom with a sack to buy coal. To Zajdman, who already more or less knew his clientele, Köstner seemed suspicious. He therefore inquired of him for whom the coal was intended. Köstner, who spoke fluent Polish, presented him with a note from a Jewish *Arbeitseinsatz*⁷, complaining about the Jewish Police who was denouncing Jews to the Germans, and adding that he, himself, had been forced to leave another camp as a result of the

² [TN: The term is used here and subsequently throughout the article in its primeval sense of a large hound trained to seek out the blood of a wounded beast of prey and to finish it off.]

³ [TN: Part of the “Unesanneh Tokef” prayer recited on the High Holidays.]

⁴ [TN: According to historical details kindly provided to us by Prof Dr hab. Jerzy Mizgalski, this individual’s name was actually Heinrich Köster (aka Kostorz), and he was Hauptwachtmeister of the Schutzpolizei. He arrived in Częstochowa on 7th July 1940. Nevertheless, we have rendered his name throughout the Częstochowa Yizkor Books as it appears in the original texts – either as “Kessler” or “Köstner.”]

⁵ [TN: In English in the original – בונטשער “crack”].

⁶ [TN: “טילטַנְקָעַר” in the original, meaning “he snaps/cracks”; apparently, this expression was otherwise not commonly used in Yiddish.]

⁷ [TN: “Labour deployment”; a forced labour category of internment under the Nazi regime.]

Jewish Police's chicaneries. Köstner [then] approached the Jews of the ghetto kitchen, who were just then stocking up on coal, [and said] that he was wondering why the Jews were not forming - as in other cities - any partisan group. The Jews, not realising with whom they were speaking, reassured Köstner that in Częstochowa, too, Jewish partisans were active.

And the Judgement of Sodom⁸ ensued - the "Small Ghetto" was bloodily liquidated. A couple of hundred Jews were simply shot by the murderers. All the Jews, living in the three houses at ul. Nadrzeczna 84, 86 and 88, were shot under the pretext that the network of the rebellion had been there and with dynamite, they blew up the three aforementioned houses up into the air. Many Jews - mainly children and old people - were buried alive in the bunkers which had been built and in underground hiding places.

About 3,500 Jews emerged "whole" from this bloodied culling, whom the Germans imprisoned within the walls of two Częstochowa factories, naked and barefoot. There, the Jews were forced, under the worst conditions [not even] fit for a dog, to work hard and bitterly, receiving murderous beatings with great frequency. On the brink of despair, being subjected to disgrace and derision, each one clung with his teeth and nails to the bare, worthless life, with the hope of being able to wreak vengeance upon the greatest barbarians of all times.

Following Liberation, I was in Breslau [Wrocław] several times. Walking, by chance, down one of the busiest streets, ul. Mathias⁹, I was suddenly struck by the appearance of a passer-by, who was strolling in the company of an unknown woman. We walked [towards one another] until meeting face to face. We dodged past each other. In the blink of an eye, the thought "*This is him!*" flashed in my mind. I did not slacken off, [but] ran after him to see him once more face to face, and I was convinced that my visual recognition had not deceived me. As I passed by, I recognised him - Köstner. I almost had an attack of madness. I truly could not contain myself. A deluge of thoughts flashed through my mind – "Yes, *this is him...* Yes, *this is me, the one who recognised him...* *This is my dream - our dream...* *This is the highest vow, the most sacred oath...* *This is, indeed, our most ardent and incandescent desire - revenge!*"

These are no abstract words, nor a religious wish. We are no longer under the harrowing deadly fear of the German boot. How powerful is an experience - a one-time experience!

And he, my adversary, unaware of what is about to come upon him here, is strolling down the length of ul. Mathias, as if nothing had happened, in the company of a lady.

I observe him and, at the same time, look for a Jewish acquaintance to help me restrain Köstner. I find one. This is a Jew [named] Bocian, who was in the "Small Ghetto" in Częstochowa and had escaped. He knew Köstner well. Bocian, upon seeing Köstner, becomes inflamed. I now had a partner.

We do not yet wish to risk everything by approaching Köstner. We fear that he might break loose, Heaven forbid. We divide the roles. I observe [him] and Bocian runs to fetch more Jews - Częstochowers - who are living on that same ul. Mathias. Only once, I see Bocian approaching with a Jew, Lajzer Rozencwajg, whom I know from the Częstochowa ghetto, do I think, "*Now you are mine! Your fate has been sealed.*"

I approached Köstner and asked him if he was a German. Köstner, not yet suspecting the worst, replied in the affirmative. When I inquired of him whether he had been in Częstochowa, his tongue

⁸ [TN: Viz. *utter and indiscriminate destruction*.]

⁹ [TN: *We believe this to be aleja Jana Matejki*.]

was literally taken from him. He lost the ground under his feet, as if a deep abyss had suddenly opened up before him. For a moment, he regained his senses and attempted to flee, at which point Lajzer Rozencwajg and others came up and restrained Köstner.

We gave him over into the hands of justice. His female companion, perceiving that Köstner was about to be arrested, took advantage of the commotion and disappeared. Once detained, and seeing that his fate had already been sealed, Köstner tried to take advantage of a certain moment and jump out the window. This was noticed. Köstner was [then] bound hand and foot.

I looked then into the green eyes of the dull Germanic simpleton, in which I, once again, saw the sorrowfully notorious bloodhound - the liquidator of the Częstochowa "Small Ghetto". Those fear-filled days, with all the gruesomeness and cruelties, once more emerged before my eyes. In Köstner, I recognised the murderer of our children, whom this deranged bloodhound shot with particular pleasure, holding them up by the hair of their little heads.

Inside me, a sentiment of boundless revenge towards this villain ignited and blazed! Revenge for the martyrs' deaths of our dearest, best and finest. Revenge for desecrating the race of man – the image of God.

I experienced the strongest emotion of all my life. I was intoxicated with joy. It seemed to me as if this fact had, to some extent, rehabilitated me [after having] experienced this horrific storm.

Revenge is sweet.
