

The Last Days in the Częstochowa HASAG Camps

On 14th December 1944, the camps in Częstochowa were taken over by SS men. As mentioned, the regime in the camps became much harsher. The SS General and Chief of Police in the Radom district, Böttcher, also began visiting the camps more frequently. We were required to go out to the roll-calls by barracks, meaning that the inhabitants of each barrack had to line up in front of their barrack and wait until everyone was counted. It was only after that that we had to march out, in tight formation, from the camp to the factory grounds to the work.

At the camp gate, amongst the SS men, the Jewish camp leader Goldsztajn stood taking reports. Each "kapo" was required to walk in front of his group of workers and call out, to Goldsztajn, "Kapo so-and-so (here he had to call out his name), such-and-such many *Häftlingen* [prisoners]." The men were required to take off their caps when marching past Goldsztajn. Those, who were a little tardy in calling out their names or the number of *Häftlingen*, as well as those who called out quietly and not clearly enough, would receive from Goldsztajn such a "coating", that even the SS men maintained that he did it no worse than they themselves.

In the meantime, the clothing of the prisoners was marked anew with red stripes of a specially prepared paint, and [then] special camp clothes (*pasiaki*) [Pol., striped uniforms] were brought down. The food also became more meagre and the time for eating, which formerly had also been limited enough, was done away with altogether. The *kapos* had to distribute the food among their workers in the factory halls, and those, even then, were not allowed to budge from the machines. While receiving the food and while eating it, the workers still had to monitor the motion of the machines.

Contact with the outside world was severed altogether, and contact between the camps within Częstochowa, itself, also practically ceased. The mood amidst the inmates was very stressful. Nevertheless, we still sought means to find out something. From time to time, from Polish workers, we began to receive German newspapers, which they smuggled in, despite the extremely stringent searches upon their crossing the factory's gate. The scant news, which the German newspapers did provide regarding the victories of the Red Army, encouraged us and created the belief that the such yearned-for liberty would arrive very soon.

It is ten o'clock in morning on Monday, 15th January 1945. SS men arrive at the barracks grounds of the HASAG-Apparatebau camp and start blowing whistles. Immediately, Goldsztajn comes up running and stands at attention. He receives a command to rouse all the men of the nightshift and assemble them at the grounds next to the hospital. Their orders are executed. The men of the nightshift are herded to the appointed location. Whoever is late, gets the usual "lesson" from Goldsztajn.

All the assembled stand at attention and wait in extraordinary stress for what will happen. SS and *Werkschutz* stand, fully armed, both at the barracks grounds and around the barbed wire on the outside. The factory director Lüth arrives and gives a speech to the Jews who have been herded together, to the effect that they must be transferred to another camp in

Germany, because the Germans wish to shield the Jewish *Häftlingen* from the Soviet “peril” approaching Częstochowa. Lüth concurrently stresses that, in the places where they are to arrive, the *Häftlingen* will firstly be bathed, after which they will receive other clothes and be taken over to work in such places, where no “evil” will happen to them anymore. He therefore cautions them that all must be obedient and willingly prepare for the road.

After this speech by the director, everyone was sent off to the barracks to prepare bundles for the road. The barracks were immediately surrounded by armed *Werkschutz* men and rarely could anyone get out of such an encirclement. Already, on that same day, carriages were parked on the factory grounds and all the detainees were taken away under a heavy guard.

New tragedies and new lamentations [ensue] from those remaining. The husbands, wives, brothers and sisters of those taken away present themselves willingly, in order not to be separated from their only, still surviving, relatives, and they request to also be sent along with those close to them. On the following morning, a transport of women is also sent away from the same camp. At this same time, all the prisoners at the HASAG-Eisenhütte and HASAG-Częstochowianka are also sent away.

Among the Jews remaining in the HASAG-Apparatebau and HASAG-Warta camps, who are also supposed to be sent away [soon], a rumour spreads that the Germans have already fled from Kielce and that the liberation army is already also in the *shtetls* of Włoszczowa and Koniecpol. Jews no longer wish to remain in the barracks and seek hiding places on the factory grounds in a bid to avoid the fate of being sent away.

All of a sudden, the ground is shaken by bombardments. The German foremen become uneasy. From minute to minute, the bombings intensify and we already see flames and pillars of smoke in the distance. The uneasiness amongst the Germans increases. The Jews are also apprehensive. The opinion is voiced that the Germans will blow up the munitions factories and we will perish under the ruins. Some of the Jews gather in the barracks in order not to be killed under the ruins of the factories and others hide precisely in the factory halls, so as to even perish on the spot - if only not to be dragged away by the Germans.

Night falls. The bombardments intensify. The Jews, who are in the barracks of the HASAG-Pelcery (Apparatebau) camp, are surrounded by *Werkschutz* men under the leadership of the *Werkschutz* chief Hermann and are ordered to go with them. Only about four hundred people allow themselves to be terrorised by the *Werkschutz* and were actually taken away. The rest of the Jews of the barracks break out onto the factory grounds and become the masters there.

The Germans are now hastily retreating from the factory. The Jews break into the “colony”, arm themselves, open all the warehouses and take control here, too. We seek for Germans and *Werkschutz* men, the feeling of revenge burning. The Jews in the HASAG-Warta camp also did not let themselves be led away, heeding the call of the activists there, with Dr Trejwicz at the forefront.

On 17th January 1945, at daybreak, the Jews from Warta also arrived at the Pelcery “colony” grounds. We embrace, kiss each other and weep. We weep with sorrow. We weep with joy.

We note that the feeling of sorrow and bewilderment is much stronger than the joy that we have survived.

Of the 11,000 Jews, who were in the Częstochowa camps in the last months, about 5,200 are left. The rest were already dragged away, in the last days before liberation, to the camps at Buchenwald and Gross-Rosen, where the vast majority of them perished.

On 17th January 1945, the Soviet liberating army was already in Częstochowa. Five thousand two hundred people then opened the gates of the concentration camps and went out to freedom. Five thousand two hundred slaves, with death sentences which had hung over their heads during the course of more than five years, had won back their lives and liberty.

Of those 5,200 Jews, who were liberated in Częstochowa, 1,518 had been Częstochowa residents before the outbreak of the War, of whom 1,240 were born in Częstochowa. Gradually, the Jews from other localities left Częstochowa and travelled off to their native towns. The majority of the Częstochowa residents remained in the city and began rebuilding their lives on new foundations in the newly-established, free People's Poland*.

* [TN: The term "Polska Ludowa" was a semi-official reference to the Polish state under Communism.]