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Bunker 39 in Częstochowa

Excerpt from a story



A few individual, female figures proceed cautiously to Bunker 39, under the collapsed synagogue. Not far from the ruined synagogue, Chaja'le stands guard. She makes signs to the women, arriving with children, and shows them to the open pit, which stretches deep into the ground. The women descend into it and disappear into the darkness.

Once all of them are already inside Bunker 39, Chaja'le scrapes down into it. She pulls on a board, on top of which weeds and leaves are lay and, with this board, skilfully camouflages the narrow entrance, the board blending in with the surrounding overgrown, green ground.

In the bunker, a clandestine meeting of a group of young Jewish mothers, called the "Holy Mothers", is being held. They have organised and taken a sacred oath not to separate from their small children. A militant fire burns in the eyes of some of them. In others, there is sorrow - extinguished gazes, whose silence splits the heavens.

Chaja'le stands and addresses the gathering of women. She speaks with a firm voice and calls them to battle. Golda-Laja, Chaja'le's elderly mother, interjects, "Chaja'le, what is the matter with you? You are still so young - you have to keep your young life safe and that of your child."

"Mother, please - hush! We mustn't speak like that. We have to fight!"

"Fight against whom?"

"Against the Nazi killers, the German murderers."

"This must be God's will", Golda-Laja replied and, with a deep sigh, disappeared into a corner of the bunker.

Chaja'le continued her speech:

"Holy Mothers! There is already once more talk of an *akcja*. The savage murderers will, once again, appear and begin dragging old people and small children to the selections, resettlements and deportations to the gas chambers in Treblinka. They may let us young mothers live, for now, because they still want to use us for hard, slave labour. Once our strengths are spent, we will also be gassed or left to die a slow death.

Holy Mothers, when they come for our little fledglings, we must not let ourselves be separated from them. We must go with our own flesh and blood. How can a mother live after

her child has been murderously torn away from her? Would we not be living dead? If we go, we go together! In the meantime, no mother must lose heart and [we must] continue with the fight to hide the children. Because, in the end, right will prevail and the Nazi murderers will suffer a devastating downfall. Then they will be held accountable for the murders they have committed.”

Each mother went up to Chaja’le and made a sacred oath not to be separated from her children.

After spending three days and nights in the bunker, there was a lack of bread and water - there was nothing to eat or drink. Their bones were aching from lying on the damp ground. The mothers decided that, as long as things were quiet in the ghetto, there was no point in staying in the bunker and expiring from starvation. It was better to go back into the houses and prepare things such as bedding, food, containers to fill with water, battery-powered lamps and chemical materials with which to manufacture weapons for the fight against the Nazi foe.

Before dawn, when a blue darkness was still veiling the sky, the “Holy Mothers” and their little children began leaving the bunker, in order to carry out and realise their plans. They snuck out from the underground tomb, one by one, so that no one should notice them.

Chaja’le, tired after an entirely sleepless night, lay next to her child Miriam’l. Golda-Laja stood by them, watching over them, while her lips murmured a prayer. She lamented her fate in old age, and more so the fate of her daughter and grandchild. The bunker was empty. Everyone had left for the time being. Only three souls remained - the grandmother with her daughter and granddaughter.

Suddenly, steps are heard from above. Mother and daughter hold their breaths. The steps come nearer. Miriam’l, the infant, is frightened and is about to burst out crying. Miriam’l remembers what her mother told her - that they must not cry, because a danger threatens them. The child holds in her tears.

A strong whack is heard on the clandestine entry. The board is lifted up. The murky bunker is lit by a ray of light from the cloudy exterior. At the entrance stands an SS officer in a Nazi uniform, his features those of one who has gorged himself beyond satiety. He calls out with sadistic enjoyment, “You’re packed [in there] hiding, eh Jews? You wanted to fool the great German Reich! How many are you in there?” The old Golda-Laja and her daughter, who is holding her child in her arms, say nothing - no one responds. “*Answer me!*”, thunders the SS man. No one replies. They move further into a corner of the dark bunker.

The SS officer yells, insults them and curses - why are they not coming out of the bunker? It is to no avail - no one responds. He dares not descend into the bunker. He fears that there might be armed fighters there who will shoot him like a dog. He is a mighty man when he knows nobody is armed.

The SS man went wild, running about and looking around, until he saw a patrol of two *Granatowe*¹ policemen. He commanded them to enter the bunker and drag everyone out from there. They entered the bunker with mixed feelings, wondering if they would come out alive. Who knew who was in there? Such things had already happened in Częstochowa. Their other thought was that maybe they would make an easy profit by robbing the victims. This thought gave them courage, and they entered the bunker brandishing loaded revolvers. They dragged Golda-Laja, Chaja'le and the infant out by force.

The SS officer stood with the stance of a victor. It was useless for the Jews to hide in bunkers - he would catch them all. He looked intently at the three victims, with his green spider's eyes, and ordered Chaja'le to stand to one side. She was still fit for labour - she was still young and could work in HASAG-Pelcery.

Chaja'le refuses, she is not willing to go. She clutches tightly onto her child - she will not be separated from Miriam'l. The SS man is seized by a murderous rage and signals with his hand that, if that is the case, all three will go. Guarded by the two *Granatowe* policemen and the SS officer, the grandmother, daughter and granddaughter are led on their last road.

"We are going together", Chaja'le murmurs to her child and presses her more strongly to her heart. "We are going together, my Miriam'l... I will not separate from you. Together..." Two tears run down Chaja'le's cheeks. All of a sudden, she swoons. The old Golda-Laja catches her, taking the child from her arms. In one arm, she holds her grandchild and, with the other, she firmly leads her daughter. She suddenly feels as if she had been given back her strengths. She strides with easy steps, her head held up haughtily and her eyes gazing at the heavens with a holy ecstasy.

"Where are we going, Bubbeshi [Granny]?", Miriam'l asks in a faint voice.

"Up!", points Golda-Laja, "Up, to where your Tateshi [Daddy] is."

"And is my cousin Mojsze'le there, too?"

"He also is."

"And, also Sure'le?"

"Also."

"And are Auntie Chawa and Uncle Szmul also there?"

"Also."

"And Grandfather?"

"They are all there - the whole family."

The infant smiles contentedly. Chaja'le, too, brushes the tears away from her teary eyes and looks to the heavens with purity. She presses closer to her mother, who gazes up to the sky with her head held up high and strides with firm steps towards eternity...

Thus walked their last road - three generations - the grandmother Golda-Laja, the daughter Chaja'le and the granddaughter Miriam'l. They walked with their heads raised to the heavens, with profound thoughts of the sanctification of the Name [of God] and the People [of Israel].

¹ [TN: Pol., "Navy-blue"; the Blue Police was the Polish police force serving under the Nazis in the Generalgouvernement.]