

Underground Work in HASAG and in the Koniecpol Woods

On 25th June 1943, at the same time as when the *Schutzpolizei* and Gestapo attacked the bunkers of the Combat Organisation in the "Small Ghetto", all the Jewish labourers who were at work in the munitions factories were held there and not allowed back into the ghetto. At HASAG-Apparatebau, the chief director there, Lüth, conducted a roll-call of all the Jewish workers and announced to them that "the return of the Jews back into the ghetto is no longer conceivable".

Amidst the detained workgroups in the munitions factories were several active members of the Combat Organisation, who had special tasks there in connection with the grenade production. They were later joined by the fighters and activists of the underground movement, who had miraculously not been killed during the course of the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto". Also, twenty-three combatants remained in the forests, who were holding out at three separate points.

During the first two or three weeks, the fighters in the camps did not display any activity. In some of them, a definite depression was evident. Others were ashamed, as it were, to have remained alive, at the infrequent and brief meetings, expressing their envy towards those whom destiny had enabled to actually fall in battle. Gradually, groups began forming in the camps of HASAG-Apparatebau and HASAG-Eisenhütte, which began conducting some activity.

The most active element - in the political sense - was the diminished communist group, which was made up of thirty-odd individuals, divided into five cells. Those, who stood at the top of this organisation, were [Adam] Sztajnbrecher, [Jakow] Wajnrach (who perished later in Buchenwald), Jadzia (Itta) Brener, Sztrausberg and Swierczewski. The organisation would work on political lectures and carry out sabotage work in the production [process]. Sympathisers grouped around this nucleus. One of the most involved activists was Kuba Lypstajn [sic Rypstajn].

A unified front was achieved in HASAG, at the top of which stood a committee comprised of Sztajnbrecher and Wajnrach (PPR), [Ajzyk] Diamand (Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair), [Izrael] Szymonowicz (Left-wing *Poalei Zion*) and L. Brener (Bund). Among the most dedicated non-partisan activists of the resistance movement, here, was the labourer Józefowicz, a metalworker/mechanic, who excelled in sabotage work, as well as the fighters Hillel Frydrych, Młodinow, Wołczyński, Prozer, Cymerman, Wiernik, "Jacek" and others.

At first, the liaison man, between the camp groups and the courier from the Warsaw underground, was the Polish worker Jan Brust, who would smuggle everything, that "Władka" brought him from Warsaw, into the Raków factory, where he delivered it to Wiernik. The Jewish comrades there would send out everything, that was intended for us at Pelcery, with the Polish worker Wojciech Nabiałek. Wojciech would give it to his brother's son, Eugeniusz Nabiałek, who worked at Pelcery. Eugeniusz would smuggle it in and hand it over to us. The frequent searches, that were conducted on the Polish workers upon crossing the factory gate, demanded great caution. Notwithstanding that, everything went well for a long time.

On one occasion, when Brust had letters and money on his person, a very rigorous search was conducted. Brust, noticing how they were checking the labourers standing in front of him, began pulling back from the gate and destroying the letters. *Werkschutz* men noticed this and wanted to detain him. He began to flee. The *Werkschutz* started shooting at him and Brust fell seriously wounded. By then, the letters had already been torn into tiny pieces and scattered to the wind. When he fell, he swallowed up the few bits of the letters that were still on him. But they found the money on his person and seized it. The Jewish liaison man "Jacek" immediately found out about this and sent out a sum of money, from his reserves, to rescue Brust. But the wound was so terrible that no doctor could save him. Within a couple of days, Jan Brust passed away. He died at his post, carrying aid to the Jews. Following this tragic incident, the contact was transferred [from Raków] to Pelcery. The intermediary here was the Polish foreman Mędrzec and his daughter, who had earlier been in contact with the tailoring worker Jankel Gutman.

Meanwhile, the welfare work was broadening more and more. In order that those whom we could not pull into the conspiratorial work should also be able to enjoy the benefits of the aid, those group leaders - the "kapos" - whom we trusted, who were working along with the underground movement, would receive specific sums of money with which to purchase bread and to distribute it amongst their groups of workers and to procure special meals for the ailing labourers in their groups. There were also some activists who had monetary sums at their disposal, and they would divide them amongst such poverty-stricken individuals as did not need to know from where the funds come, under the terms of lending out [money] to people to be taken back after the War.

After the Jews from the Łódź Ghetto and, later from Skarżysko, arrived, the relief work had to become more intensive, even if the means were limited enough. Several men, headed by Engineer Efros, who had been authorised by Warsaw already back in the Skarżysko camps, engaged in the welfare work amongst the prisoners from the Skarżysko camp.

Those, who engaged in the relief work at the HASAG-Warta camp, were Dr Trejwicz (a native of Białystok, who arrived along with the Jews from the Skarżysko camp) and the nurse Polja Kozioł, who had previously been in Raków, where she had worked with Dr Glatter and with Wiernik and Wilczyński, and was later transferred to Warta, where she continued working as a nurse in the camp hospital there, which was run by Dr Trejwicz.

Activity was very restricted due to the prevailing regime in the Warta camp and as a result of the fear of the Jewish camp leader there and Jewish policemen, who ruled "with a strong arm, as required by the Germans". The money that could be sent over from Pelcery was limited, so their activity was very restricted, even though the situation there was worse than in the other camps. Forming a combat group there was out of the question. The regime in the Warta camp was very hard, because it was there that the camp leader of Skarżysko, Bartenschlager, showed, to the greatest extent, what he was capable of doing to the defenceless Jews.

In Pelcery, too, the regime became increasingly harsher and harsher. The combat leadership, in the Raków and Pelcery camps, took precise stock of the state of affairs and embarked

intensively on organising the combat “fives” and preparing plans of resistance in case of an *akcja*. The leadership of the combat units at Pelcery worked out three plans:

- to prepare equipment to be utilised by the “fives” upon going out to do battle;
- to blow up the factory by setting fire to the dynamite storerooms and
- to organise a group of many people, containing such determined fighters who would be willing to sacrifice their own lives, attacking the *Werkschutz* guardroom at the appointed moment, disarming them and taking control over the factory for a certain time, so that the majority of the people should be able to escape.

The responsibility for producing special cutters and pliers, with insulated handles which would serve to cut through the barbed-wire fences even in the places where they were electrified was given, to the communist Adaś* Sztajnbrecher. The rest of the leadership members divided, among themselves, the barracks where each one was to organise and direct the “fives”.

The comrades in Warsaw expressed their readiness to provide weapons and asked us to give them the manner by which to get the weapons into the camps. But the searches on the Polish workers in the factories were becoming increasingly more frequent and stringent. It was, therefore, impossible to find such among the Polish workers, in Pelcery, as would be willing and able to undertake such perilous smuggling.

“Jacek”, who was strongly yearning for an armed stand, told us that, at the Eisenhütte camp, there was actually one such intrepid character, who had also found a Polish officer who had undertaken the provision of armaments. Sometime later, “Jacek” said that the same had declared he was an officer of the AK [Home Army] and would do nothing for Jews.

* * *

We were forced to abandon the idea of an open struggle with weapons in our hands. The underground cells continued carrying out their work. Meetings were held and collective talks were conducted on the remembrance days of the *akcje* in the Częstochowa “Big Ghetto” and “Small Ghetto” and of the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The press, which would be smuggled in, was passed from hand to hand and, from time to time, we also endeavoured to receive radio news. We received this radio news via male and female workers, who would be taken by the German foremen to the “colony” to clean up their dwellings. They strove, now and then, to catch something from the radio there. Besides that, Pupek Rozencwajg had a certain way of obtaining radio news at the workshop, where he worked.

We maintained constant contact with Warsaw. In cases of necessity, we did not wait for the courier from Warsaw, but gave letters, through Jankel Gutman, to the liaisons man, Mędrzec, with whom the courier from Warsaw would stay, and he would send them with his daughter or wife to Warsaw, to Maria Borkowska at ul. Krochmalna 83.

* * *

* [TN: Pet name for Adam.]

One day, *Werkschutz* men raided the barracks at the HASAG-Pelcery camp and confiscated all the equipment they had gathered and also the tools of all the craftsmen who would manufacture various objects to sell. The reasons for such searches, which were repeated several times, were never established. But all the equipment was seized and an order was also issued to the effect that no tools whatsoever were permitted to be found on the barracks grounds and inside the barracks themselves - including such as were necessary for cleaning up [the barracks].

* * *

On 4th November 1944, during a search among the Polish workers upon leaving the Pelcery factory, they arrested Eugeniusz Nabiałek, on whose person were found letters, which had been sent by Natka Wiernik to "Jacek" at Raków. The other liaison man, Wojciech Nabiałek, was also detained in connection with this. The letters that they found on Eugeniusz put them on the trail of Natka and Jacek, who were also arrested. Both Nabiałeks were sent to the concentration camp in Gross-Rosen, where Wojciech perished. Jacek and Natka were also sent away. (Eugeniusz Nabiałek, Jacek and Natka survived. All three were saved by the Red Army.)

* * *

In the last months prior to liberation, the fighting spirit of the prisoners in the camps changed. The fact that the Jews from the Skarżysko and Płaszów camps had been brought to Częstochowa, and the fact that Jews should organise different [football] matches* in the camps, which had been inspired by the Germans, caused many to forget the sorrowful experiences until then. They interpreted it as a sign that no more Jews would be annihilated. We notified the comrades in Warsaw regarding the mood among the inmates and the changed attitude in the camp. The responses from the central party** authorities were that we should harbour no illusions, for the politics of the German fascists, regarding Jews, had not changed at all and, if there were no prospects of engaging in open combat, the activists should flee the camps. Due to the peril of collective answerability, it was decided that the activists would not escape and we, also, understood that there would be no possibility to engage in open warfare.

In August 1944, the contact with Warsaw was interrupted due to the Warsaw Uprising. But sometime later, envoys were once more sent to Częstochowa and Koniecpol. The regular courier from Warsaw, once again, made contact with Mędrzec's daughter and regularly inquired as to the "health" of her relatives.

Becalel Altman who, as a good baker, was led out of the camp every early morning to bake bread outside the camp for the Germans, became the liaison man with the new emissaries

* [TN: In the chapter "Jewish Sportsmen" of his book "Churban Czenstochow", Dr Benjamin Orenstein writes: "In the spring of 1944, when [only] a small number of Częstochowa Jews were left alive after the massacres, *akcje* and selections and were barracked in the HASAG-Pelcery camp, a whole series of football teams were established according to the departments at work."]

** [TN: As the combat units in Częstochowa were made up of members of various political parties (e.g., communists, Bundists, Poalei Zion etc.), it is presumably to the central committees of these parties that Brener alludes.]

from Warsaw. The bakery, where Altman would bake the bread, became the rendezvous point for him with the envoys of the Warsaw underground.

* * *

In December 1944, we became convinced of the truth of the warnings from the comrades in Warsaw, to the effect that German policies, regarding the Jews, had not been altered. SS men came and took over the entire management of the Jewish camps. The regime became much worse than even when Bartenschlager was in power. It became impossible to go about both on the factory grounds and on the barrack grounds. Only whole workgroups could march out, in tight formation, from the barrack grounds to work and march back in from work. It also became impossible to continue running the kitchens for the sick people and children, who needed to avoid being noticed by the SS men. The SS people had a certain Goldsztajn to assist them, whom they had brought down from the Płaszów camp. This fellow reported everything to them and beat the inmates in no lesser manner than the SS men themselves. As a result, the aid activity from the outside ceased altogether. Inside, it was still conducted from with the last reserves, albeit in a limited measure, until 15th January 1945, when the Red Army approached the gates of Częstochowa and the former internees became the masters of their own lives and liberty.

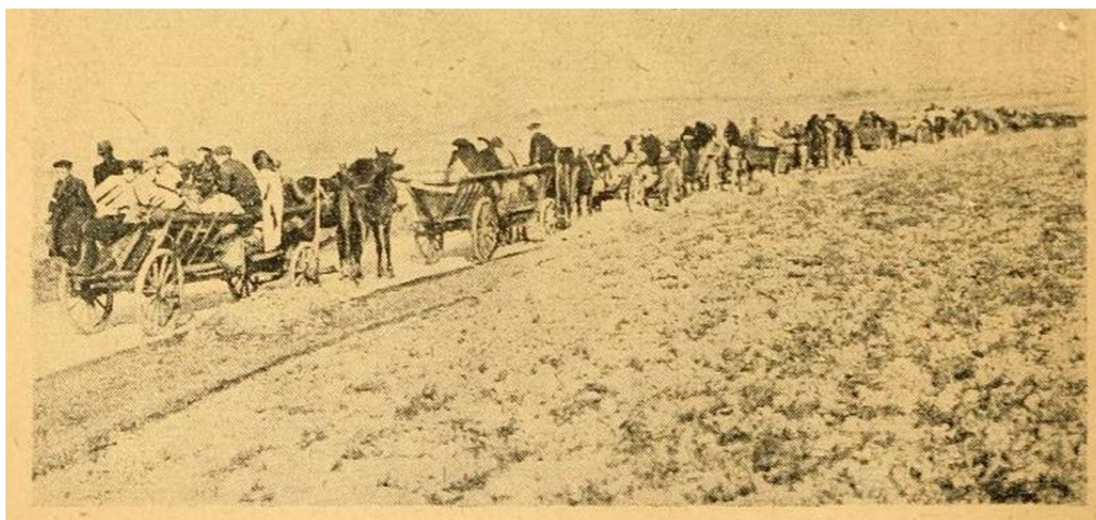
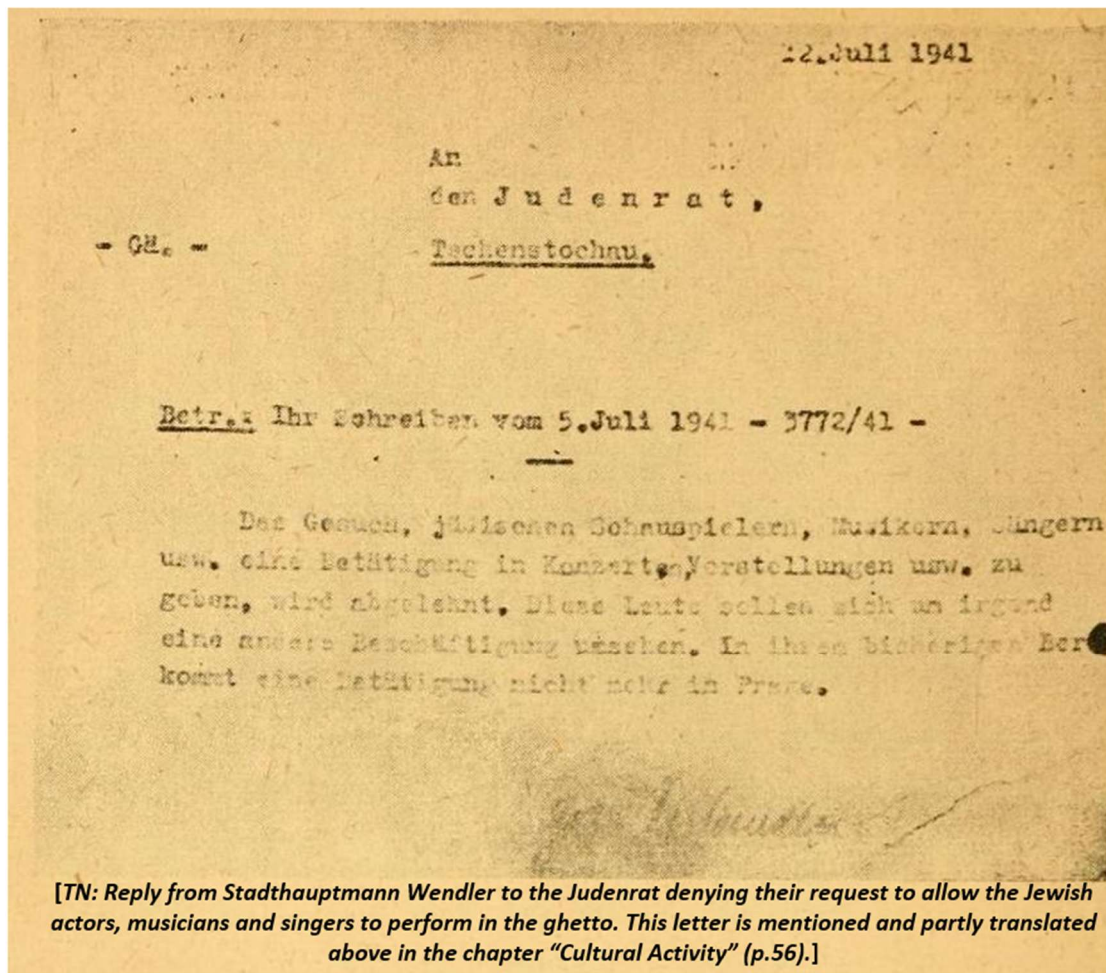
* * *

During the period in which we conducted our activity in the camps, the twenty-eight militants, who were holding out in the Koniecpol woods, also did not sit doing nothing. They launched attacks on the Germans and their servants in order to procure weapons and food for themselves. All their attacks were well-organised and successful. But, they maintained that they would not be able to carry out any large-scale operations against the Germans on their own, and sought means and opportunities to make contact with Polish partisan groups and to join their ranks.

In the Koniecpol area, however, antisemitic AK bands, under the name “Orzeł” [Eagle], were rampant. The Jewish combatants in Koniecpol, ignorant of the character of these bands, began conducting negotiations with them regarding joint operations against the Germans. The exact place and time of the first meeting were settled. At the appointed time and location, several Jewish partisans, headed by Kuba Rypstajn, awaited the Polish partisan delegation. Ten partisans arrived with revolvers and automatic weapons. Kuba and his comrades, not suspecting the Polish partisans of anything bad, went happily and earnestly to meet them, not even pulling out their guns from their pockets. As soon as they were already standing face to face, the “Orzeł” people opened fire on the Jewish group. Only one of the Jewish partisans, grievously injured, managed to flee from death. All the others perished on the spot.

Following this incident, the Jewish militants in Koniecpol became more cautious. They therefore fixed themselves in bunkers with trustworthy Poles and would emerge only at night, in order to launch attacks of their own against specific points where there were Germans. Even in these bunkers, the small groups of Jewish fighters had no peace from the reactionary, antisemitic AK bands. The “Orzeł” men sought out the bunkers of the remaining Jewish partisans. Sometime later, a large group of them attacked the bunker where Juda Gliksztajn,

Bela Zborowska and Bela Bram were. All three managed to evade the murderous hands and disappeared into the forest. The "Orzeł" people organised a hunt for them. *Granatowe* policemen, who were serving in Koniecpol, assisted them. The three Jewish combatants were surrounded in a narrow strip of forest, where they were captured, under fire from the automatic weapons which the *Granatowe* policemen used, and they perished.



The expulsion from Mstów on 25th September 1942

In the Koniecpol woods, there was also a Polish left-wing partisan division of Hanyż* - a few members of the ŻOB also joined this group and were welcomed in a fraternal and comradely manner. It was here that the ŻOB members were first able to demonstrate their active and willing desire for sacrifices.

Lajzer Szydłowski, particularly, distinguished himself here. Lajzer came from Mstów. On 25th September 1942, when the expulsion of the Jews in Mstów began, his family members hid in a bunker, where - as Lajzer later recounted - they were murdered as the result of robbery. From then on, Lajzer was filled the idea of suicide. This sentiment vanished in him from the moment he was deeply drawn into the work of the ŻOB in the "Small Ghetto". His outer appearance enabled him to move about more freely than others, as an "Aryan", and to execute the organisation's most hazardous missions. He was already so well-trained in his "craft" of carrying out the tasks laid upon him by the organisation, that even when he was once stopped at the "wylot" (ghetto gate), at a moment when he had weapons on him, he swiftly wriggled out of it and still managed to smuggle the weapons across and bring them into the ghetto. With his daring, Lajzer displayed much heroism, both in the ranks of the ŻOB and in those of the *Gwardia Ludowa*. In the battle against the Germans, which the Hanyż group waged in the area of the village Święta Anna (near Koniecpol), Lajzer, already wounded, also strongly distinguished himself. He fell in the year 1944.

The safest bunker around Koniecpol, where the fighters hid, was in the village of Michałów. There, they stayed at the house of the Pindelak peasant family*. As the wife Celina [sic Paulina] Pindelak reported, there were fifteen ŻOB members, headed by Bolek Gwircman, staying with them. That same lady said that only eight of those fifteen people survived. At the end of January 1945, a few individuals among them arrived in Częstochowa, and their representative, Gwircman, began to take part in rebuilding the renewed Jewish community in Częstochowa.

* [TN: Ref. to Stanisław "Stach" Hanyż, a leftist partisan commander active in the Koniecpol region.]

* [TN: Roman and Paulina Pindelak were recognised by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations. See many more details in *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. II, in the article "Chronicle of the Koniecpol Unit", which was written by the commander Bolek Gwircman himself.]