

A.L. Bomba

My Escape from Treblinka



Everyone, who worked in Treblinka, went around with a plan to escape, but carrying the plan out was a very difficult task. Firstly, one had to have a great deal of money and that was one of the most difficult things to obtain, as anyone found with even one *złoty* or other valuables, would be directly shot. In addition, one had to choose with whom to escape, because one feared to let the vapour from one's mouth out about escaping - even to the best, good friend. [Even if] one already had all this, one of the hardest tasks was how to go about [actually] rescuing oneself from Treblinka.

We were a group made up of Hersz Goldsztajn, Herszel Kaufman, Chaskel Kaufman, Izaak Zajdman, Jechiel Berkowicz, Lajbel Rozental (*Schnellzug* [Express-train]), Jankiel Ajzner and me. Once it became known that I was a barber, from time to time, I would cut the hair of the *kapo* Benjamin Rakowski, and also that of the head *kapo*, Blaj. The *kapo* Rakowski came from Jędrzejów and he was fond of me because I resembled one of his brothers, whom I had aided to escape from Treblinka with ten other people - all from the city of Jędrzejów. By the way, from this group of eleven people, only one survived - Lajbisz Pleszewski, who, to this day, lives in the State of Israel. This Rakowski directed me to work in his brother's place, at the barrack, and I took in another ten men to take the place of those who had escaped. There, it was possible for me to gather money and valuables. Thus we, the aforementioned group, stockpiled in a large rucksack until, on a certain day, we decided that *Tonight we will escape!*

We wrapped the rucksack very carefully in a quilt, to convey the impression that we were taking a quilt with us into the barrack, where we slept, in order to cover ourselves. After roll-call, when it was very dark, we crawled out of the barrack on our bellies. The first was Izaak Zajdman, then Hersz Goldsztajn and then me. When we were already some twenty metres from the barrack, we saw two Ukrainians threw themselves upon Izaak Zajdman. When we saw that they were not shooting him, but just speaking with him, we drew back into the barrack. They immediately entered the barrack with Izaak Zajdman and ordered the commander* (this was Engineer Galewski from Warsaw, a Jewish apostate) that all the people of the barrack were to go out onto the [assembly] square. When we emerged, we were put in [rows of] four and the two Ukrainians led Zajdman out, so he should say who else had been with him. But Zajdman did not betray anyone. They talked for a while with the commander about something, after which they ordered everyone to go back inside the barrack. It would seem that the sack of money they had taken from Zajdman had enticed them and they did not inform the German SS.

A couple of days later, we again began gathering money and planned to escape. Once more, we had a considerable sack of money. [Then,] Lajbel Rozental approaches me, saying that he wanted half of the rucksack with money. He was escaping with someone from Warsaw and [said] that we were too large of a group. He had found out that the man from Warsaw knew the road by which to escape. I discussed with Hersz Goldsztajn as to what I should do. Hersz told me to give Lajbel half of the rucksack with money and that is what I did. Lajbel took the money and, at roll-call, we already did not see him,

* [TN: In the historical sources, he appears as having been the camp's "Lageraltester" (Camp Senior Prisoner), or Head *Kapo*, before Rakowski. That said, as in our text he is invariably referred to as "kommandant," we shall use "commander," albeit in a loose sense.]

nor in the barrack to sleep. That meant that perhaps he had succeeded in escaping - or that he had been shot.

Some four weeks later, [as] we are going to work in the morning, a certain Kuzecki (his father was a cobbler in the Old Market) comes up to me and tells me that Lajbel Rozental had returned. I thought that he had lost his mind. How did he mean, "Lajbele's back?". I enter the barrack where we worked, sorting tresses [of hair]. I take a look. It *was* true, Lajbele *Schnellzug* was back in Treblinka. I ask him, "What happened? Why have you come back?". He tells me it was for our sake that he returned, because he wished to show us the escape route. Soon, the entire camp knew that someone had stolen back into the camp.

Commander Galewski, who also dreamed of how one could escape, came up and spoke with him and instructed him to return to work.

At night, in the barrack, we grilled him as to how he had escaped and by which route one could flee. He glances at us and says that only one of us can escape. That is Hersz Goldsztajn, because he looks like a Christian. He also showed us an identity card in the name of a Christian living in Praga, near Warsaw.

It was not long before Commander Galewski summoned Lajbel and spoke with him for hours, late into the night. When Lajbel came back to our group, he told us that the commander had grilled him on how one could escape.

The following morning, when we were going to work, I noticed that Lajbele was consorting with the *kapos* of the camp and that they gave him something, which he very quickly concealed. When the day passed and we returned to the barrack, Lajbele *Schnellzug* was no longer there. At once, we understood that Lajbel had again escaped, but that he had not taken anyone with him - not even Hersz Goldsztajn, who looked like a Christian.

Lajbel was in Praga, near Warsaw and, later, in Wola [a suburb of Warsaw]. But a couple of months later, Lajbele was brought back to Treblinka, in a convoy of Jews. By then, people were no longer being selected for work, so that the entire convoy, [together] with Lajbele, was killed in the gas chambers.

My friend Boraks from Radomsko told me this later. When Lajbele was brought back to Treblinka, I was no longer there, as I had already escaped.

On the day following Lajbele's escape, we saw that the SS men were going about, whispering to each other. I understood that someone had let the SS know what had transpired here - that a Jew had broken in to steal money and had fled back out with a great deal of money, and that the commander had also had a conversation with him.

We soon saw the SS men summon the commander. They shouted at him and let him have it over the head with their boots. He [tried] justifying himself a little and they went directly over to the group in which I was working. And here, the commander pointed at Szlojme Czapnik, Hersz Goldsztajn, the two Fajner brothers from ul. Warszawska, the two from Piotrków and at me.

They led us away from the working group, but *kapo* Rakowski at once came running and said something to the commander. The commander came over to me and asked me if I was the barber. I said that I was. He said, "Pardon me, I didn't mean you", and told me to go back to work. The six other men were led to the *lazaret* [infirmery], where they were shot. As I understood it, the *kapo* Rakowski had repaid me for helping his brother to escape.

The day following these events, I noticed that *kapos* were speaking about something and constantly looking at the group in which I was working. Chaskel Kaufman, Jankiel and Jechiel Berkowicz were working with me. A little further away, Mojsze Rapoport, Szymon Amsterdam and the Wolman brothers (they were called "the comedians of ul. Kozia") were working.

We talked it over and decided that three men should escape - Mojsze Rapoport, Jankiel Ajzner and one of the two brothers who had worked for Neufeld at the *skład apteczny* [pharmaceutical warehouse (in Częstochowa)]. I do not recall their names. We could not send two brothers together because, if one did not succeed, the second could try his luck - maybe the second would make it.

Prior to roll-call, they concealed themselves in the piles of things that were there. This was on a Thursday. On the morning, it was quiet at work, from which we understood that the three comrades had successfully escaped. We decided that, on Saturday night, we - me, Jechiel Berkowicz and Chaskel Kaufman - would attempt to escape.

As Chaskel Kaufman was with a brother Herszel, it was decided that he, Chaskel, [and not his brother,] would be in the group.

On Saturday, all day long we made a bunker. We took turns every hour so that, by roll-call, we had completed the bunker.

Before roll-call, as we were hurrying to hide ourselves, we noticed that someone was snooping around too much in the same place where we had the bunker. This was a certain man who had collaborated with the Gestapo in Częstochowa. His name was Kolenbrener. We pulled back, understandably, and decided to go into the bunker a day later, on Sunday.

On Sunday, we calmly worked [through] the day and, in the evening, hid ourselves in the bunker. After roll call, Ukrainians and the SS snoopied about, searching if anyone had concealed themselves. From the hiding place, we saw that they were stabbing things through with the lances and checking if anyone was not hiding.

We observed that, after a few minutes of searching, they left the square and we breathed a little more freely. We lay there thus for a couple of hours, until we decided to crawl out. The only place through which it was possible to escape was the infirmary, because there were only a couple of barbed wires there. We scraped out of the hiding place on our stomachs and [began] crawling. The fire in the infirmary burned on the side and we crawled to the barbed fence. The first to crawl over was Jechiel Berkowicz, the next was me and then Chaskel Kaufman. On the other side, there were watchtowers with searchlights. The searchlights were on, but there was no one inside [the towers]. We rolled [slithered?] on our stomachs in this manner for a couple of hundred metres and then we stood up and began to run. We ran for hours into the night, until two in the morning - until we heard, not far from us, talk in Ukrainian. We realised that we were in the camp, at the Ukrainians' [billets]. This meant that, during five hours, we had run in circles and that we had not progressed more than one kilometre at most.

Immediately, we turned into another direction and began running, until we came to a river. That was the [River] Bug. We were six kilometres from Treblinka. It was about five o'clock in the morning and soon dawn began breaking. From some way off, we noticed a rural cabin. Jechiel Berkowicz went in and soon emerged, telling us what the peasant woman had told him - that the entire area was surrounded by the Gestapo and that we needed to flee immediately in another direction.

We began running until we came to a bridge. This was the Malkina Bridge but, in the distance, we noticed a German guard. We feared crossing this bridge. It was already broad daylight. At nine o'clock in the morning, we decided to hide in a pit in a field until nightfall and to continue running at night.

As we lay in the field inside the pit, we saw a peasant pass by in a wagon. We called him over and told him that we had escaped from Treblinka and would it be possible for him to take us into his barn. He tells us that he must ride to work. We asked him if perhaps we could pay him for the work. We finally convinced him. He pointed out his barn to us from afar and we went inside. But he knows nothing about this. If we are asked, we are to say that we stole in. That is what we did. We were there all day. At night, the *sołtys* [leader] of the village came and told us that he would lead us out of the village and show us which way to go. He did, in fact, take us to the main road and we walked through the night until daybreak. In the morning, we came to a village. At the front of the house, we saw a woman opening the door. We approached the house and the woman told us to go inside. We were there for a week. The second week, we stayed with one of the peasant's friends in that same village. I remember that peasant's name - Piotr Supeł.

We left the house of the good peasant Piotr Supeł. This was in the village Zagrodniki, near Ostrówek Węgrowski. The peasant travelled with us to Warsaw. In Warsaw, we gave him money and he bought us tickets to Częstochowa.

As we were saying our goodbyes, Piotr Supeł's wife wept and she beseeched us to write to her, should any of us survive.

After the War, I wrote her a letter, to which I received the reply that her husband and his friend had perished in Mauthausen. She had married a Jew. I could have sworn that she was a Jewish woman.

Of our entire group, [the only] survivors were Jankiel Ajzner, who lives in Israel, Mojsze Rapaport, Jechiel Berkowicz and I [who live] in the United States.