

Testimony

- *taken (in [Kibbutz] Kiryat Anavim in July 1944)
from Abram Izbicki,
who arrived in the Land of Israel in May 1944.*

I left Poland at the start of 1944. The whole time since the [outbreak of] the World War, I was in Częstochowa and lived through all the persecutions and “resettlements” there. I was later forced to flee from Częstochowa and I hid in other Polish cities.

On Sunday, 3rd September 1939, German Panzer troops occupied Częstochowa. The entire Jewish population was in hiding. The first day after taking the city, the German soldiers behaved decently enough. They would also come to the Jewish streets, so that they could communicate more easily with the Jews. They would buy in Jewish shops and pay the exact price for everything. Many of them would come into the Jewish houses, giving out chocolates to the Jewish children. And, when some antisemites yelled, “Those are Jews!”, the soldiers would reply, “That is not important”. In this manner, the Jews were pacified a little and emerged from the cellars and hiding places. The shops that were still closed then opened and people prepared themselves to transition to a more normal life.

That was on the first day. But, immediately upon the second day, Monday, 4th September 1939, the situation changed radically. On Monday, at precisely 12:30 in the afternoon, as if by a given command, every German soldier, regardless of where he was, began shooting at the civilian population - including women and children. Over the course of just five minutes, all the streets - both where the Jews were living and also where there were Poles - were covered with dead bodies. This was, as we well know, “Bloody Monday”. Wishing to find a justification, the Germans fabricated the false charges that they had been shot at. Following this first mass-murder, the Germans ordered the entire civilian population to come out of their homes, into the street with their hands raised high. They were searched. Whoever moved from his place or attempted to go up to a child during the inspection - was shot on the spot. They took the Jewish and Polish populace to four points - to two barracks, to a church and to the prison (in Zawodzie). The crowding was such that, in the small cell where I was and which normally held six prisoners, there were 140 of us. They held us there for three days - with no food and no drink. In my cell, nine people had already died by the second day. Many died afterwards (after we were freed) from exhaustion.

In the large Catholic cathedral (next to the brewery), they mostly concentrated the Jews, because they lived in the neighbouring streets (Nadrzeczna, Garncarska, Strażacka, Ogrodowa, Berka Joselewicza [and] Nowy Rynek). The Germans fired shots into the church and a terrible panic broke out. Many Jews were killed then. The church’s entire grounds were in a pool of blood.

When (after three days) the population was released, the Germans ordered everyone to return to their occupations, declaring, “From now on, everything will be in order”. During these three days, while the population was being held by the Germans in the various points, the Nazis conducted searches in all the houses, and simply carried out a pogrom - they robbed anything of value that they could find. Over the course of these three days, many people were murdered in the different parts of the city.

A little later, the Germans began persecuting politically-active individuals, both Poles and Jews. Those, who suffered the most from this, were the intellectuals, workers and communal activists. Among the first fallen Jewish martyrs was Icek-Jakow [sic Jakow-Icek] Zarnowiecki, the leader of the former Independent Socialist Workers Party, who was, following the unification with *Poalei Zion*

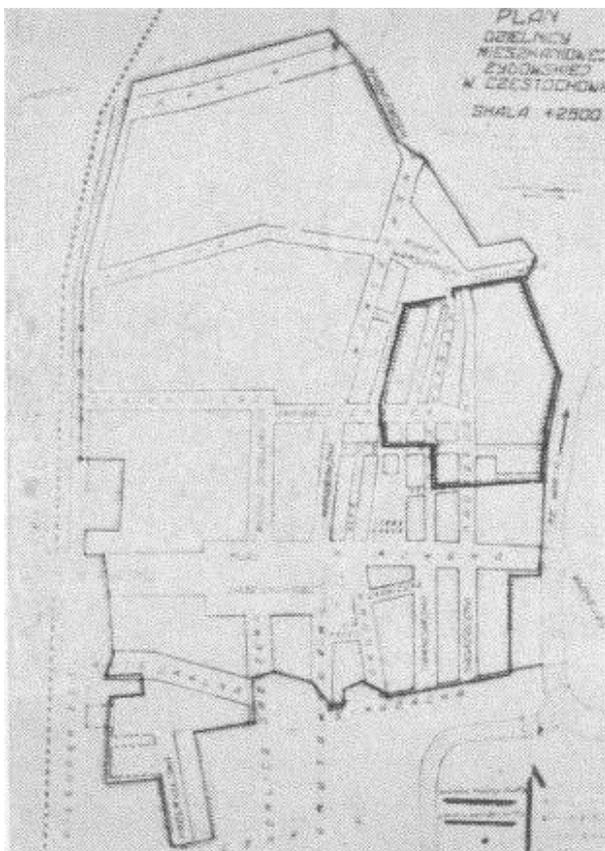
(Zionist Socialists), the secretary of the Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* Committee. Zarnowiecki organised the first Jewish kitchens, various cooperative institutions and would heroically aid the Jewish masses in the hardest of times. He raised everyone's courage and energy. The Germans sent him away to the concentration camp in Oświęcim - effectively death camp, where he was killed after prolonged torture. Afterwards, his wife in Częstochowa received an envelope from Oświęcim with some ashes. Mojsze Berkenstadt, the Bundist activist and member of the *Kehilla* Management Committee, also walked down that same road. The Revisionist activist Szmul Nemirowski met a similar fate.

Yet, by comparison with other cities, the situation in Częstochowa was much better. This was constantly brought home to us, because many refugees would arrive in our city - first of all, those from the Polish *shtetls* which had been annexed to the Third Reich (Łódź and the vicinity, Wieluń, Krzepice, Kłobuck, Pajęczno).

That is how the situation was until the summer of 1941, when the Germans began the war with Russia. Then, the period of "resettlements" began, meaning that the Jews were told to leave various *shtetls*, and to go wherever they wanted. Among others, the Jewish population of Płock - which had also met this fate - came to Częstochowa during this period. The Częstochowa Jews took in the Płock Jews with extraordinary kindness and warmth. They were given clothes and accommodation. The small children were taken into people's own homes [and] provided for. Yet, despite all this, the mortality rate of the Płock Jews was extraordinarily high (due to exhaustion and the suffering which they had endured). Every day, dozens of funerals would be held for the Jews of Płock.

The Residential Regulations Question

The matter of residential rights was a bizarre one, and changes were made several times - but always for the worse.

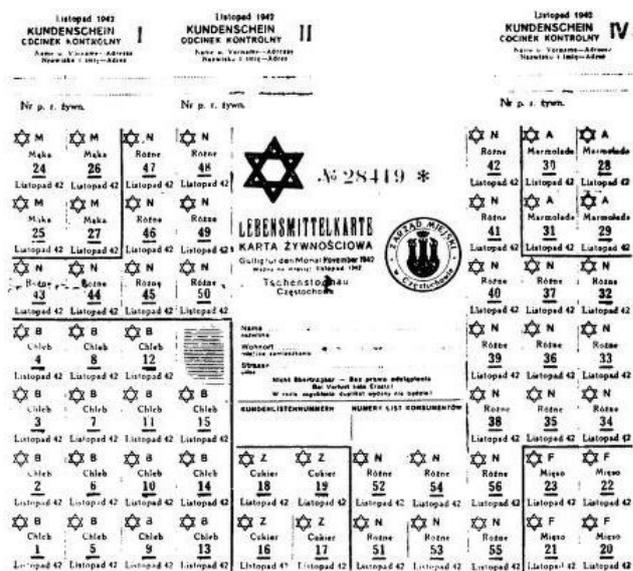


a) At first, Jews were forced to live within a designated quarter, but which was very large and encompassed most of the streets where the Jews had lived previously - starting from the railway bridge on the First Aleja, across the Old and New Markets, to the prison bridge in Zawodzie on one side, and from the bridge by Mottes' factory, across ul. Krakowska and Warszawska, up to the street of the "Three Crosses" (altogether, some sixty-odd streets).

Jews were allowed to occupy shops and workplaces also, outside the aforementioned streets, and Jews were permitted to go about freely in the entire city. There was no walled-in ghetto. The Germans even forbade calling the Jewish streets a "ghetto". It was called "*das Juden Wohnviertel*" [the Jewish residential quarter]. The Christians had the right to come inside here, and they traded with the Jews – under, needless to say, the pitiful conditions of the times, when people would sell earrings, a wedding ring or a watch for a small amount of chickpeas, flour or other necessities.

The map of the Big and Small Ghettos

b) During the second period (from the end of 1941), Jews were no longer permitted to have any shops or occupations inside the general parts of the city, but exclusively within the “*Juden Wohnvierte*”, where they were living. That said, the Christians still had the right to enter there. Jews could only go into the Christian parts of town with a special permit. All large Jewish businesses and enterprises were either completely taken over by the Germans, or continued under the Jewish firm - only with a German commissar. The Jewish owner was forced to work there as an employee. Various other individuals (Poles) were also employed as commissars, who had first become “Germans” only after the German occupation, such as Lesicki (a great merchant), Wołoszczyk (wholesale colonial goods shop; formerly a “*narodowiec*” [(Polish) nationalist]) and Władysław Bączek (previously a great coal merchant [and] active *Sanacja* figure). When the Jewish labourers, who performed different types of work at the orders of the Nazis, sometimes approached the latter requesting bread or a little water (if the Nazi controllers were not around), he replied that he did not understand any Polish at all. Moreover, he warned us of “consequences”, should we approach him again.



A bread card [TN: Besides bread itself, this card features coupons for rations of flour, meat, sugar, marmalade and “miscellaneous” items]

c) The third period began in March-April 1942. The ghetto was made much smaller. Under pains of death, the Christians were no longer allowed to enter the Jewish streets, which incidentally, had already received the designation of “ghetto.”

The hunger then was harshly felt. Black bread costed 36 złoty (2kgs. of potatoes - 4 złoty). Despite this, hungry Jews would leave the ghetto, to the Christian streets, to buy a little loaf of bread. When they were caught or denounced, they were shot on the spot. But the need was so dire that, the very next day, after an execution for such a “sin”, other Jews went outside the ghetto.

Parallel to this, the forced labour was intensified. Every day (seven days a week), all Jews - men and women between aged 15-55 - went to work at the *Ostbahn*, the power station, the water-management (regulating the rivers), the army staff, military construction sites, as well as in the heavy war industry and in industries essential to the [German] war [effort], such as Częstochowianka, Mottes and Enro (the former Jewish ironworks of the Rotsztajn brothers). Many Jews were deliberately sent to the two largest factories, formerly Raków and Pelcery, which had now been unified as a “Göring enterprise”¹ under the name “HASAG”.

d) During the fourth period, the ghetto was reduced even further, and all the streets (for example ul. Tartakowa, Krakowska, Strażacka [and] Wilsona), which “cut into” the Christian neighbourhoods, as it were, were divided. The ghetto became “rounded” and was strategically prepared specifically for the upcoming persecutions and murders.

The Liquidation

The state of the Jews progressively worsened even more. Young men, aged 16-30, were sent away in special trains to various labour camps outside Częstochowa, such as, for instance, Skarżysko, in the

¹[TN: The “*Reichswerke Hermann Göring*” was an industrial steelworks conglomerate of Nazi Germany.]

Lublin region [and] later to the Radomsko region (Topisz²[and] Gidle). Day in and day out, we would receive ever more terrible news about them. The mortality rate among them grew. Shortly before the destruction (September 1942), they were brought back to Częstochowa, so that they should go, together with all of us, to be murdered in the most horrific manner.

At the beginning of September 1942, rumours began to spread to the effect that, on 22nd September, the liquidation of Częstochowa Jewry would take place. All trembled with fear, because the earlier rumours regarding the liquidation of the Włoszczowa *shtetl* (a neighbouring *shtetl*) - had [indeed] come to pass. As a consequence, the panic became several times greater. Jews took the best possessions they owned - merchandise, jewellery, money - over to Christians, so that, when the calamity arrived, they should be able to hide out with the Poles, or be saved by them in some manner or other.

On Yom Kippur Eve [*Erev Yom Kippur*], the *Hauptmann* [Captain] of the *Schutzpolizei*, the SS Major³ Degenhardt, summoned to him the Chairman of the *Judenrat*, J.L.⁴ Kopiński. Before the War, Degenhardt had lived in Dąbrowa Górnicza, where he had his property and assets. He is a sixty-year old man with a higher education, exceptionally well-mannered and deems himself a great intellectual and aristocrat. (He has a scratch on his right cheek, presumably from a duel.) He played a gruesome role in the murder of the Jews in Częstochowa and the neighbouring towns. He was commissar of the special 7th SS Division⁵ (*Judenabteilung* [Jews Division]).

Upon summoning the Chairman of the *Judenrat*, Degenhardt asked him to convey his holiday greetings to the entire Częstochowa Jewish population. He stated that he was aware of the atmosphere of panic among the Częstochowa Jews, but that it was absolutely groundless. He knew that the Częstochowa Jews had the best reputation with the German authorities - that they worked in the factories and that, at that precise moment, the military had placed very large orders in those branches of industry in which the Jews were working. In conclusion, he asked Kopiński to calm down the Jews and that they place their trust in him, adding, "I am, after all, their father and I care about them". In the highest of confidence, he told Kopiński that, on the 27th of that month, there would in fact be news in Częstochowa, but not concerning the Jews - 10,000 Christians would be sent to work in Germany, digging up potatoes. At that same time, thousands of young SS *Totenkopf*⁶ men arrived - but many took this to mean that the Poles were [in fact] being sent to work in Germany, because that was, after all, what Degenhardt had assured.

The Jews went to *Kol Nidrei*⁷ with a heavy heart. My mother said to me, "Even if, until the Yom Kippur of next year, we should have worse times yet, but we only come out alive - [then] we will survive already". With their prayer-shawls, the Jews went to the clandestine study-halls. They wept terribly, like small children, raising their hands to Heaven in the study-halls, pleading for mercy. Having cried their fill, after *Neilah*⁸, the people returned to their rooms. Everyone kissed each other and, tearfully, wished one another that this second year should be a more fortunate one - [or] at least, a year of staying alive. Exhausted after the fast, the people lay down to sleep. The youth continued standing in groups long into the night, talking about the fact that the Nazi promises were not to be believed.

² [TN: River near Radomsko (nowadays a wildlife park), where the Nazis put forced labourers to work.]

³ [TN: Paul Degenhardt was an SS Hauptsturmführer, a rank equivalent to a captain in the military.]

⁴ [TN: As Kopiński's Gentile name was Leon ("Lion"), it is most likely that his Jewish name was Juda-Lajb. This compound name is made up of the biblical name Judah - of whom Scripture says "Judah is a lion's whelp" (Genesis 49:9) - and the Yiddish Lajb, or "lion."]

⁵ [TN: We have as yet been unable to identify this division.]

⁶ [TN: Almost certainly ref. to the "SS-Totenkopfverbände" ("Death's Head Units"), the SS body responsible for administering the Nazi concentration camps, extermination camps, and similar duties.]

⁷ [TN: "All Vows"; opening prayer of the first Yom Kippur service, which is held on Yom Kippur Eve at dusk.]

⁸ [TN: "Closing (of the Gates)"; final prayer at the close of Yom Kippur.]

On that same night, the fate of Częstochowa Jewry was sealed. At three o'clock in the morning, the ghetto was surrounded by several rings of hooligans: first, by the Ukrainians - murderers who had been trained specifically for this purpose (they were young men aged 16-25). Alongside them, stood the German gendarmerie. Further off, stood the Polish police [and even] further, in a tight-packed circle, stood the Nazi police with heavy machine-guns. Within these three rings, it was swarming with Gestapo agents. A large number had come from the neighbouring cities (Kielce, Radomsko [and] Radom). They drove about in the streets on motorcycles, checking if everything was in order and in adherence with directives.

News of this spread among the population. One felt death hovering in the air. Scenes of desperation were played out. People wrung their hands, [and] no longer had anything to breathe. That night, a chapter of suicides began. The first one to take his own life was Zalman Windman (Zalman the Baker) of ul. Garncarska 22. When someone tried to break out of the ghetto, he was shot on the spot by the Ukrainians. Nevertheless, some of the Jews still managed to pass through the Ukrainian line, and they thought that they had already saved themselves. But they immediately came up against the second line, where the Germans were standing, shooting with machine-guns. In this manner, that night, hundreds of Jews were shot.

At seven o'clock in the morning, all the Jews were ordered to leave their homes and present themselves, in a row, in the street. Each one was permitted to take along a 10 kg. pack. According to houses and blocks, they were taken to the marketplace (*Nowy Rynek*). The Gestapo divisions, headed by the aforementioned Degenhardt, were already standing there. He decided the fate of each individual Jew - with his stick, he indicated who should go to the left - these were taken directly to the carriages at the "Warta" station [on ul.] Towarowa - or pointed to go straight ahead, in the direction of the *Aleja*. The latter were taken, along ul. Wilsona, to the factory buildings of Landau and the *Metalurgia*. It was to this group that I was designated. These Jews, almost exclusively young people, had been chosen to remain in the city in order to carry out the liquidation of the ghetto. In this, Degenhardt did not take any criterion into account, [such as] whether one had a profession and a work card or not. He told one to go left and the other straight - at random. When members of one family did not wish to be separated - and many of those whom Degenhardt told to go "straight" (viz. to remain in the city) preferred to go "left" (that is, to their deaths) rather than be separated from their children and wives - the Nazi leader purposely ordered those Jews to stay put, laughing cynically while doing so. He taunted the people who were being deported, saying, "Have no fear - he will come to you later. You will all meet in dear God's heaven".

Patients in the hospital were shot first thing in the morning. Elderly and infants, who were at home and were unable to leave their homes, were later shot on the spot. The small children, who were in the orphanage, were murdered then and there, alongside the old people [in the aged care home].

Each group of those transported to their deaths consisted of 7,000 people, who were crammed into sixty freight carriages. Then, the Germans paused for two days, until the return of the train - into which another 7,000 Jews were once more packed. These transports continued in the same manner during four whole weeks.

After the first month, the transports departed less often and in smaller groups, because these were the Jews who had hidden in the cellars, attics, etc. The Germans discovered them by searching everywhere, with the aid of trained police hounds. Groups were put together from these people, concentrating them in the courtyard of ul. Katedralna 11, and they were later deported.

Those Remaining

Those remaining in *Metalurgia* (7,000 Jews) were divided into various groups, and were sent out to different military departments, such as to the *Luftwaffe* [Air Force], [or to the] *Armee Dienststelle* [Army Department]. We worked there and also stayed to sleep at night, always heavily guarded by the German gendarmerie. Degenhardt, or his representative, Foreman [Felix] Rohn, would come there. They, once again, "sifted through" the Jews and left only 4,000 of the 7,000. In doing so, Degenhardt and Rohn intentionally separated family members - sending one to his death and ordering the other to continue living, even though the hapless Jew in question would have preferred to go to his death together with his whole family.

For the remaining Jews, the Germans made a new ghetto - quite a small one, fenced with barbed wire and heavily guarded by Ukrainians, Germans and Poles. The ghetto consisted of the streets ul. Nadrzeczna (from numbers 48 to 90), ul. Garncarska ([from] Straus' building to the end of the street) and ul. Kozia (from Fajga's candle factory to the Rynek Warszawski). That is where the Jews were brought. Every morning, under police escort, they were led to work - mainly liquidating the previous ghetto. The Jews, who had hidden in the streets of the newly-designated ghetto, seeing that Jews were living here once again, emerged from their hideouts. The Gestapo did nothing to them - on the contrary, Degenhardt declared that he was very happy that there were more Jews. He ordered that they be treated well, especially the elderly and children. A few Jews from the surrounding *shtetls*, who had been hiding in the woods, also presented themselves at the new downsized Czestochowa ghetto. If, until then, the Germans had shot on the spot every hidden Jew whom they found or was denounced, now it was quite the opposite, Now, nothing was done to these Jews, but [instead] they were brought into the ghetto. Hundreds of Jews, who had hidden in the fields, and especially in the burnt and abandoned houses, or who had tried to save themselves by jumping off trains, were reported, by various Poles, to the agents of the Gestapo. In this manner, the number of Jews, who presented themselves, reached 7,000. Besides these, there remained a certain number of old people and children whose family members did not wish to "sign them up", but kept them hidden with them. At night, they would be given bread and water.

Early one morning, Degenhardt arrived, ordered that the Jew Galster (from the "*aprowizacja*" [provisioning] of the *Judenrat*) be brought before him and, with a revolver in his hand, stated these words to him, "If the poor Jewish children continue to be so badly provisioned and cared for, you will be shot. What fault of the small children is the War, which is a misfortune from God?" To this, Galster replied that, after all, he had no possibility of giving them more products, to which Degenhardt responded, "Yes, you are right about that", and he ordered that, henceforth, Galster be given special rations of milk and eggs for the children.

When news of this spread in the ghetto, people began registering the children who had been hidden. From then on, day in and day out, the children were indeed given special rations of milk and eggs. Shortly afterwards, Degenhardt came to the ghetto and said that "if he knew for sure that there were several women to take good care of the children, he would free them (the women) from their work, in order that they should occupy themselves solely with the children". Special living quarters, on ul. Kozia, were given over for the young children, who numbered more than a hundred. The children were treated well there. Degenhardt would come there every day. He would bring the children presents and pat them on their little heads.

After some time (in December 1942), on an uncommonly frosty day, Degenhardt came to the children's house and ordered the gendarmerie to bring the children to the police guardroom, which was at Town Hall in the Rynek Warszawski. Seeing that a number of children, who were registered in

the list, were missing, he commanded the *Judenrat* to bring the rest of the children there within two hours, and if not - they would be shot.

The children were brought. They were immediately flung like stones onto manure carts and sent away to their deaths.

Before that, they also stripped the children half-naked and took away their garments. Many children already froze while still on the wagons because, just then, it was one of the harshest frosts. And Degenhardt personally stood by, his face beaming with joy as a sign that, this time, it had "worked out well".

At the start of January 1943, at ten o'clock in the morning, when the Jews were outside the ghetto, Degenhardt's representative, Rohn, ordered all those who had been left in the ghetto for different home economy duties (cooking, peeling potatoes, transporting rubbish, fetching coal from the cellars, etc.) to stand in a row. I, too, was among these - together with my younger brother. Soldiers arrived. Several people among us were told to get onto the vehicles. It later emerged that the Germans had received orders to provide one hundred Jews to the labour camp in Skarżysko. But, at the time, as we stood in the rows, we began to think that we were, in fact, being sent away to Treblinka.

At that moment, one of us left one of the rows - a twenty-year-old lad from Radomsko, Mendel Fiszlewicz. He was a member of *Ha'Chalutz* [and] belonged to the local *kibbutz*, where we had begun to arm ourselves and planned an armed struggle. Fiszlewicz came out holding a revolver and, together with a few others, set upon the Nazi representative Rohn, meaning to shoot him. But the revolver jammed. Another comrade did manage to shoot, but did not hit Rohn. The gendarmerie shot this comrade then and there. Then Fiszlewicz fell upon Rohn, tackled him to the ground and struck him on the head with the revolver, making him bleed. When Rohn managed to extricate himself, Fiszlewicz hid amongst the crowd. The gendarmerie commanded that the offender be handed over. When we failed to do so, the soldiers raised their rifles in our direction. Then, Fiszlewicz, himself came out and declared, "Here I am, you filthy dog!". Rohn and the other Nazis shot Fiszlewicz on the spot.

Soon, a division of the gendarmerie and Gestapo men arrived and, as punishment, decided to shoot every tenth Jew then and there. On purpose, my brother and I stood one next to the other, so that if one of us was shot as tenth man in the row, at least the other one would remain alive. I was one of the twenty-three chosen to be shot.

We, the twenty-three, were divided into two groups. The first group of eleven men were stood up against the wall in the Rynek Warszawski. The soldiers were positioned opposite them. We still thought that, perhaps, they might not shoot them after all. But the soldiers were given the command "Shoot!", and all eleven fell. Whoever was still breathing was shot a second time. Among them was the lawyer Rozensztajn, Lajzer Trembacki [and] the baker Wiernik.

Then the second group was told to go to the wall. I was among them. But already none of us wished to go voluntarily. One threw himself on the ground. Another was dragged to the wall by his hair. Two of our group started to run, and jumped over the [barbed] wire. The Germans were shooting at them.

And, while all the attention was focused on the runaways, in their direction, I began to pull back towards the crowd of Jews who were in the square and who had been forced to witness the

execution. I succeeded and, in this manner, I was then saved from death. We were led back into the ghetto, and a certain number of us were sent away to the labour camp in Skarżysko.

A few hours later, rumours reached me to the effect that Rohn had counted the murdered and noticed that one was missing and that he knew his name. As a result, I already no longer went to work and, for several days, hid in a stable filled with sacks and old things. I later found out that the rumour had been false. But, due to my long absence, I had already become "un-kosher" to the Germans anyway. As a consequence, I came to the decision I would flee over the ghetto fence - even though I knew that the odds were 99% against me. Nevertheless, I succeeded.
