

The Evacuation Transport from HASAG-Pelcery to Germany

On the morning of Monday, 15th January 1945, the HASAG-Pelcery camp grounds were surrounded by Nazi *mechablim*¹ and *Werkschutz* men. The nightshift forced labourers were driven out of the barracks, and a lightning-fast evacuation ensued. Groups of 100 Jews were quickly encircled by *Werkschutz* men and taken away to the railway line, which was adjacent to the camp. The same happened in the other camps in Częstochowa, namely HASAG-Raków and HASAG-Częstochowianka. The Jews were packed up to 80, 90 and 100 into a single freight wagon.

No one knew the reason for such a sudden evacuation, or to where the transport was being sent. Nor did anyone know that the Nazi regime, in Częstochowa, was already in a moribund state and that, within thirty hours, the Nazis would be forced to flee to where “the pepper grows”². What had actually happened, about which no one knew? After all, different news still had reached the camp. They had also received, in an extremely clandestine and illegal manner, the latest radio reports, as well as a few individual newspapers, from which one could find one’s bearings as to the state of affairs in the world. The answer is that, ever since the Nazi murderer [Fritz] Bartenschlager had taken charge of running the concentration camps in Częstochowa, the terror and repressions intensified, and it was impossible to maintain the same connections that had still been viable up till then.

The Nazi killer Bartenschlager had special powers over the HASAG concentration camps and he did anything he pleased. He would always run about brandishing his revolver, shooting anyone he came upon. He implemented new regulations. The first was that a guard was to be stationed at the entrance to the camp, and it became forbidden to enter or exit one by one, but only in closed groups, to and from work. A Jewish police force and Jewish firemen were once more introduced, in addition to which, it is sad to say, three Jewish “camp specialists” were brought in - one was a German Jew named Goldstein, [to serve] as camp leader, and two policemen Jidl Frenkel and Umglik³ from the Warta camp.

The Nazi murderer also ordered a new barrack to be built as a kitchen on the camp grounds, so that the enslaved Jewish nightshift workers would not need to leave the camp for their midday soup. The clothes of both the male and female enslaved Jewish labourers were smeared with a reddish black paint in vertical stripes.

Trains, with machines, arrived on a daily basis – meaning that the factories were being enlarged. (In reality, these machines were from evacuated factories from which the Nazis had fled.) The SS men brought, for themselves, [railway] carriages with office furniture, various fittings, chandeliers and other plundered items.

¹ [TN: Heb., used in Yiddish to mean “destroyers”, although in modern Heb. the term denotes terrorists.]

² [TN: Pol. and Yid. expression denoting an unknown, distant place, akin to “the ends of the earth”.]

³ [TN: Appears as Immerglik on p. 272 of Dr Orenstein’s book “Churban Czenstochow”; as “umglik” means “misfortune” in Yiddish, this deviation from the correct surname may have been intentional.]

The killer Bartenschlager [then] declared that far too many Jewish slave labourers were employed for production and that a smaller number would also be able to carry out the work. A series of reductions ensued.

The first groups, which were reduced, were sent to Częstochowianka and Warta in Częstochowa and those made redundant in December 1944 were deported to concentration camps in Germany - the men to Buchenwald and the women to Ravensbrück. Others reduced were employed in building new railway lines to connect the factory grounds with the railway lines from all sides. The work of laying the new rails proceeded at the quickest tempo.

Goldstein, the Jewish camp leader who had been brought in, held special meetings with the kapos and explained to them that Hitler's regime was proceeding steadily forward and would engulf the whole of Europe, and there was only one way out for Jews - to adapt to the conditions and execute everything which the Germans demanded. He taught the kapos the new concentration camp system, how the kapo was to lead his group through the gate at the rollcall, at which an SS man was always present. The procedure was as follows:

The kapo stands in front, and his group behind him. He then gives the command, "*Forward march!*", followed by "*Caps off! Eyes to the right!*", and then delivers his report, "Kapo eleven reports thirty *Häftlingen*"⁴, whereupon he marches through the gate with his group and gives them a further command - "*Caps on!*".

No one was familiar with the word "*Häftlingen*" (the term denotes prisoners), which created a tragi-comic situation. There was one kapo, who was unable to learn this word by any means, and Goldstein "treated" him for this to ardent blows every early morning. The kapo, instead of saying "Kapo eleven reports thirty *Häftlingen*", would announce, "Kapo eleven reports thirty *pitlingen*"⁵. After being dealt a fiery slap, he would say, "Kapo eleven reports thirty *hefker-yingen*"⁶. The blows were to no avail - he was unable to say the word "*Häftlingen*". Who knows? Could it be that he was, in fact, familiar with the meaning of the word and therefore refused to say it, thus demonstrating his protest against the SS men and their assistant Goldstein?

This state of affairs continued until Monday, 15th January 1945. Early that morning, the Nazi assassin Bartenschlager came running up, with a group of SS men, to conduct the evacuation. This occurred with such lightning speed that, before anyone understood what was happening, he was already inside a sealed [railway] wagon. Under such conditions, it was indeed possible to become disoriented as to the strategic situation at the frontlines and how long the War would last.

As it turned out, the management of HASAG-Pelcery was aware that there would be such an evacuation — this emerged from the rumours they had spread to the effect that the factory's enslaved Jewish labourers were considered as qualified professional workmen and, as the HASAG firm was continually opening new factories, some of them would be sent to these new

⁴ [TN: Ger., prisoners/detainees, as follows below.]

⁵ [TN: Yid., plural form of "pitling", a whole smoked herring with head, tail and fins.]

⁶ [TN: "Debauched youths", made up of the Heb. "hefker" (lawless/licentious) and Yid. "ying" (youth, derogative form).]

factories. But who could think about that inside the sealed wagons – when everything that the Germans had ever said had always turned out to be lies and fabrications?

The train dragged its way laboriously onwards and was continuously left standing on branch lines, because trains with German military and ammunition were constantly speeding through. Inside the wagons, each minute was unbearable. One could not take one's breath. There was quite simply the hazard of suffocating or perishing of thirst and hunger.

Once evening fell, one could not see anything because of the general darkening. Due to the fact that the train was continuously diverted to different branch lines, one also became disoriented as to the direction in which the train was travelling.

In the morning, when it became light, one could see a sign at a railway station - "Weimar" - and a sign "Buchenwald" could already be seen in the distance. Everyone was embittered and despondent. Suddenly, shots rang out from a nearby grove. Instinctively, Dawid Watenberg called out, "Jews, say *Vidui*⁷ – our end has come." Everyone was left in shock. There was already no time even to think. The train came to a halt and a command was given to disembark from the wagons. As it turned out, Germans had been holding shooting practice in that grove.

Buchenwald, with its extraordinary appearance, came into everyone's sight - an enormous *combat*⁸, a gigantic city and, as far as the eye could see, only barracks, barracks and more barracks - the work and achievement of Hitler's regime. The camp police, who had already been informed of the transport, appeared. Firstly, the people were lined up and counted, as was the "custom". Then they were led inside the camp. There were tall towers encircling the concentration camp, manned by SS men with machine-guns in full readiness to shoot anyone who only attempted to tear himself away from the Buchenwald "Valley of Hell".

A babel of different tongues was heard in the camp, because people had been sent to the sorrowfully notorious Buchenwald concentration camp from all the countries where the boots of the Nazi destroyers had only tread. A command rang out to remain standing and put down one's packs, which was again not a good sign. The *Częstochowers* were led, as a group, into a haircutting and bathing facility - it was actually like a basement - which alarmed them no less.

Another command was given to willingly give up all valuables - money, gold objects, and foreign currency - and was anyone to conceal them, he would immediately be a candidate for the crematorium. The SS officer pointed in the direction of the crematorium - the symbol of Hitler's technological mass murder - from whose chimneys were rising fiery billows of smoke. Is it possible, then, to convey such a horrific experience? Is it possible, then, to convey the sadistic bestiality of the Nazis, who transformed mass murder and looting into an ideal?

⁷ [TN: Heb., "confession"; a prayer in which one asks for forgiveness for his sins, which is recited, in among other instances, by one who is about to die.]

⁸ [TN: The meaning of this word is unclear within this context; in Dr Orenstein's earlier version of this article in "Churban Czenstochow", p. 278, the phrase he uses is "a city - a concentration camp".]

After this prelude, everyone had to undress to have his hair cut and be bathed. The clippers tore the hair out instead of cutting it. The bath consisted in that everyone had to go into a deep tub, containing a disinfection liquid, and then wash himself under a shower. Then those, who were already shorn and bathed, were led up to the upper floor, where clothes were given out, which consisted of a shirt, a pair of trousers, a coat, a pair of shoes and a cap. At the same time, a registration was carried out.

After this whole procedure, which took some fifteen hours, everyone was taken, by the camp police, to a barrack. The *Częstochowers* were billeted in the so-called “Little Camp”, in blocks 59, 61 and 63, whose [real] name was “Quarantine” or “death camp”⁹, and was fenced off from the general camp with barbed wire.

After going through the procedure, people could not recognise one another. All were deathly pale and exhausted from the journey, the hunger and the haircut - which would be more rightly called plucking the hair out – and the disinfection, which had taken an eternity. The clothes changed everybody. One was given the cap of a ship’s captain, another that of a mariner and a third that of a chauffeur. Tall men wore short trousers and short jackets, while short ones wore long clothes, and everything hung down from them. Is it a wonder, then, that one could not recognise the other?

The system in the barracks was very different from the one in HASAG in Częstochowa. First of all, they were not called barracks but “blocks”. A block was divided into “sections” and “bunks” - a bunk was made up of nine prisoners and a section of six bunks. Each section consisted of 55 inmates - 54 from the six sections, plus one section leader. Over all these sections, there was a block orderly, a scrivener and a block elder. Those, who went to work, also had a foreman and a kapo. Besides these, there was also an [SS] *Blockführer* [Block Leader], *Rapportführer* [Report Leader], political department leaders and a whole bunch of leaders of all sorts - each murderer beastlier than the next.

In Buchenwald, the *Częstochowers* were not sent to any work, but the bunch of “leaders” already saw to it that everyone should be kept busy from early morning to late at night. It began with rollcalls, [then] injections, lice inspections and various other nuisances, which a normal person could never have thought up. The food was like at HASAG-Pelcery, but the sleeping conditions were unbearable. Everyone lay as if packed into the bunks, utterly unable to move. In addition to that, there was also the plague of the cold - freezing at the rollcalls. Buchenwald lies in the hilly Jena region, where the wind is very acute. In January 1945, there were terrible frosts and, as no one had any coat, there was quite simply the peril that all would freeze [to death].

After several days of torments, the *Częstochowers* were notified that anyone wishing to work was to register and would be sent to a factory. This was a problem. To register or not to register? Not registering would mean avoiding work and, for the murderers, this would constitute grounds to be gassed and burned in the crematorium. If one did register, who knew

⁹ [TN: “The ‘Little camp’ had horrific conditions, particularly exacerbated by overcrowding; on occasions over 2,000 people were crammed into space intended to hold fifty horses. Tents were also erected within the ‘Little Camp’ as an increasing number of people were sent to this sub camp. No sanitary facilities were available, leading to high mortality rates from disease and exposure.” (source: The National Holocaust Centre and Museum, <https://www.holocaust.org.uk/buchenwald>).]

what awaited one there? Who knew if it was [really] a factory? Could anyone believe what the Nazi murderers said?

The quandary was resolved, when the lists were compiled without asking anyone whether he wanted to travel or not. On the eighth day, the *Częstochowers* were summoned and taken, in files, to the transport at the cinema block. The transfer was no easy feat, due to the lack of a means of transport. Everyone stayed in the cinema all night long. To everyone's astonishment, a film was [actually] shown.

[But] it all looked like a distorted mirror - films and music on one side, and the gallows and crematorium on the other.

At dawn, the command "*Eintreten!*" [Ger., Fall in!] was heard, which meant to line up in formation for the transport. The frost was fierce and everybody was shivering and trembling with cold. In tight formation, guarded by SS men, the group was led out to the branch railway line, where a new procedure of counting [the people] and boarding the freight wagons ensued. Once more, they were packed eighty to each wagon. This time, there was a fully armed SS officer in every carriage - another bad sign. There could already be no talk of tearing open the little windows enclosed in barbed wire. Secondly, this was German territory, and any encounter with a German was a 100% death.

The train dragged its way for twelve or fourteen hours, until arriving at a place called Untersachsenhausen¹⁰. As it later emerged, the distance from Buchenwald to Untersachsenhausen is sixty-five kilometres - viz. not even forty-one miles - and such a journey would have needed to take no longer than one hour.

From the railway station, everyone was taken, in tight formation, six kilometres to the Dora concentration camp, which presented the features of a separate, locked-down world. First of all, everyone was taken to the bathing and disinfection block. At the entrance stood SS men and kapos, who kicked, punched and slapped every individual without any grounds. That was the *kabules punim* [Heb., welcome ceremony] in Dora, after which a new procedure ensued, as in Buchenwald, with disinfection, bathing and registration, which took till morning.

[Yet] the difference between Buchenwald and Dora was colossal in that, in Buchenwald, there were political arrestees from various nations, such as ministers, judges, writers, artists and clergymen of various faiths, and they undoubtedly exercised an appropriate influence, which compelled those in charge of the internal administration, who were prisoners themselves, to take into account the fact that the representatives of their [respective] governments were there, and to curb their savage and barbaric instincts to some extent.

In Dora, it was completely different. The majority of the internal administration, such as kapos and foremen, was made up of German criminal offenders, each of whom possessed a record of numerous criminal transgressions and time in prison. They tried to surpass the SS men with their sadism and bestiality, in a bid to attain higher positions in this manner. The underworld men were those who held the power in the Dora concentration camp.

¹⁰ [TN: We have found no mention of a locality by this name in any other sources, but its proximity to the Dora camp indicates it was in the vicinity of Nordhausen, Thuringia.]

The kapos, here, were in various ranks - namely, *Unterkapo*, *Kapo* and *Oberkapo*¹¹. Their duty was to incessantly beat, slap and kick [the prisoners]. It was here that one discovered the meaning of the term *kapo* in its Nazi sense as, in the Częstochowa camps, a kapo had not played any role. On the contrary, in Częstochowa, the kapo was the one who *received* the beating. If someone in a group failed to perform his work, the German foreman treated the kapo to a beating. If someone did not stand correctly at the rollcall, the kapo was hit - and thus, at every opportunity. In the Dora concentration camp, a kapo needed to have the proper "qualifications", which consisted in being a criminal offender with a sadistic propensity to torture others.

It is a confirmed fact that a son, a kapo, had hanged his own father and mother at the Majdanek death camp near Lublin. Every concentration camp was a sealed-off kingdom of gruesome, sadistic tortures, which were perpetrated by the criminal SS men and their servants, the kapos.

Following liberation, the Jewish Holocaust survivors treated kapos, in general - and Jewish ones in particular - with the greatest loathing. This may be attested to by the following facts:

- The first congress of liberated Jews, in the American Zone in Germany, which took place in the days 27th, 28th and 29th January 1946, adopted a resolution to the effect that former kapos were not to be allowed to hold any communal office.
- The convention of the partisans and frontline combatants' "Pachach"¹² movement, which took place in Leipheim on 8th and 9th May 1946, in clause 9 of the general political resolution, resolved that the ruling authorities would not allow kapos to hold positions in the communal life.

Częstochowa Jewry knew nothing of the expression "kapo". The first time they heard this word was on 24th June 1943, when they were barracked in the HASAG-Pelcery concentration camp. On that occasion, Political Director Lűth gave an address, in which he explained that "kapos" would be instituted in the camp - meaning that, at the head of each workgroup, there would be an individual, whose duties would be to see to the rations and clothing of his group.

The term "kapo" was understood to be [an abbreviation of] "concentration camp police". In truth, the word [*kapo*] comes from the Italian language, and it denotes a chief of police or person in charge, as well as headman. Both in Buchenwald and Dora and, later, in Bergen-Belsen, the *Częstochowers* found out, or [rather] felt from the sadistic tortures, what "kapo" meant in the Nazi terminology.

Dora! Such was the name which the Nazi devils thought up for the concentration camp at Untersachsenhausen which, in reality, was a hell of death. This hell of death was a division of the sorrowfully notorious Buchenwald concentration camp. The tortures and killings at Dora far, far surpassed those of the main Buchenwald camp. The best proof is that the overall

¹¹ [TN: "For the most part, Kapos were in charge of work gangs, but there were also Kapos for the hospitals or the kitchens. Certain camps even had a hierarchy: Oberkapo, Kapo, Unterkapo. Initially, Kapos were appointed from the ranks of ethnic German prisoners convicted on criminal charges etc. Jews were appointed Kapos only in those camps which were all Jewish." (source: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/kapo>).]

¹² [TN: Heb. abbreviation of "Partizanim, Chayalim, Chalutzim" (Partisans, Soldiers, Pioneers).]

number of those enslaved, in Dora, exceeded a total of 140,000 - and there were no more than thirty-odd thousand inmates in the camp. The [other] more than 100,000 enslaved inmates perished in the physical and mental wrangle from arduous labour, starvation, necessity, cold, illness, beatings, tortures, shootings and hangings, and were burned in the crematorium and turned into ashes.

Dora was an international camp for men only. The inmates were from various nations which had been subjugated by Hitler's Germany. Transports of young men were sent to slave labour at the Dora concentration camp from all the countries upon whose soil the boots of Hitler's troops had tread. Transports arrived with great frequency, for no one could withstand more than a few months. There was a constant transit. Every couple of days, new transports replaced those who had died and were burned in the crematorium.

The *Częstochower landsleit*, who arrived in Dora, were divided into groups and sent to work, which consisted of hauling rocks - which was really just an excuse to beat [the prisoners] and [make them] freeze. No one would have been able to survive long, regardless how. A "miracle" simply occurred, that the *Częstochower landsleit*, along with other people, were led into a tunnel to work at the "Sawatzki Works"¹³.

Firstly, it started with an entire array of formalities and paperwork at the *Arbeitseinsatz* [Labour Deployment]. Everyone had to answer a whole series of questions and everything was written down in special questionnaires. Most of the *Częstochowers* registered as professional metalworkers, because no metalworkers were sent to a dirty job, viz. transport - which was under the direct supervision of the SS and kapos. That was the worst thing one could imagine. SS and kapos also ran about inside the factory, but they did not have the opportunity to deliver such beatings as, here, the German foremen "reigned".

The majority of the *Częstochowers* were assigned to the "Klein Group", which was thus [named] due to the fact that the chief of the department was Engineer Klein, who was the one who put forth the V-3 project¹⁴. Previously, the V-1s [flying bombs] and V-2s [rockets] had been produced [there, but] the production of the V-3s had not actually begun. The plan still needed to be approved but, in the meantime, halls were prepared for the work and machinery was installed. There was no actual work yet - only preparations were made for the assembly of the V-3s. Everyone was forced to work, because the SS men and kapos, passing by, would have immediately treated them to blows - and there was nothing to do. Someone, who was an actual locksmith, would make a key for the foreman or other similar things, but those who were not [real] metalworkers were compelled to look for something to do. All became sweepers and cleaned the huge hall. One group drove about with water, spraying [the hall], another spread rubbish on the ground, a third swept [it back up], and a fourth made brooms out of wood wool, because there were no brooms either.

¹³ [TN: Named for German engineer Albin Sawatzki, the head of production of the A4 missile and technical director of the Mittelwerk underground factory.]

¹⁴ [TN: Likely ref. to Georg Klein, who was Chief Engineer under Albert Speer, the Minister of Armaments and War Production in Nazi Germany, who was in turn the one who convinced Hitler to put into production the V-3 cannon (the V-3, Ger., "Vergeltungswaffe 3", or "Vengeance Weapon 3", was a large-calibre gun working on the multi-charge principle whereby secondary propellant charges are fired to add velocity to a projectile - a weapon which was planned to be used to bombard London). As yet, however, we been unable to find any direct link between Eng. Georg Klein and the V-3 cannon in historical sources.]

In the second half of March, the head of the department, Eng. Klein, who was called the "*Betriebsleiter*" [Operations Manager], ordered the kapo to hold a rollcall, because he wished to deliver an address - which is what transpired. In his speech, Eng. Klein declared that, hitherto, preparations still had been made, but that now the real work was about to begin. All those, who had registered as qualified metalworkers, electro-technicians and mechanics, would now need to be able to carry out the works with accuracy - otherwise, this would be considered sabotage. Every smallest imprecision would be punished as sabotage, and [the perpetrator] would be hanged within two hours. Those, who were not first-class professional workmen, still had a chance to withdraw now, and they would be sent to other forms of labour.

[Only] a small group then withdrew, most of whom were neither Jewish nor from Częstochowa - for who had the guarantee that these people would not be killed for having deceived [the Germans]? A funny slogan circulated among the *Częstochowers* - "Stick it out, lad - otherwise you're lost!" This comical motto did not disappoint, for the assembly of the V-3s never began. This was already the time when the Allied aeroplanes were flying over the German territory, day in and day out, "dishing out" serious bombs - or "*arbeslech*" [Yid., chickpeas], as those enslaved in the concentration camps would call them. These "*arbeslech*" did their job and the [railway] wagons, with the parts for the assembly of the V-3s, never reached Dora - they were all destroyed along the way.

This was the course a "normal" day followed in Dora:

All were roused at four o'clock in the morning - the Block Elder and *Stubendienst* [Barrack Orderly] ran about shouting, brandishing beating weapons and thrashing whoever failed to rise that very second. All were required to wash immediately. There was neither soap nor hand towels, but everyone was forced to stand at the cold water in the bleak frost. This provided the supervisors with, yet another, opportunity to dispense blows. Immediately afterwards, everyone had to line up to receive his portion of bread and soup, which were the rations for the entire twenty-four hours, during the course of which one was beaten for not standing straight in line, looking into one's soup to see if it contained a potato and similar "transgressions". This was immediately followed by the command "*Eintreten!*" [Fall in!], which meant that everyone had to line up, in rows of five, in front of the block. The beatings ensued once again - for not lining up quickly enough, for talking amongst each other and so forth.

Then the Block Elder led everyone to the parade ground, and nor did the march there transpire without beatings - for marching unevenly, walking too slowly, walking too quickly, etc. At the parade ground, each one had to report to his team. Every team had a number, which consisted of a pole onto which a little board was nailed and, on that board, the number was marked with paint. Here, the rulers were already the true bandits. They could not only be immediately recognised by their appearances, but also for the marks they wore in the form of green triangles, which were referred to as "corners", bearing inscriptions with the letters BV or SV. The meaning of these characters was: BV - *Berufsverbrecher* [career criminal] and SV - *Schwerverbrecher* [serious criminal¹⁵]. The "career criminals" were former professional

¹⁵ [TN: According to many other historical sources, SV stood for "*Sicherungsverwahrte*" (preventive detention prisoner).]

thieves and men of the underworld. The “serious criminals” were professional robbers, bandits and muggers.

These brigands were the *oberkapos*, *kapos*, *unterkapos* and foremen in Dora. They already gave out murderous beatings without any justification¹⁶. Not a day went by without several people being beaten in such a manner at the parade ground, that they collapsed half dead. They were carried away to the hospital, which was called the “*Krankenbau*”¹⁷ - and were seen no more. One may already imagine what kind of hospital this was, if the name itself was such an aberrant one - *Krankenbau*.

The experience the *Częstochowers* had with this *Krankenbau* was the following:

Landsmann Dawid Watenberg, who was the only professional locksmith in the “Klein Group”, felt very debilitated and ill, like all the other *Częstochowers*. One early morning, he was no longer able to eat his morning bread. He realised that he was in a very bad state and went, from the parade ground, to the *Krankenbau*. A few minutes later, he returned beaten up - in addition to which he had been robbed of his chunk of bread there. The result of this was that, when he lay down to sleep that same night, he never got up again.

Such was the *Krankenbau* at Dora. It is a fact that, up to that incident and following it, not a single *Częstochower* ever crossed the threshold of the *Krankenbau*. They took their direction from their motto, “Stick it out, lad - otherwise you’re lost!”

These rollcalls would take over two hours, and all the prisoners trembled with cold. On top of these calamities, an orchestra played a variety of marches, which simply put one’s thoughts in turmoil as regards the Dora hell. To one side were the fiery billows of smoke from the crematorium, which incessantly burned the bodies of the deceased, those beaten half to death, the shot and the hanged and, all the while, an orchestra was playing marches...

After all had been counted by the kapo, he positioned himself at the front, and everyone had to march behind him, in military order, to the exit gate, where the SS men were standing. Here, the kapo already delivered commands from the Nazi lexicon: “*Caps off! Eyes to the right! Forward march!*” and, after marching through, “*Caps on!*”

The kapo was issued a written note stating the time of passage and the number of prisoners. And they marched thus, until reaching the tunnel of the factory’s subterranean *combat*¹⁸. Here, there was another guard of SS men and, once again, they started the headcount, to check whether it matched the kapo’s note. [And] the same story with the “*Caps off!*” etc. repeated itself...

Once the dayshift had marched into the tunnel, the nightshift marched out. Another series of beatings ensued for speaking with those of the nightshift. After all these rollcalls and headcounts, when everyone was already in separate halls, new, smaller rollcalls of the

¹⁶ [TN: The expression used in the Yiddish original is “without a for when and without a for what”.]

¹⁷ [TN: Ger., lit. “sick building”; although “*Krankenbau*” is the term commonly used in German in ref. to an infirmary or camp hospital, it would have had an ominous ring to the Yiddish-speaking prisoners, as the name denotes an establishment of sickness rather than one of healing.]

¹⁸ [TN: The meaning of this word is unclear in this context; it is perhaps a German abbreviation.]

workers of the separate departments begab. The masters [viz. chief foremen] and foremen picked out their workers and assigned them to different jobs. When the work was divided, there were more blows, because this or that person wanted to go to another job to which he had not been designated. As already explained, there was no work, but everyone had to work, otherwise his life was not safe. Some of the masters already recognised that this was a game for the devil¹⁹, but they had to make a show, in front of the SS men, that everything was progressing towards the very large production which needed to begin.

No one could allow himself to wonder what he should do, but had to find himself an occupation on his own. Everyone found something to do in order to avoid being hounded and beaten for not working. [And] what did the *Częstochower* lads do? The majority snatched up wrenches, climbed atop the highest metal beams, which were secured with bolts to the hall's entire metal structure, and continuously tightened the bolts, to then loosen them again. At first, the lads would actually screw and unscrew the bolts, but they later only made hand movements to make it appear as if they were doing so and, even later, they [just] struck the metal beams with the wrenches. Others would dismantle a metal table, to then put it back together again.

Lunchtime was anguish. All were hungry, but were given no food. The Nazi foremen and all the other Germans went to lunch - *they* certainly did eat! But the prisoners were only given coffee, which consisted of a bitter, black water - and this, too, would be accompanied by blows for not standing straight in line, for standing much too near the kettle, and so on.

Very seldom did the day go by in peace. Things were constantly happening to put the lives of the prisoners in peril. On one occasion, an incident took place, which threatened the lives of fifteen prisoners. The story was as follows:

The German foreman was welding a [certain] iron flap, and the welding apparatus malfunctioned, because the rubber hose was slightly torn in one place. He called the kapo and showed it to him. The kapo was waiting for just that type of opportunity, for now the "real work" of being able to beat everyone, without exception, would start. In order to give the event greater significance, the kapo went off to the SS guardroom and reported an act of sabotage. Immediately, two SS men arrived. They checked the hose and "determined" that it had been cut with a small knife. As it was forbidden for the prisoners to have knives, a command was immediately given to search all those who were near the hose. All were searched. The kapo made a list of fifteen prisoners, who had been near the welding machine, which he summoned and presented before the SS. First of all, the kapo treated each one of them to ardent slaps for two new sins - firstly, for not standing to attention and, secondly, for not taking off their caps before the SS (the same, old "*Caps off!*" story) ...

After that, one of the SS officers gave an address, in which he declared that should the transgressor, who had perpetrated the sabotage not come forth at once, all fifteen criminals would immediately be hanged. The story was taking a very serious turn, for hanging an entire group of prisoners, on fabricated accusations, was a day-to-day phenomenon. One of the group started saying that he was an expert in welding, and that [even] a blind man could see

¹⁹ [TN: Yiddish expression meaning fruitless endeavour or fool's errand.]

that the rubber hose was old and thoroughly unsound and had torn due to its faultiness. For this “impudence”, Willi (that was the name of the kapo), who wore a green corner with the inscription “SV”, or “serious criminal”, attacked him and beat him murderously. The SS men also kicked him with their boots, until he was streaming with blood. After that, the SS officers left – and with that the matter ended. Who knows what the outcome of this story would have been, had it not been [just] a few days before the collapse of the rogue Nazi regime.

Returning to the camp, after completing the shift work, was not among the easy things. First of all, each person gave back the tools he had taken in the morning, then lined up according to his group, which was counted once more. Following that, they once again joined the entire team, and the march to the tunnel’s exit commenced. At the exit, the wait began for the other shift to arrive, because no one was permitted to leave the tunnel before that.

Besides all this, events occurred, every few days, which perturbed one’s psyche. These were the executions of entire groups of prisoners and everyone was forced to stand by and look on. This provided the murderous kapos with an opportunity to beat everyone, under the pretext that one was not watching in the required manner or turning one’s head [away]. Is it really possible to watch mass executions of innocent people being hanged, and how the bloodthirsty SS men are standing, with loaded machine-guns, and laughing? On top of that, SS women – also with machine-guns – took part in the executions, with a satanic smile on their bestial countenances. Every such execution simply shocked the prisoners physically and mentally.

Once the nightshift arrived, they were, first of all, forced to march past the hanged people and look at them, whereupon the dayshift started marching out, under the kapo’s commands - in the familiar style – “*Forward march! Caps off! Eyes to the right!*” and so on. [Then,] the counting and, once they were already outside, they did not march straight into the camp, but were led to the stone quarry, where everyone was forced to take up a huge stone, for a new road that was being built there, and march with it to the camp. With the stones, there was another series of beatings, for taking up a small stone or for choosing one. Once all had already finished with rocks, they finally marched into the camp. At the entrance, once more there was the story with the “*Caps off!*” and a headcount to verify whether the number was in accordance with the note the kapo handed over to the SS.

When all were already inside the camp grounds and had laid down the stones and wished to repose a little from these dismal torments – a new hell began inside the block itself. First of all, the Block Elder and *Stubendienst* welcomed the prisoners with blows and insults. A new story - a spoon had been lost, and this would not go by smoothly. The inventory did not match, and this could not go unpunished. The result was that everyone was punished to sleep in the freezing, unheated block for three nights - without a blanket. No one was given any food and no one could have been able to eat [anyway], after such an experience as the mass execution. This was a “normal day” at the Dora concentration camp.

Despite the cruel and brutal Nazi terror, there was nevertheless a resistance movement in the Dora “inferno of death”, as we found out from the execution of thirty prisoners, with the orchestra director first and foremost. As it emerged, the *Kapellmeister* - the director of the orchestra which played during the rollcalls – was the organiser of a resistance movement.

The plan had been to blow up the tunnel with dynamite on a Sunday morning, when the nightshift returned to camp, and none of the prisoners were inside the factory. Day by day, the dynamite was gathered from the quarry. The mountain of rock was regularly blasted with dynamite and, every day, a little was stashed, with the greatest secrecy, in a hiding place. It appears that this plan was betrayed and the thirty conspirators, along with the *Kapellmeister*, perished on the gallows as heroes.

Ever more cheering news began to reach us - the Germans were suffering devastating defeats, the whole of Germany was under bombardment. This encouraged everybody - might we, just maybe, live to make it out of this hell alive? That the situation was not so splendid for the Nazis, is something we already sensed inside the camp itself. Firstly, for several days in a row, they stopped giving us bread, because the bakeries had been bombed - and instead of bread, the prisoners each received three rotten, steamed potatoes. Secondly, groups of aircraft pilots arrived on daily basis to work in the assembly of the "new V-3 weapon". As it turns out, they had no more aeroplanes left - and they were tricked into thinking that the Nazi victory would come through the V-3, which flew without a pilot. They were indeed the proper mechanics and electro-technicians [for this], and they were to be the instructors for the assembly of the "*neue siegreiche Waffe*" [Ger., new weapon of victory].

When they entered the V-3 assembly hall, their eyes were dimmed²⁰. They saw a multitude of prisoners sitting on the beams near the ceiling, pretending to turn the bolts with the wrenches - after all, *they* could not be fooled. They entered the master's office and created an uproar as to what was going on here. The master told them, firstly, to be quiet. Secondly, he had not sent for them and thirdly, how could anything be assembled, if nothing had arrived? "*What do you mean?*", they yelled, "We have been informed that thousands of V-3s are being assembled here every month..." - to which the master replied, that all those reports were just propaganda. The pilots became "acclimatised" and, like the masters, began making themselves metal cupboards for clothes, with little locks and keys.

This did not last long. A few days later, on 31st March 1945, a "block curfew" was declared through the camp loudspeakers. None of the prisoners were let outside the block and no one was taken to work in the tunnel anymore. Every couple of hours, there were sirens – a sign that an aerial strike was imminent. The Nazis no longer reacted in any manner. They were hat-makers no more²¹, and had no ammunition to shoot at the planes. In order to delude their own [men], they spread the information that they did not wish to attack the aeroplanes, because this could bring about the bombing of the factories, which they wished to avoid.

In the early morning hours of [Monday,] 2nd April 1945, orders came through the camp loudspeakers to the effect that every prisoner was to take with him two blankets, a bowl and a spoon, and he would be given rations at the central depot. This was already completely different news. However, we were not allowed to ponder this newest development, because the Block Elders immediately drove everyone out from the blocks - without blankets, bowls or spoons. They took a rollcall and, as usual, counted the number [of prisoners]. In effect, everyone was led to the central depot, where kapos were striking about wildly with thick

²⁰ [TN: Biblical expression used in Hebrew and Yiddish akin to "their world fell apart" (see Lamentations 5:17).]

²¹ [TN: The Yiddish expression "no longer a hat-maker" is used in ref. to one abruptly fallen from grace, and is probably derived from the communal importance formerly enjoyed by hatters.]

clubs. Bread and tinned food were distributed at the depot. From another part of the warehouse, blankets, bowls and spoons were simply hurled out. Those able to withstand the blows from the kapos took their chance and seized [them] - but the majority relinquished the blankets, bowls and spoons, unwilling to risk catching mortal blows.

At a distance, we perceived smoke and fire. Records, documents, questionnaires and books were being thrown out from the windows of the Labour Deployment and Political Department and were being burned in specially-made bonfires, in a bid to erase the traces of the Nazi criminals in the Dora "hell of death", where over 100,000 prisoners, of numerous nationalities, had met their demise. From that, it was already clear that the camp was being evacuated. Jews and Russians were sent forth first, and then the people of other nationalities.

Then began the march to exit through the camp gates, where SS men stood and counted, as usual. Railway wagons were already standing on the branch line, in the area next to the tunnel. The prisoners were led to the wagons, where the SS officers counted once again and packed a hundred inmates into each wagon, each one of which was guarded by an SS man. All this transpired in a great rush, and the long train hastily departed from the branch line.

Making it alive out of Dora was truly a fantasy. More than 100,000 inmates had not lived to see that dream and that day. Where was the train headed? How long would the journey take? What awaited the prisoners on the train? To these questions, there were no answers.

The train dragged its way across various towns and was, very often, left standing for hours on end or travelling to and fro. As a result, it was impossible to determine the train's trajectory. From a conversation the SS officer of the wagon had at a station, while the train was waiting, we learned that the train was headed for Hamburg.

We were given neither food nor even water. [But] meanwhile, a rumour was spread to the effect that the International Red Cross was active in Hamburg and that they would take charge of the transport and give everyone [something] to eat.

After travelling forty-eight hours, the train finally arrived in Hamburg. From the wagons, we could see the port, the sea [viz. river], the numerous cold storage facilities and the bombarded buildings of the city. To everyone's dismay, the rumour with the Red Cross - like all other rumours in the ghettos and concentration camps - was groundless, and we received nothing to eat.

After stopping for a couple of hours in Hamburg, the train set off once again. Once more, it dragged its way on and on. The hunger and thirst tormented us horribly. In one of the wagons, everyone revolted and they began beating on the doors and shouting. Two SS men entered the wagon, brandishing loaded revolvers, and showed the Nazi morals. "*You want bread? Here's bread!*" [they exclaimed] - and shot two prisoners. An empty wagon was hitched onto the train and, into that wagon, the two who had been shot were thrown and those who had died of hunger and thirst in the wagons.

[To everyone's astonishment, on the fourth day²²], the train arrived in Hamburg once again, stood for a couple of hours and set off once more. At every stop, the dead were dragged out from the wagons and thrown into the wagon of the dead. Once the wagon of the dead was overfilled, the corpses were left together with the living, who were already also more dead than alive.

Finally, on the seventh day, 8th April, the train came to a halt. The doors were opened and a command rang out, "*Get off!*". This was the train station on the way to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. At the station, near the side tracks, lay turnips and beetroots. The prisoners, starving to death, ran to the turnips and beetroots and began seizing [them].

[Suddenly], the Nazi murderer - the commander of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, [Josef] Kramer – appeared, as if from under the earth. He pulled out his pistol and threatened that whoever grabbed a turnip or a beetroot would be shot on the spot. He positioned guards with loaded rifles, everywhere with the command to shoot anyone who seized a turnip or beetroot.

As always, a headcount began - and the numbers did not add up because, every couple of seconds, another prisoner fell dead. Finally, the march began to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, which was five kilometres away. The whole road became littered with exhausted, half-dead prisoners. Those, who were still alive, dragged themselves with their last strength to the camp and simply collapsed on the parade ground. They still did not give us any food or water. A new headcount ensued and the prisoners were divided into various blocks. The *Częstochowers* were billeted in blocks 88 and 89. Earlier, there had been a military school there, which had been evacuated. Fifty prisoners were packed into each small room. There were no sacks of straw and everyone lay down on the bare floors.

Everyone's lips were not just dry, but burnt. We all resembled living corpses - skeletons covered with tautly stretched skin. They still gave us no food. A few hours later, soup was brought and everyone received a little something warm. There was nothing more to eat, because the camp kitchens were unable to cook for the newly-arrived transports, and the bakers had no flour with which to bake bread. No one was sent to any work because those, who had arrived in the transport, were unable to [even] drag their feet.

Meanwhile, events developed at a lightning-quick pace. The German attack force had been destroyed long ago, and their resistance had also been completely broken. The [only] thing which they were still doing was fleeing from the approaching Allied armies.

On the sixth day at Bergen-Belsen, 14th April, we saw that the only Panzer tank in Bergen-Belsen had been painted all around with broad, white markings. The majority of the SS men disappeared and the few individuals, who remained with the murderous Nazi, Commandant Kramer, put on white armbands. The camp guards, who were Slovaks in the service of the Nazis, also put on white armbands. Here, we already clearly perceived that Nazi rule was a question of counted hours.

²² [TN: We have added these words from Dr Orenstein's original account in his book "*Churban Czenstochow*", p. 294.]

In the evening, a secret rollcall of the murderous kapos, with the BV and SV marks, was held. The Nazi murderer Kramer gave them leave to flee. They still managed to steal certain things from the warehouse, changed, in order to avoid being recognised for their concentration camp clothes and, with an abundance of stolen valuables, escaped into the night.

Liberation in Bergen-Belsen

One week after the *Częstochower landsleit* arrived in Bergen-Belsen, the camp was liberated. On 15th April 1945, at eight o'clock in the morning, the first columns of British motorised units arrived. In the front, the Military Police (MP) rode on Jeeps and motorcycles. They were followed by whole columns of military units. A few vehicles stopped in the camp and the columns travelled onwards to fulfil their military duties. The British Military Police immediately occupied a building, where a new camp management was formed. They declared that, within several days, a civilian administration would arrive and take over the management of the camp.

A radio station on wheels immediately drove throughout the camp broadcasting the latest news in various languages. The radio communiqué announced the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and delivered a short report on the appearance of the camp and the miserable state those liberated. The radio also made it known that, by orders of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, all the camp inmates would be properly fed and clothed and all the sick would be sent to hospitals and sanatoriums.

Special ships with products were on the way but, due to the fact that the fighting was still going on, transportation was difficult - so everyone needed to be patient. The motorised radio station broadcasted news several times a day.

Liberation arrived like a miracle for the half-dead, languishing camp inmates. This miracle had been forged in the offensive battles of the Allied armies, which struck the shattered and defeated Nazi legions in the skies, oceans and continents. The Nazi hangmen fled in the greatest fear and panic, in a bid to thus avoid the legal punishment, which they deserved for the mass murder and mass robbery they conducted during the course of their cruel reign.

The General Liberation of the Częstochowa Survivors

In the last stages of Nazi rule, there were Częstochowa Jews in an entire array of concentration camps - namely, in four concentration camps within Częstochowa itself and, as a result of forced evacuations, in concentration camps in Germany. The men were in Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dora in Untersachsenhausen, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, Groß-Rosen, Buchberg and other [camps]. The women were in Ravensbrück, Burgau, Türkheim and Allach.

The liberation was a result of the Allied armies which, in heroic battle, won the territories where the concentration camps were. The dates of liberation were from 17th January to 5th May 1945. The first to be liberated were the four concentration camps within Częstochowa

itself. In those four camps – HASAG-Pelcery, Raków, Warta and Częstochowianka – there were eleven thousand Jews. Of that number, 5,800 Jews had been evacuated in the last thirty hours. This means that on the Tuesday night from 16th to 17th January, 5,200 *Częstochower landsleit* were liberated. True, not all of those liberated were *born* in Częstochowa – but, due to the fact that they experienced their suffering in the Częstochowa concentration camps, they are considered *Częstochower landsleit*.

The liberation of the concentration camps in Germany took place on the following dates:

15th April 1945 – Bergen-Belsen;
27th April 1945 – Türkheim;
1st May 1945 – Buchberg;
2nd May 1945 – Allach;
5th May 1945 – Ravensbrück.

Three thousand *Częstochower landsleit* were liberated from the concentration camps in Germany and 5,200 from the four concentration camps in Częstochowa - so, in total, 8,200 *landsleit* were liberated.

The long-awaited liberation was a moment of spiritual exaltation, indescribable joy and, at the same time, profound sorrow. The joy was because the tyrannical, bestial Nazi regime had been militarily vanquished by the Allied forces. The sorrow was that not a single Jewish family or Jewish house had been left whole. The once blossoming Jewish community of Częstochowa had been completely destroyed. Before the War there had been multiple families which included four entire generations - and all of them had become dead bodies in Treblinka and other death camps and gas chambers, and were then incinerated in cruel tongues of fire into ashes.

The surviving *Częstochower landsleit* are [a small number of] individuals, who represent the once colourful Jewish life.

[Go to next page]

The Liberation

*Concentration camp inmate –
After years of slavery, you have awoken once again,
Destroyed the barbed wire and tall towers.
The minute you pondered for so long
Came by fire, battle and fury.*

*Hider in a bunker –
You were always in mortal fear and mortal peril,
Hiding from every shadow, without a crumb of comfort.
The miracle happened on the threshold of the struggle with death,
The enemy fell – you were set free.*

*Partisan –
In forests, fields and roads you fought.
You were always ready for battle,
You never turned away from weapons.
You became free by helping to vanquish the foe.*

