

Harry Klein

## **The Destruction of the Częstochowa Jewry During the Nazi Epoch** (Excerpts from a speech delivered at a memorial service)

During the times of the Second World Inferno, in the years 1939-1945, the majority of Częstochowa Jewry perished by the cruel Nazi sword.

The survivors of the destruction cry out before the world, with the bitter scream of agony, for this disaster. Appearing in thoughts and minds are the images of the gruesome annihilation of the Częstochowa Jews, who were utterly destroyed in rivers of blood, gas chambers and pyres.

Częstochowa was an integral part of European Jewry and the grief for the destroyed holy community of Częstochowa is, therefore the grief of all the Jews of Europe, for the destruction of the Jewish nation, a third<sup>1</sup> of which the systematic and calculated murder machine driven by the German people managed to exterminate - six million Jewish martyrs. There is no one in this generation, the living witnesses of the destruction and annihilation, who has not lost part of his family. Thousands of threads bind today's generation with the martyrs, who rendered up their souls in the German killing factories - the death camps - in sanctification of the Name [of God] and the People [of Israel].

### ***Remember What Amalek Did unto Thee*** [Deuteronomy 25:17]

Twenty years have passed since the grisly events. In this time, a new generation has already arisen - a generation which has not seen the destruction and cannot imagine that such things could happen. The Holocaust survivors are those who must not allow these events to be forgotten. They have an obligation towards the martyrs and this obligation is "*Remember what Amalek did unto thee!*"

### **The Beginning of the Nazi Crimes**

On Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939, the Second World Inferno broke out and, by Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> September, the Nazi legions were in Częstochowa. Immediately, they commenced with tortures, shootings and murders. At one o'clock in the afternoon, the Germans opened fire on the unarmed civilian population. They drove out the people from all the streets and homes, with their hands raised, to these locations: [from] ul. Katedralna to the cathedral, [from] the New Market Square [Nowy Rynek] to the church, to the Town Hall square and the square at ul. Strażacka.

German soldiers, armed with machine-guns, guarded all the places listed above and everyone was forced to lie down facing the ground. In addition, shots were fired at them. Bullets flew over the heads of those who were lying on the ground. Later, after long hours of lying on the ground under a hail of bullets, the Germans ordered them to get up and run - which was, once more, accompanied by shots.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: According to various historical sources, the worldwide Jewish population in 1939 numbered 16.6 million.]

Those from ul. Katedralna were herded into the cathedral; those from the New Market Square—into the church; those from ul. Strażacka – into Brass’ factory; those from the vicinity of Town Hall – into the nearby church. Several hundred people were killed in these savage shootings. In the annals of the Częstochowa Holocaust, this day is marked as “Bloody Monday”.

On the following day, Tuesday, those aged fifty and over were released. The younger ones were transferred to the prison at Zawodzie and also to the military barracks. On Wednesday, the others were freed. But they retained several dozen hostages, who were to answer with their lives in the case of demonstrations of animosity or attacks by the civilian population against the Germans. This was the beginning of the German persecutions, repressions, chicaneries, tortures and shootings against Jews in Częstochowa.



Harry Klein is speaking; part of the presidium [is seated].  
(L-R): L. Jakubowicz and M. Frydlender

### **Jewish Life Under the Nazi Rule**

The first Rosh Hashana, under Nazi occupation, also did not transpire peacefully. The German military came to the Jewish neighbourhood and captured Jews for forced labour.

In January 1940, Jewish women experienced great fear in Częstochowa. It was a Friday night. Several streets were encircled by gendarmes, who entered Jewish houses, dragged out thousands of men and women, especially young girls, half-naked from their beds and herded them to the New Market Square. They were held there for long hours in the cold and were released half-frozen.

Jewish lives and possessions became free for the taking. Jews were driven out from their homes in a whole series of streets, and these streets were declared an Aryan neighbourhood,

where Jews were not permitted to live. Mass arrests ensued, during which the Polish police commander Szabelski, who caused the Jews of Częstochowa great troubles, treated [the detainees] in a brutal manner.

Immediately after Yom Kippur, the Germans staged a pogrom. Hundreds of Polish scoundrels, armed with sticks and stones, entered the Jewish neighbourhood, smashed windows in the Jewish houses and shops, beat anyone who fell into their murderous hands, torched the Jewish cigarette stand at the New Market Square and, from there, the wild multitude let loose towards ul. Wilsona, setting fire to the magnificent German [New] Synagogue which, within an hour, was standing in incandescent flames and was completely destroyed.

In 1941, rumours spread to the effect that the Germans were preparing to implement a ghetto in Częstochowa, and that Jews would only be permitted to live in this demarcated, shrunken area. It did not take long. On 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1941, the ghetto was implemented. The ghetto's boundaries were marked with large poles, onto which yellow boards were hung, bearing the legend that exiting the ghetto boundaries, without a special permit, was punishable by death.

In June 1942, on a Saturday morning, the Jewish ghetto police announced that all men, aged between fifteen and fifty, were required to report to the Old Market Square, the New Market Square and Aleja I for a rollcall in order to check their work cards. This caused a great panic, for not everyone was in possession of a work card. In ghetto terms, a work card signified a permit to be alive. Indeed, not everyone reported, but only those who had the work cards.

All the assembled Jews were suddenly surrounded by gendarmes, *Schutzpolizei*<sup>2</sup> and Polish policemen. Tension grew from minute to minute. No one knew what this meant. After a few hours, all were released and sent off to their respective workplaces. As it was later understood, this had been a trial-run, by the Nazi murderer Degenhardt, to see what the selections to deport people to Treblinka would look like. The unrest in the ghetto increased from day to day, but no one could imagine that the calamity of the mass deportations to the death camps was so near and was being planned in such detail by the German murderers.

## **The Destruction of Częstochowa Jewry**

On Yom Kippur Eve 1932 [sic 1942], the mood was oppressive. No one knew the exact reason why<sup>3</sup>. Evening fell and Jewish Częstochowa prepared to go attend *Kol Nidrei*. The Yom Kippur candles had already been lit in all the Jewish homes, and the Jews were preparing for the Day of Judgement by prayers to the Creator of the World that He should grant them a good year. Regretfully, their fate had already been sealed. The German sadists had already formulated their plans.

On Yom Kippur, 21<sup>st</sup> September 1942, it already became known to all that the most horrible thing, which everyone had feared, had arrived. On the following day - the day after Yom Kippur, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1942 - the ghetto could no longer be recognised. All the ghetto borders were guarded by the death squad. Incessant shooting was heard and Jews were being

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: Ger., "Protection Police"; name of the German uniformed police force, aka "Schupo" for short.]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: The expression used in the original Yiddish is "no one knew for what and for when", which is akin to the English "no one could put his finger on it".]

driven out to the selection. The mournful cries of women and children were heard. An enormous mass grave was dug on ul. Kawia to bury those who were shot.

The arch-murderer of Częstochowa Jewry, Degenhardt, carried out the selection. Jews - the elderly, women and children - were taken away in large groups to the railway wagons, in order to be sent to Treblinka to their deaths, to the gassing and burning. A whole series of such selections and deportations took place at intervals of every few days, encompassing the period between the day after Yom Kippur to the day after Simchas Torah. The "Big Ghetto", which had bubbled with so much life, energy and creation, was completely emptied. Now, a deadly silence reigned in the entire area where the Jews had lived and struggled for their existence.

### **The "Small Ghetto" and Its Liquidation**

After the mass slaughters, in which the greater part of Częstochowa Jewry had perished, six thousand lonely and orphaned Jews remained. For several weeks, they were billeted at the various workplaces where they worked, until the so-called "Small Ghetto" was established in four small, filthy alleyways.

Life in the "Small Ghetto" was a continuous wrangle between life and death. Deportations, shootings and the so-called "selections" were daily occurrences. Let us mention here the *akcja* against the elderly and children, the deportations to Radomsko and Bliżyn, the *akcja* against the Jewish intelligentsia and a whole series of others.

On the days 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> June, the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto" took place, which was concurrently bound up with the uprising of the Częstochowa resistance movement. Two thousand Jews perished in that unequal and heroic battle. [But,] this does not yet seal the chapter of the destruction of the Częstochowa Jews.

With the definitive liquidation of the "Small Ghetto", the Nazis, may their names be obliterated, declared Częstochowa "*Judenrein*". All the Jews were barracked in the four HASAG concentration camps and on ul. Garibaldię. There, too, there was not a peaceful moment. On 20<sup>th</sup> July 1943, a selection was made at HASAG-Pelcery, which robbed three hundred more Jews of their lives. Simultaneously, a selection took place at ul. Garibaldię, and a hundred Jews were selected there. All those 400 Jews were shot at the Jewish cemetery in Częstochowa.

During this entire period, there were individual shootings of Jews, who were on the "Aryan side" and of combatants of the resistance movement in skirmishes against the Nazi murderers. At the same time, there was mortality in the concentration camps as a result of physical exhaustion and typhus.

In the last days of the German occupation in Częstochowa, on 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> January 1945, they still managed to deport 5,800 Jews to the German camps - over half of whom perished.

### **Not to Forget and Not to Forgive**

The *Surviving Remnant* is unable to remain indifferent upon describing the Holocaust or writing about it. The blood boils and the fists clench against the murderers of the Jewish

people, who are currently living in comfort. The events in Częstochowa, with its mass selections, deportations, whitewashed railway wagons and mass shootings, reappear. Rage surges up and the grievous cries of the small infants, whose little heads the assassins and mass-murderers smashed against walls, ring in one's ears. [Remember] the fate of the little Yanke'les, Moishe'les, Sure'les and Rywke'les, who were flung out of windows in a bestial manner.

[And] the cruelties and mass slayings in Treblinka, Auschwitz and all the other murder factories, where the crematoria blazed and, in their tongues of flame, were incinerated the bodies of our fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers and children – our dearest and nearest.

All around, we are enveloped by the horrific events to which the Surviving Remnant are the living testimony. When the bandages are removed from the deep wounds, which time will heal, it hurts. These are huge and terrible pains, and the agony therefore cries out. The wounds are profound and one needs to be stronger than iron to write about them. Bleeding are the hearts and bleeding are the souls of the eyewitnesses of the destruction and annihilation, who must not allow the world to forget what Amalek has done to the Jewish people.

### **The Function of the Memorial Services**

The memorial services must give expression to the horrors of how a third of the Jewish people was exterminated - and no passage of years gone by can make this national catastrophe be forgotten. The whole of Europe is still damp from the blood of six million Jewish martyrs. Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen and all the other death and concentration camps have become engraved in the minds, thoughts and hearts of the Holocaust survivors. Anywhere, throughout the globe, where Jews only find themselves, all are united in this great sorrow, which the world wished to forget.

At the Eichmann trial in the Jerusalem courthouse, the millions of gassed and incinerated in the gas-ovens and crematoria marched past once again. The battles of the Jewish heroes, who fought in the forests and ghettos, echoed throughout the hall. This historic trial also stirred the entire non-Jewish world, which had been as if barely cognizant of what had happened to the Jews in the times of the Nazi regime, and made it open its eyes.

### **The Literature on the Destruction of Częstochowa**

Much has already been written - and much is yet to be written - about the destroyed holy community of Częstochowa. Each author has taken upon himself the task to describe, in his manner, the pulsating Jewish life before the War, as well as the struggle and demise of the heroes and martyrs during the Hitler era.

It is the obligation of each one of us, who holds his hometown dear, to have in his home all the books and publications on Częstochowa, because every book was written with blood and tears, as a document for today's generation and for generations to come.

An [entire] reality has vanished along with the builders, the crown-bearers of the proud Częstochowa, with her exemplary institutions in all arenas – the financial, social, political and cultural life. Every party and every group were proud of their institutions. Idealism and

readiness for self-sacrifice were the imperatives of each separate party - and all this has vanished.

It is the Holocaust survivors, the living witnesses to the seas of tears and blood, who need to continue the traditions of the now destroyed holy community of Częstochowa.

### ***Yizkor***<sup>4</sup>

Immersed in deep sorrow and with bowed heads, let us say *Yizkor* for those who perished in sanctification of the Name [of God] and the People [of Israel]; *Yizkor* for those, who fell in the fight against humanity's greatest enemy; *Yizkor* for the heroic ghetto fighters and partisans of the resistance movement who, with their resistance and struggle, elevated the national importance of the Jewish people and helped bear the flag of the eternal Jewish existence of "*The Strength of Israel will not lie*" [1 Samuel, 15:29].

In the general destruction of European Jewry, the Częstochowa Jews rendered forth 50,000 sacrifices on the altar of Jewish sanctity [i.e., martyrdom]. Honoured be their memory.



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<sup>4</sup> [TN: Heb., "(may God) remember"; opening word of prayer for the souls of the departed.]