

From the “Small Ghetto” to Bliżyn and Auschwitz

On the night of 22nd February 1943, the six thousand Jews, imprisoned in the Częstochowa “Small Ghetto”, which was fenced all around with barbed wire, were sleeping - exhausted after a hard day of work, thinking and dreaming of a speedy liberation, and that the Nazi destroyers would suffer an unanticipated downfall and the Jews would finally be freed of the bitter tribulations and pain. The stillness of the night, along with the wishful dreams, were interrupted by the ghetto police. They ran about the small houses of the dim alleyways holding lists, seeking eighteen people to arrest. As it emerged, all eighteen wanted individuals were professional carpentry workmen, and they were all sent away to Bliżyn in order to build a new camp.

In the morning, everyone went to their workplaces as if nothing had happened. A deportation of professional workmen of this kind was among the “normal” happenings in the “Small Ghetto”. Everyone thought he had come out of it with just a fright. It was only when we returned in the evening that we apprehended the disaster that had taken place. All the elderly and the children, who had been hiding in the “Small Ghetto” had been caught and sent away to their deaths. There were also rumours that, either on 15th or 17th March, other occurrences of this nature would take place once again. Our imprisonment in the “Small Ghetto” continues on, with sleepless nights, until the day of 15th March arrived – and, as nothing extraordinary took place, some already started to think that all these things had [just] been imagined.

On 17th March, in the evening, I was approached by a friend, who was working in Warta, and he told me that the ghetto police already had another list and that they would start “catching” those, who were on it that [same] night. On the following morning, my sister Madzia Rozenberg¹, who was working at the hospital, came to me and asked me not to go to work that day, and to hide out, because from every workgroup marching out, several individuals were taken out and pushed into the *jatka* [Pol., butchery] next to the guardroom. Nevertheless, I was afraid to remain in the “Small Ghetto”, and I actually did go out to work.

When the group left the “Small Ghetto”, several men were, in fact, taken out and, amongst them, were two good professional carpentry workmen. When we arrived at work and Schott noticed that the two professional carpenters were missing, he called out Gotajner and me and took us to the *jatka* and exchanged us for the two carpenters. At twelve noon, we were driven out from the *jatka* to the Old Market Square [Stary Rynek] for a rollcall. The Nazi murderer Degenhardt began telling us not to be afraid - he was not sending us to Treblinka, but to work as professionals in a shoe factory in Bliżyn.

We were immediately surrounded by gendarmes with extended rifles, onto which bayonets were fixed, pointed directly at us. They led us through the former “Big Ghetto”. Here, we saw images of horror. The once overpopulated area was desolate and empty. All the houses had

¹ [TN: The wife of Josel Rozenberg (genealogical sources).]

been robbed. All the buildings were vacant and deserted, the windowpanes smashed, the display cabinets torn out, resembling the sunken eye sockets of corpses. The former businesses had been plundered and were marked with a chalk "X". Tables, beds and mattresses were laid out in front of every house. Thus, walking and lost in thought, I felt a strong push. It was a Ukrainian who had given me a shove with his rifle butt, yelling "*Bystro, bystro!*" [Quickly, quickly!²]. Suddenly, we heard a command - "Stehen bleiben!" [Ger., "Remain standing!"] and several rifles were heard being shot in the air.

Several youths escaped from the rows and ran into the vacant houses of the former "Big Ghetto". I did not think long and I also ran. Two Ukrainians immediately ran after me, shouting, "*Kuda, kuda?*" [Rus., Where to?]. All the others and I were captured and, again, we were all lined up in the rows. Fortunately, no one was punished on that occasion - because anyone who fled could have been shot at the time.

We were taken to the railway station, where whitewashed freight wagons were already in position. They ordered all of us to board the wagons, whereupon they were closed. After two hours, we were told to come back out, and we were taken away to the police station on ul. Piłsudskiego. We spent the night there and, on the following morning, we were taken, once again, to the railway station and loaded 120 people into each wagon. The train set off in the direction of Bliżyn. It was terribly crowded in the wagon which I was in. Perspiration streamed from everyone, even though outside it was cold. At two in the afternoon, the train came to a halt and the command was, "Out of the wagons!" A row of Ukrainian degenerates stood, holding clubs and "treated" everyone to blows.

From the station, we were led to the camp through the *shtetl* Bliżyn, which is in the Kielce region. Behind the town, we could already plainly make out the camp, with its barbed wire fences and watchtowers - symbols of the Nazi regime. Polish camp policemen stood at the camp's gates. This was what Degenhardt, may his name be obliterated, had called a "shoe factory". After passing through the gate, the commands, "*Halt!*", "*Attention!*" and "*Caps off!*" were heard. A Nazi, wearing the uniform of an *Untersturmführer*³, emerged and it was reported to him that a transport of 300 Jews had arrived. They then notified us that we were all to register immediately and give up all valuables and cash. Should more than five marks be found on anyone, he would be shot on the spot. Following registration, they led us through a second barbed wire fence, which divided the first grounds with flowing water⁴. All the arrivals were taken into one barrack. Everyone simply collapsed onto the bunks, completely exhausted, tired and famished.

My mind could not come to terms with the factual state of affairs, and I thought about familiarising myself with the camp and wove plans on how to escape. I went outside the barrack to acquaint myself with the camp grounds. I met two Russian prisoners and began talking with them. From them, I found out that there had been several thousand Russian prisoners in the camp. The majority of them had died of hunger and arduous labour. They showed me a nearby grove, where they had been buried. Others had been sent away to

² [TN: The word "*bystro*" is used in Polish, Russian and also Ukrainian.]

³ [TN: Ger., "junior storm leader"; *Untersturmführer* was the first commissioned SS officer rank, equivalent to a second lieutenant in other military organisations.]

⁴ [TN: "Within the camp, the parade ground was also surrounded by barbed wire. In an adjoining camp, separated from the prisoners by the Kamienna River, were the offices and accommodation for the camp personnel." (Bliżyn, www.holocausthistoricalsociety.org.uk)]

various camps, and the two of them were the only ones remaining here, because they were electricians and were carrying out the electrical jobs in the camp - the electrified fences and the electric lights.

I returned to the barrack, because I saw a canister in front of the door and understood that they were distributing soup. As it turned out, what was in the canister was black, bitter water - this was called "coffee". I entered the barrack and lay down on the hard planks. There, I found my friends Szmul Kohn, Icek Krakowski and Herszl Konsens. Tired and hungry, I fell asleep. My sleep was interrupted by shouts from the camp police, "*Rise! Rollcall!*" It was five in the morning and I felt very depressed, tired and despondent. I was still unable to become accustomed to the idea that I would be forced to remain here in this sorrowful and bitter camp. Meanwhile, everyone was running to the canister for coffee and to receive a chunk of bread. There was no order in giving out the coffee and bread. The camp police struck people over the head and rushed us to the rollcall. I did not receive the portion of bread and everyone was driven to the rollcall.

Exhausted and famished, I stood on the parade ground. They counted and counted - something did not add up. Everyone was lined up in rows of six, and no one could make head nor tail of what was going on with the counting. Camp Commandant [*SS-Oberscharführer* Paul] Nell arrived and the counter relayed the report to him. A process of calling out every individual separately by name then took place. At one name, no one came forward. Following lengthy investigations, which continued until two o'clock in the afternoon, it emerged that one person had been registered twice. Everyone breathed a little easier, and it only passed with fright.

That same day, we were all assigned to workplaces. The majority were chosen to work at the *Steinbruch* [Ger., stone quarry], which was the hardest labour, while others to various jobs in the camp. I was assigned to the group of electricians, thanks to my proficiency and the intercession of my friend Herszl Konsens who, regrettably, perished shortly prior to liberation. My friends Icek Krakowski, who is in Israel, and Zeew Brokman, who was killed in Auschwitz, worked in that same group.

In the Bliżyn camp, besides *Częstochowers*, there were Jews, who had been sent there with transports from an entire array of towns, namely Tomaszów, Skarżysko, Piotrków, Pinsk, the Płaszów camp, Radom and other towns and camps.

All the *Częstochowers* stuck together and they were the ones who escaped from the camp. The camp police were aware of this. As a result, the barrack where the *Częstochowers* were [billeted] was more stringently guarded, and it was locked up during the night.

One day - it was about twelve noon - I saw the camp police race over to a group of *Częstochowers*, who were working by the camp fence. The Ukrainian guards were running about wildly. Before I managed to get a grasp of what was going on, an emergency rollcall was held. It turned out that six *Częstochower landsleit* had fled the camp. Camp Commandant Nell was at the rollcall. German gendarmes and Ukrainian guards came up running and reported that none of the escapees had been captured. Nell threatened that everyone would be shot because of it. The commandant of the Jewish camp police, Szlamek Minberg, held a

list in his hand and called out the names, in order to ascertain the names of the fugitives. No one responded to the six following names: Alter Szyldhaus, Horonczyk, Diamant, Arje Mandelbaum, Lemel (I do not recall his surname) and Berl Rudnicki. These names were called out several times and nobody came forth. After standing for two hours on the parade ground, a very high-ranking SS officer arrived (this was probably [Herbert] Böttcher who, following the War, was sentenced to death by the Polish court in Radom, where he was hanged).

He pronounced the verdict that, for the six who had fled, six others would be shot. Meanwhile, the commandant of the camp police, Szlamek Mincberg, negotiated with the SS to the effect that sick people should be taken. Mincberg held up a list and called out the names of four sick people and two, who had lost their minds as a result of the tribulations and pain. Among those summoned were the two Hofman brothers - but they did not leave the row, because they had been called "Ofman". Mincberg, therefore, called out two others - also brothers; I do not recall their names but, in the camp, they were called "The Gypsies".

The six victims were immediately surrounded by armed Ukrainians. The leader of the Ukrainian band, in service of the SS, Moskalenko, chose six other Jews to accompany them and dig a grave for the six victims in the grove near the camp.

One of those, who were taken to dig the grave, gave me the particulars of the execution. The Ukrainians made the six diggers stand aside and ordered the condemned to dig the pits themselves. They resisted - the most involved were the two "gypsy" brothers, who put up an active resistance. The Ukrainians stabbed them with their bayonets and slashed the clothes on them. When they were already half-dead, they still continued putting up resistance and, with their last strength, they shouted, "*Brothers, take revenge!*". A salvo of bullets put an end to their lives.

For a long time, the incident of the shooting of the six innocent inmates enveloped everyone in profound sorrow.

Following this event, the Częstochowa barrack was more tightly guarded. A Ukrainian guard was stationed there during the night. An even stricter discipline was implemented. Every individual became answerable for those who slept to his right and to his left - meaning that should someone escape, those sleeping to his right and left would be shot. Two people would be shot for each person who escaped.

Some two days later, when I was working with a few other electricians repairing the electric lighting at the "*Wachstube*" [Ger., guardroom], I noticed that something had happened. I immediately heard horrific and wretched screams. I looked out the window and saw a terrible sight. Two men were lying half-naked on the ground, and the Ukrainians were incessantly beating them with their rifle butts. Camp Commandant Nell arrived and ordered that the torture be stopped. The commander of the Jewish camp police, Szlamek Mincberg, also arrived. Camp Commandant Nell commanded Mincberg to take the two men and lead them away to the kitchen so that they be given soup, and he was to interrogate them. I recognised them at once - they were Arje Mandelbaum and Lemel.

Famished, after several days without eating, they eagerly attended to the soup. Szlamek Mincberg asked them to relate what had happened to them and where the other four were. They said that, as soon as they had escaped, they entered the forest and got lost. They were the only two who stuck together.

After walking all night in the woods, they came out at daybreak onto the highway. Poles attacked them, dragged them into the woods and took everything from them - they even robbed their clothes. Having no other way out, they decided to enter the first house near the forest and tell them what had happened and request aid. The peasant-woman went out and returned, a few minutes later, with Polish police, who detained them and brought them to the camp.

Camp Commandant Nell entered the kitchen and inquired of Mincberg whether they had already revealed the whereabouts of the four other escapees. They were led into the *Wachstube* and a cross-examination ensued, accompanied by heavy blows. After torturing them for hours, they were unable to obtain any information from them as to the other four escapees.

After the cross-examination and torture, they were both taken to the grove by Ukrainians. Two inmates went with them to dig a grave. These two inmates afterwards recounted the bestiality of the Ukrainians and the resistance of the two victims. Thus, the two victims ended their young lives - the martyrs Arje Mandelbaum and Lemel. Honoured be their memory.

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The regime became stricter and worsened from day to day. Rumours were already spreading to the effect that the camp would be definitively liquidated. Poles, who worked at the camp, even gave details that, during the liquidation, a selection would be carried out and the majority would be shot.

In March 1944, everyone was driven out of the barracks to the parade ground. The liquidation of the camp had commenced. Everyone had to give up his clothes and received striped prisoners' trousers and a jacket. Every individual was given a bowl and spoon and two pounds of bread for the journey that was to last five days. Everyone was led away to the railway station, where freight wagons were already standing at the ready, and everyone was loaded for the voyage to Auschwitz. We waited for one hour, and the locomotive set off on the long, unknown road.

After travelling for three days and two nights, the train arrived at the Auschwitz death camp, which is a separate chapter of my experiences during the times of the Nazi tyranny.



[Text in picture: May (God) remember (the) 6,000,000 martyrs.]
"Remember what Amalek did unto thee." [Deuteronomy 25:17]