

Testimony

- *taken in Jerusalem from A. B. (Aron Brandes),
who was in Poland until 1943.*

When the War broke out, I was in my hometown of Żarki (Zhurik), near Częstochowa. The Germans entered our town on Saturday, 2nd September, at nine in the evening. On 2nd September, the Nazis bombed the town with aerial raids. One hundred Jewish victims fell. Many houses were destroyed. Whole families with children were killed. A terrible panic set in. Civilians with their families fled Żarki itself, as well as the peasants from the vicinity. But the Germans travelled more speedily and, wherever one arrived, the Germans were already there. The Germans gave out bread and sweets to the refugees on the roads, and only asked one thing of them - to return to their homes. And thus, everyone went back to Żarki.

On 4th September, the Germans set fire to the old Study-Hall in town and burnt it down. When the Jewish youth perceived the unrest and uncertainty, a large number of them went into the nearby forests. The Germans suddenly declared that the civilian population, including the Jews, had fired shots at the German military, killing a number of soldiers, and that this was the reason for the repressions. They took hostages (respected Jews) and brought them into the church. There, they threatened them that they would be shot were the Jews to try anything against the invaders. After that, we returned from the woods. The Germans began capturing Jews and sending them away to Germany. I, myself, was in the camp in Nürnberg. There were 3,000 Jews there, mainly from Kalisz and Łódź, and 17,000 Poles. After one month, they sent me to a Nazi camp in Kraków. After three weeks, the 3,000 Jews were freed. We had suffered hunger the entire time. They beat us and also shot at us. Later, the Jewish *Kehilla* aided us.

I travelled back to Żarki. The situation in the *shtetl* had worsened. The leader of the Nazis was a cruel man. They dragged the Jews off to work, to beatings, etc. Once, they gathered all the Jewish men in the synagogue and told them they were going to finish them off. The panic was great but, after a few days, they were released.

Afterwards, another Nazi commander arrived - a bit of a better person. And, although the situation was hard, we somehow managed to live in the *shtetl*, and people worked. In Żarki, there were 3,200 refugees from Płock, of whom 300 were Jewish.

There were also people there from Łódź. They had escaped from their city to Żarki. In Żarki, the leather industry (manufacture of boots, overcoats, etc.) was particularly developed. The decrees of the *Generalgouvernement*, such as the yellow patch, for example, and others, did not apply to Żarki. All this [was] in the beginning. Only later, when Żarki was annexed to the Radomsko district (summer 1940), did they first start implementing all kinds of decrees concerning us. We were not allowed to do business. Work was restricted. Every Jew was required to wear a white patch. But there was no official ghetto. The Germans formed the *Judenrat*, which carried out all the formalities. The Germans would take bribes, and many of them were bought off. For some time, we managed in this manner.

In 1941, a group of about fifty youths (some of whom had come from Warsaw) organised an agricultural farm in our town, as part of the *Ha'Chalutz* and *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* movement. We were working on land that had formerly belonged to us. The *Judenrat* leased it from the Germans and gave it over to us to work. The Germans frequently inspected our farm and many of them, especially those who had lived in the countryside themselves, highly praised our "exemplary work". Jewish representatives from Warsaw (the Joint and others) were also [there], and they assisted us.

For us, the large deportations began in September 1942. The German "Commission [sic Commando] for the Extermination of Jews" arrived in Częstochowa on 22nd September 1942, and that is when the horrific days began for the entire Częstochowa area.

With us in Żarki, the deportations began on 6th October 1942. We found out that there would already be a deportation the next day. Some of the Jews fled to the fields, forests and surrounding villages, and also to the neighbouring *shtetl* of Piltz (Pilica). The deportation had been carried out in Pilica one month earlier, and some of the Jews there had then fled to us and lived in Żarki. When the deportation was about to take place in Żarki, the Pilica Jews and some of those from Żarki fled to Pilica (which was already "*Judenrein*" [clean of Jews]) and there they hid themselves.

On 6th October, one hundred Germans and Ukrainians arrived in Żarki on motorised vehicles. In addition, the local Nazi police gathered, together with the "*Grenzwache*" [Border Guard]. The Germans ordered all the Jews to assemble in the marketplace. They went from house to house, driving the Jews out to the marketplace. Whoever was found hiding, in a cellar or some other place, was shot on the spot. Sick people were also shot in their beds. They only spared thirty Jews in order to help liquidate the Jewish property.

In this manner, the Nazis gathered 780 Jews in the market (they shot immediately twenty-three [of these] Jews). Each one of the assembled (men, women and children) was allowed to take one small package. All the Jews were taken to the Żłoty Potok railway station. There, they were treated with the greatest cruelty. They were all packed into freight carriages. When mothers refused to give up their children, they were shot on the spot - together with their children. Young people, who tried to escape, were also shot.

The Jews who managed to escape into the forests began returning to Żarki, being unable to hold out in their hiding places. Many of them were detained and, once a group of 40-50 had been gathered, they were sent away to Częstochowa (later to Piotrków), because parties of Jews continued to be sent out from there.

I personally fled to Pilica. I was there for three weeks, with a group of twenty-five comrades. We collaborated with the Polish partisans there. Together, we distributed different flyers, went to [mount] attacks in the woods, shot at the Germans and made assassination attempts on them. The partisan movement had just begun there. With weapons in hand, the Jewish youth organised attacks upon the Germans.

I must add that, before the deportation from Żarki took place, a group of Jewish youth - and the *Ha'Chalutz* and *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* members in particular - organised a self-defence [squad]. We worked out detailed plans on how to cut off the telephone lines, mount attacks on the Germans and so on. But we could not carry out the plan because the Germans had made a rule that wherever a shot was heard, they would they murder the entire Jewish population around them, including the women and children. Due to this, we did not wish to also take from the Jews their last hope that they - or at least their children - might be saved.

Three weeks later, the second deportation took place from Pilica [and] from the entire Kraków district. After the second deportation, if a Jew was found in this region (Pilica, Wolbrom, Miechów), he was shot on the spot. Those of us, who had hidden in Pilica, fled back to Żarki. We could not show ourselves on the streets, because every Jew was arrested. The Jews went into sealed-up houses. They concealed themselves in the attics and the cellars. There was no food. In the evening, we went to the thirty Jews (whom the Germans had still retained) and received food products from them. There were harsh frosts just then and it was hard to endure the situation.

Seeing as how the Germans knew that there were still many Jews in hiding, they issued an order to the effect that, by 30th November 1942, all Jews were to come into the ghettos, where they would be allowed to live and work. In addition, the Germans declared that “the record of the deportations has already been completed”.

Sixteen new ghettos were then formed in the four districts - Warsaw, Kraków, Radom [and] Lublin. The newly-created ghetto, nearest to Żarki, was in Radomsko (in Częstochowa, there was only a labour camp, but no ghetto; the Jews there worked in factories essential to the [German] war effort).

Those in hiding had no way out and to remain in the woods any longer was impossible – they came forward and then left for the ghetto in Radomsko. Among them were also many Jews from Pilica and Wolbrom. In this manner, a camp of 5,000 Jews was formed in the Radomsko Ghetto. Until the first deportation, there had been up to 10,000 Jews in Radomsko. All of them had then been sent away. They only left 200 Jews to liquidate Jewish property.

I was among those who returned to Radomsko. The Germans concentrated all these 5,000 Jews into seven huge houses. One cannot imagine how crowded it was there. There were thirty people to one room - [including] women and children. The situation was horrifying. Food could only be obtained, from Poles, for large sums of money.

We were in Radomsko until 6th January 1943. Jews only worked in one wood factory (300 Jews), manufacturing sledges and wagons for the Germans. The Nazis promised that “no more harm would be done to all these Jews, because they are working for the Germans”.

We sent an emissary to the partisans in the woods in Pilica, and we brought a Polish partisan from there to help us in our work, because we ourselves had organised partisan groups of five individuals (“fives”). They, the Poles, were supposed to send us cars with armed [men], to take us into the woods where the Polish partisans were. But, before the leader of the Polish partisans arrived, another deportation took place in Radomsko (on 6th January 1943), and we were no longer able to travel through to the woods.

Three days before the deportation, on 3rd January 1943, the Gestapo informed the *Judenrat* that there was a possibility to travel to the Land of Israel. They formed three categories:

- 1) Citizens of the Land of Israel, and holders of passports from there;
- 2) Those with close family members living in the Land of Israel;
- 3) Those with more distant relatives there.

The *Kehilla* [viz. *Judenrat*] began registering Jews. The throng was extraordinary. People stood in long queues before being able to enter the office. Up to 3,000 Jews signed up. Post factum, the Nazis told the *Judenrat* - secretly, as it were - that they could only take 300 Jews. A new selection and a new list were made. Each one had to provide the exact address of his relative in the Land of Israel. The mood improved a little. People looked forward to the Land of Israel with enthusiasm and yearning.

Then a thought arose that, should another deportation take place, we would no longer run. This running [away] was beyond [our] strengths - always fleeing back and forth, again a new place, again hunger [and] cold. We decided that what would be - would be. We had no strength to continue escaping. In the meantime, the Germans added a few other houses to the ghetto and brought four Jewish doctors over from Częstochowa. They wanted to create a “ghetto atmosphere”.

On 6th January 1943, the new deportation took place. The German police, together with Ukrainians and Polish police, encircled the ghetto and began the liquidation. I was in Radomsko at the time. All the Jews were gathered at the *Judenrat* [offices] in the early morning. On that day, the Jews still remained in Radomsko. They were sent away on the second day. I personally witnessed how they took all the Jews away. Each one was told to bring a pack of 10-15 kg. From all these 5,000 Jews, they picked out 300 young, healthy Jews and sent them to the labour camp in Skarżysko, near Radom and Kielce. The rest were taken to carriages at the railway [station]. The little packs were immediately taken from them and, from many of them (particularly those who were dressed a little better), they stripped off their clothes and crammed them into the carriages, just in their shirtsleeves. The sight was a ghastly one. The wailing and screaming reached the heavens, for the Jews already knew what awaited them. After all, there were those among them who had already escaped several times from various [concentration] points. There were many women and children among the deported. All were packed into the carriages and, on that same day, the carriages were sent off to Treblinka. The Germans left twenty-three Jews to liquidate the [Jewish] property.

A few Jews managed to conceal themselves in bunkers but, after eighteen days, the Germans searched every house [and] every place and brought out all the hidden Jews. Their number was then 350. They were led to [a location] behind the city. Poles were brought in to dig pits. These same Jews were shot and buried in mass graves. Of these 350 Jews, two boys (one aged 15 and the other 13) managed to escape because, when the Germans told the Poles to dig pits, the two boys had come up closer [and] taken up spades and later left together with the Poles. After that, the two boys made it to Będzin.

So, in this manner, the end had come to the Radomsko Ghetto, together with the Jews of the surrounding *shtetls*.

Along with eleven other comrades, I too was able to escape. We bought off the Germans with a vast sum of money. Going [about at large] was extremely dangerous, because the Nazi Central [Command] and police of all sorts were very strict. They frequently verified the identity of passers-by. Four of us eventually perished behind¹ the city. We hid out in a worker's house, hired a sledge and travelled off to Częstochowa.

In Częstochowa, the liquidation of the "Big Ghetto" had already taken place. It previously had held over 6,000 Jews - among them, many from Łódź, Warsaw and Płock. Officially, 5,500 Jews still remained as "working Jews", who worked in labour camps inside the city and its vicinity (HASAG-Raków), which were working for the German armaments cause.

The Częstochowa "Big Ghetto", which had been established in 1941, had encompassed (and included) the First *Aleja*, the Nowy Rynek [New Market], Nadrzeczna, Kozia and the surrounding streets. Once the Big Ghetto had been liquidated on 22nd September 1942, the "Small Ghetto" was left, which was on Nadrzeczna, Garncarska [and] Kozia. The Old and New Markets no longer belonged to the ghetto. No one was allowed to live there, including the Poles. Whoever was found there faced the death penalty. Only later - eight months after the deportation [and] following a rigorous inspection - were the Poles allowed to settle there.

When we arrived in Częstochowa, we no longer saw any children there, because the Germans only allowed those who worked to remain (only a few children remained then, whom [people] had

¹ [TN: The often-used Yiddish expression "behind the city" denotes a location just outside of town, most likely connected to the wind prevailing in the locality - a foul-smelling business (such as a tannery or abattoir) would be located "behind the city," meaning downwind from it.]

managed to hide in the bunkers). Men and women were not allowed to live on the same street. Men were on one street and women on the other.

In many places, when the ghettos were liquidated, all the Jews were herded into one location and sent away. In Częstochowa, it was different - the German, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Polish police went from house to house, took out the Jews [and] brought them to the freight carriages at the station, where the Gestapo were standing. They paid no heed as to whether one worked or not, who he was, what he was, age, gender, etc. The Nazi High Command was also there, and they decided who amongst the Jews would live and who would not. Most of the Jews were packed into the carriages and sent away to Treblinka.

They left 5,500 Jews^{*)} - selected quite randomly and predominantly young people. Part of the *Judenrat* was also sent away. The deportation took three weeks, due to a lack of carriages in which to send the Jews out. The carriages were brought back every other day to take the Jews. The deportation was conducted in horrifying silence - despair and exhaustion pervaded the masses. People knew that there was no salvation and no way out.

They would pack 150 Jews into one carriage and seal the door. In some cases, half of the passengers were asphyxiated due to the lack of air. Everyone stood in the carriages in the greatest of crowded conditions - [and] later on top of the corpses themselves.

The Germans threw the children into the carriages like balls, playing cruelly with them. Many children were killed in this diabolical "game". Many Jews committed suicide in their rooms when the Germans came to get them. There were a large number of intellectuals among those who killed themselves.

"This is our destiny", many said in despair.

On 4th January, on the eve of the liquidation of the Radomsko Ghetto, the Germans decided to round up the 300 Jews, who were just then not at work, and declared that they would be sent away to Radomsko^{*)}. That is when the resistance began. The first incident was when a *Ha'Chalutz* member pulled out a revolver and attempted to shoot a Nazi. But the Nazis around him threw themselves upon him. He tussled with a German policeman and severely wounded him. But, they overpowered the Jew and, as punishment, the Nazis shot every tenth Jew in the row. Twenty-seven Jews were shot. The rest were sent to Radomsko and, from there, with the others - to Treblinka.

I was in Częstochowa for several days. Every Jew in the ghetto wore not only a white patch, but also a tin number [plate]. This number signified that the Jew had been appointed for specific work.

The Germans would take a certain number (200-300) of Jews every week from the "Small Ghetto" and send them away to the labour camp in Skarżysko, where horrible conditions reigned [and] where people worked sixteen and eighteen hours a day. And, for this, the Jews were given fifteen or twenty *deka* [200 grams] of bread. Naturally, most could not withstand it, and the mortality rate was very great. Soon typhus also broke out.

The *Ha'Chalutz* youth decided to organise a defensive campaign. The most important issue was to procure weaponry and dynamite. This only met with partial success. Forty-five revolvers were acquired (most of them were bought on the Polish side, and [some] were also brought from our

^{*)} According to A. Izbicki's report, the number reached some 7,000. L. Brener reports 6,500. (The Editors)

^{*)} According to A. Izbicki's report, the Germans had received orders to supply 100 Jews to Skarżysko.

comrades in Warsaw). A stash of weapons was organised. A tunnel dozens of metres long was dug, leading from the "Small Ghetto" to the Polish side.

But the Germans discovered the bunker while most of them were still at work. Before they [were able to] look about them, the bunker was already surrounded by Nazis, and the Jews could no longer use the weapons. The Germans shot thirty members of our *kibbutz* (which was on ul. Nadrzeczna). The rest of the Jews were transferred to two factories behind the city, and they were not allowed to leave that place.

Some of the *Ha'Chalutz* youth had already earlier gone out into the forests of Złoty Potok and Koniecpol, to [lead] a partisans' war. Seeing as how it was difficult to make contact with the Polish partisans, they formed an independent Jewish partisan division. They carried out various operations against the Germans in the region, in the locations frequented by the Germans. The Jewish population was taxed [by the ŻOB] in order to purchase armaments. The Jewish partisans conducted operations against the Germans at the *Ostbahn*², where they destroyed [viz. dismantled] the rails and blew up the train connection³. Also, in the factories where the Jews worked, they carried out various acts of sabotage.

At the beginning of 1943, the German leader of the Jewish ghetto, Degenhardt, came to the chairman of the *Judenrat* and told him that there was permission for 150 Jews to travel to the Land of Israel, and that he was to register the Jewish intellectuals wishing to travel there. One hundred and fifty were in fact registered. These had already made preparations to take their belongings with them. They were taken outside the ghetto, [where] freight vehicles were already waiting for them, [and] they began taking them in the direction of Olsztyn. Since they were being taken in that direction, they already knew that they were going to be shot, because the Nazis would bring the Jews and Poles to the Olsztyn woods to be executed. Twenty-nine of those Jews managed to escape (including Kopiński's son). The other 131 were shot in the woods and buried there⁴. It was later discovered that this had been a special operation targeting the Jewish intelligentsia.

I only wish to add that the Jewish populace was intensively productive pending the deportation. Every Jew made efforts to work in a factory or workshop that were run by the Germans, in the hope that their lives would thus be saved. Nearly 95% of all adult Jews worked in factories, including in the very large ones. There were even plans to reinstitute the large Jewish communal agricultural farm, and the German *Stadthauptmann*, Dr Wendler, even agreed to this, [and] the *Judenrat* also declared its willingness to assist. A Jewish delegation travelled there, but the Germans drove them away - for even the Poles were not allowed to live there. The farm was settled by Germans, who conducted their own economy⁴ there.

² [TN: The "Eastern Railway" supplying men, weapons, etc. to the frontline in the East; it was also a forced labour workplace for Jews.]

³ [TN: We have rendered this literally; it is unclear whether the author simply means to say that the train service was disrupted as a result of tampering with the rails, or whether something was physically blown up with explosives - in which case the exact meaning of "train connection" is unclear.]

⁴ According to L. Brener's report, the mass-shooting of the Jewish intelligentsia took place at the cemetery.

⁴ [TN: Viz. they grew their own produce.]