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The Beginning of Częstochowa's Destruction

Twenty-three years ago, the Nazi destroyers and devils set out to annihilate the Jewish population in the most murderous and barbaric manner.

Twenty-three years ago, the Nazis, like venomous snakes, set upon Częstochowa Jewry - orphaning, impoverishing, destroying and obliterating Jewish life.

On Yom Kippur, black and sombre tidings reached the Jewish populace. The grisly news descended upon the darkened, heavy moods of the Częstochowa Jews like black clouds. This was on Yom Kippur 1942. With aching hearts, filled with pain and sorrow, the Jews were gathered at the houses of prayer. Each item of news cut into the hurting, saddened hearts like a knife, and rivers of tears gushed from the agony-filled eyes.

In reality, no one knew what misfortune and devastation were in preparation. No one believed the Nazi authorities anymore. No one believed their assurances that nothing would happen in Częstochowa, given that the city was an important industrial centre. No one, any longer, fed himself with hopes¹, for the majority of the Jews in the neighbouring towns had been utterly destroyed - [they had been] dragged away, in railway wagons, to death camps and gas chambers - tortured and tormented until their souls expired.

At eight o'clock in the evening, a delegation of the *Judenrat* went to the Nazi *Stadthauptmann*² to intervene regarding the restless situation in the ghetto. The *Stadthauptmann* received the delegation and accepted a "gift" of 100,000 złoty, assuring them that no *akcja* would be conducted in Częstochowa. The reports, which reached the ghetto, were exactly the opposite. On that day, all the Jewish forced labourers had been sent back into the ghetto, and those from the Ostbahn [Ger., Eastern Railway] reported that the "black" *Ausrottungskommando* [Extermination Squad] had arrived and was billeted at the Piłsudski School, and that a hundred wagons were standing at the train station in readiness for the deportation of the Jews.

This news shook all the Jews of the Częstochowa Ghetto, because it was all believable - from the first day of the Nazi occupation of the city, there had not been a single peaceful day. Arrests, beatings, shootings, capturing people for forced labour, deportations to concentration camps, wearing marks and numbers, paying "contributions" and the confiscation of fixed and non-fixed assets were day-to-day phenomena. Bitter experience no longer gave any ground for believing the Nazis in their promises and word of honour.

In view of these reports, Jews attempted the last means which were only possible. Those, who possessed work cards, believed that nothing would happen to them. But those, who did

¹ [TN: "To feed oneself with hopes" is an old-fashioned expression in various European languages meaning "to get one's hopes up unduly".]

² [TN: Ger., "City Captain"; ref. to Dr Eberhardt Franke, who was the mayor of Częstochowa appointed by the Nazis.]

not have work cards, made attempts to break out of the ghetto, through roofs and windows, to the “Aryan side”. Others hurriedly began to prepare bunkers and hiding places for the elderly, for sick people and for children, in a bid to evade the Nazi sword of destruction.

There were also feverish preparations on the part of the resistance movement called the “*Arbeiterrat*” [Workers Council]. The plan was for the Polish resistance movement to set fire to houses in all parts of the city, thus causing fires, and the Jewish fighters were to break out of the ghetto with weapons and, together with the Polish resistance movement, launch armed street battles against the Nazis. At the last moment, the Polish resistance movement wriggled out of all its obligations and promises, using the excuse that it was not yet ready to take on such a fight.

Isolated from the outside world, from everything and everyone, the misfortune arrived. At the close of Yom Kippur, at midnight, the ghetto was more vigorously guarded, with whole cordons of black destroyers from the *Ausrottungskommando*. Shots were immediately fired at those fleeing via the rooftops. This was the first sign that disaster was imminent. With every minute, the unrest mounted and the moods became more nervous. The streets were fully lit, which had, until then, never occurred, because Nazi Germany was at war with the Soviet Union at the time, and a full blackout was in effect. This was yet another sign of impending misfortune. This was a night fraught with fear and terror — a night surrounded by the black destroyers of the *Ausrottungskommando*, a night of sleeplessness, a night on which Jewish mothers cried out all their tears. Each minute was a tragic eternity - minutes of tension, minutes of frayed nerves, minutes of dashed hopes and desires, minutes of profound sorrow and despondency.

On that same night, the Nazis issued a strict command to the effect that all the Jews of the ghetto were to report for a rollcall at six o’clock sharp in the morning - “for an inspection of work cards”. *Hauptmann* [Captain] Degenhardt, with his revolting, simian features, stood there with his aides, the SS men, holding a baton in his hand and indicating who was to be deported and who was to be temporarily retained for slave labour. This happened on Tuesday, 22nd September 1942, the day after Yom Kippur. This was the first mass slaughter of seven thousand Częstochowa Jews who, on that day, were deported to Treblinka, where they were destroyed with gas and fire. Five³ such *akcje* and selections were conducted from 22nd September to 4th October 1942, severing the Jewish community of Częstochowa, annihilating and destroying the glorious Jewish settlement in Częstochowa.

May [God] remember the martyrs of Częstochowa! May He remember the hallowed fathers and mothers! May He remember the brothers and sisters! May He remember the wives and children! May He remember the ghetto heroes and partisan fighters!

³ [Editor’s note: there were actually six such transports at that time.]