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Jews Deported to Germany via Częstochowa

The arrestees were taken from Tomaszów to Radomsko and from Radomsko to Częstochowa. The road to Radomsko was a good one - even a happy one, one might say. The skies had cleared up, the scent of greenery, woods and orchards was all around, and the experiences one had lived through became a little lighter on the heart. There was also food to eat that day, because the Bundist women from Tomaszów had brought so much food, that there was also enough for one to take along.

Radomsko was the first city that looked almost like a complete ruin. On the road, [one saw] shot-up and knocked-down houses, and entire streets [were] smoking mountains of ash and bricks. The heart was saddened once more. The feelings of one's own misery blended with sorrow for the surrounding devastation, but there was no opportunity to dwell [on this] at length, for the vehicle proceeded onwards - to Częstochowa.

Were the Jews tortured here? The refined pain to which they were subjected here had been so cunningly devised, that it appeared as if everything happened of its own accord. But the part taken by Hitler's beasts in these torments - in these painful "chance events" - was thoroughly clear. These "accidents", of course, were not coincidental, but a refined system of torture. Besides, there was no lack of overt torturing.

Częstochowa looked almost normal. It was mainly the proletarian suburbs that had suffered from the bombardment and, in the city centre through which the arrestees were led, there were scant signs of the bombings.

It seems that enormous parties of prisoners [of war] and civilian prisoners passed through Częstochowa because, on the city's high street, a Christian relief committee worked very assiduously, giving out bread, sausage and tea to those being led through [town]. Hundreds of old and young Christian women were positioned along the pavements, working very diligently at distributing the products. Polish girls went from individual to individual, from vehicle to vehicle, offering everyone a portion of food - without differentiating between Christian and Jew. They did this with all their hearts, but almost wordlessly. Only a few of them let out a halting, broken word, filled with anguish and empathy. Every time, someone else lifted up a hand to brush away a tear rolling down the girl's cheek.

Yet seldom did any Jew get something to eat. Indeed, the Polish girls and Polish womenfolk in general made no distinction between Jew and Christian - those, who did make this distinction, were the evil Nazi hands that were guarding the captives. As soon as a girl approached a group of Jews, one such hand would start to drive her away with words, and if the words were to no avail - [then] with the rifle.

"Nicht gestattet. Hier sind Juden." [(It is) not allowed. (These) here are Jews.]

According to the Jewish calendar, it was the eve of *Rosh Ha'Shanah*¹ (14th September [1939]). But even the religious Jews among the prisoners did not know the correct date at the time. Only once they had been locked up in some murky underground hole - in some mouldy, putrid cellar - did a few Jews remember that it was *Erev Rosh Ha'Shanah*.

¹ [TN: Pronounced "Rosh Ha'Shuneh" by Polish Jews; we have used the more well-known modern Hebrew pronunciation.]

Several hundred Jews were crammed here, into this cellar. Here, they were sentenced to spend forty-eight whole hours together. There was enough standing space for maybe two hundred people. But this was too great a luxury for such "accursed Jews". They pushed several hundred people in, as stated. Nobody knew exactly how many people were in that cellar during the forty-eight hours. Counting them was impossible and no one had the head for it. What these hundreds of Jews experienced here, during those forty-eight hours, was a true hell.

At first, no one understood the suffering that was in store for them. That it was crowded, everyone felt from the first minute onwards. But, when one hour passed and then another and it became clear that they had not been crammed in for minutes or hours but for a lengthier period, everyone was seized by terror. Just think of it - you cannot stand, sit or stretch out an arm. After two hours of imprisonment in the cellar, it became so stuffy that there was nothing to breathe. The sweat poured from everyone in buckets, but it was even impossible to take off one's clothes, because people were pressed together so tightly that one could not move a hand.

The people stood, all night long, packed together like herrings in a barrel, drenched in perspiration, breathing with great difficulty. The hope smouldered in everyone that, in the early morning the situation would change and all would be led away to resume their journey. People can never know what might, at one point, become their greatest hope. That night, the few hundred Jews saw such an elementary thing as a little common fresh air as their greatest ideal. No one thought that night about the fact that he was hungry. Everyone was thirsty, but no one made a fuss about that - the most horrifying thing, that night, was the feeling that they had all been locked up in the cellar so that, there, they should lack air and thus perish.

A few people managed - by employing a series of gymnastic movements - to pull off their jackets and shirts. During this mutual contact, one was bathed in the perspiration pouring from the other's body. People spoke little amongst themselves. But the few words, that *were* uttered, revolved around one single question - a little air.

Exhausted [and] worn out, some fell asleep on another's sweaty shoulder - standing up, of course. Some middle-aged Chassidic Jew in a far corner apparently remembered that it was *Rosh Ha'Shanah*, and began quietly and sadly to hum the melodies of the High Holidays. All at once, the floodgates opened up - wailing broke out in the cellar, as in a women's section in a synagogue. At first, a few sobbed - then it became a general cry.

In this manner, the horrible night passed, but morning brought no salvation. Hour after hour passed. Through the cellar's little square windows one could see the sunny day outside, but it occurred to no one to open the doors and let the prisoners out into the open. Food and drink were obviously out of the question - that had not been given to them during the whole way here.

The prisoners began to speak openly amongst themselves about a revolt - the people were breathing with their last strength. In moments like these, in people who are united, a strange, often times unfounded, stubbornness for life is awakened - to hold out just to spite their oppressors. Indeed, people spoke amongst themselves in the cellar to the effect that something needed to be done, that they could not let themselves be tortured.

"Come what may", some of the arrestees said in desperation, "but we must give the Nazis to understand that we will defend ourselves".

The brain was clouded. Everyone's minds were working sluggishly. No one even made an effort to analyse, in his thoughts, [what] the expediency of any offensive whatsoever [would be]. As if of its own accord, a roar of several dozen voices suddenly broke out, "Water! Water! We're dying!"

The face of a young German Nazi appeared in one of the little windows. "Was los?" [What (is) wrong?], he inquired, as if he did not understand what was going on here. Several dozen voices shouted up at the window. One rang pleading, another with anger. One could not make out the words. It all merged into one great shout, "Air! Air! Air! Water! We're dying!"

The Nazi said nothing in response. The face disappeared from the window. For a while, there was silence both in the cellar and outside. But just for a short while – a few seconds. The laughter of several voices resounded outside. The Nazi had apparently told his comrades there about what was happening in the cellar, and they - the 20th century's beasts in human form - reacted to it with laughter.

Another while passed - this time, a longer one - and, in the tense silence that reigned in the cellar, one could hear several Nazis busying themselves near the little windows. All at once, a stream of water gushed through one of the windows. It hit the heads of those standing nearest with a rousing freshness. As if someone had given them the greatest satisfaction, a shout of pleasure sprung forth from all their breasts – "Aaah!"

A commotion ensued in the cellar. People started pushing towards the windows, [and] began shouting to the Nazis to also let the water in through the other windows.

The Nazis did not need to be asked [twice], and they showed their "kind heartedness", by letting an endless amount of water in through all the windows. All were already standing to their ankles in water, but everyone pleaded with them not to stop pouring. The hydrant outside worked dutifully. Everyone stood drenched, like cats. Clothes were pasted to bodies and soaked to the last thread. Still, at first, no one was bothered by this. There were some in the cellar who caught the water in mid-air in their hands and brought it to their lips. A kind of water-madness pervaded the cellar.

Only once the hydrant had been shut off and the frenzy subsided, did everyone first begin to feel the curse that the relief had brought with it - all were standing ankle-deep in water. Those captives, who were still wearing their shoes, felt this plague with the least pain. But everybody soon sensed that the Nazis had bestowed a little water upon them - [only] in order to turn the blessing into a curse.

However, a new hope flashed up - the door to the cellar opened, and two young, smiling Nazis appeared on the threshold. "Sind sie Arbeitsjuden? Arbeitsjuden heraus!" [Are you working Jews? Working Jews out!]

When the door was opened, a stream of fresh air rushed in, awakening, in people's minds, a burning desire to break out of the cellar at all costs. Almost everyone rushed to the door, without exception. All shouted that they were "Arbeitsjuden". Only a few obstinate religious individuals did not attempt to get out, because they did not wish to desecrate the awe-inspiring days of *Rosh Ha'Shanah*. But also many of those, who rushed to the door, were forced to remain inside. The Nazis counted off several dozen people and led them outside.

When they returned two hours later, they presented a picture of broken men. They had, indeed, freshened up a little outside, but what they recounted in broken voices was horrifying - they had been tortured outside with refined sadism.

One group had been taken deep into the courtyard to some filthy latrine, which was not only full of faeces on the inside, but on the outside as well. Apparently, great masses of people had cleaned themselves there in the last few days, and no one had cleared out the faeces. Even around the wooden latrine building lay whole mountains of excrement and the stench that wafted all around was unbearable.

The Jews were forced to clean the excrement with their hands. The Hitler-beasts stood at a distance, mocking them. During the course of the “work”, they thought up something else. At a certain moment, for instance, they forced the Jews to “play” at baking pastries - they had to shape little cakes with the faeces! Then they forced them to taste the “pastries”. Others were simply made to smear their faces with the muck. The beasts were greatly pleased with all that they had thought up and, when the tormented people began vomiting, the Nazis burst out with braying as gleeful as [that of] African cannibals.

Another group was led off to some other corner of the courtyard and, there, they conducted lethal exercises with them! They were forced to run at a super-human speed, walk on their knees, move their legs like speed racers on bicycles, and so on.

With the cyclists, it had not been so straightforward. Before that, they had lined the groups up and asked who could ride a bicycle and, only once ten young lads had willingly stepped forward for this, did they put them through these “exercises”.

At the end, they lined everybody up and made them hit one another. First, one simply gave the other a blow. Then, the one who had been struck had to hit the hitter back, because he, the hitter, had dared to strike him. And after all this, the Nazis pummelled them both, as punishment for having hit each other too weakly.

These two days, that the Jews had spent in the Częstochowa cellar and courtyard of torture which we have described here, were truly “Terrible Days”² for them. The following day, already no one wished to go to work, but they were forced out with rubber truncheons. People could barely stand on their feet for hunger and lack of air - they fainted *en masse*. They wished death upon themselves a thousand times.

But death did not come. The reserves in the human organism are inexhaustible - after these two horrific days, the people were standing on their feet despite everything.

When, after *Rosh Ha'Shanah*, they led everybody out of the cellar and took them to the train, they dragged themselves like shadows - but no one lagged behind. They were no longer people, but a meek herd.

How much a person can still endure!

They did not yet know then that they were still very, very far from the end...

² [TN: The Hebrew term for “High Holidays” – Yamim Noraim (ימים נוראים) – can mean both “Days of Awe” and “Terrible Days.”]