Rena Waga RIP

A tear falls, bearing an edge so sharp; It was whetted with the hardest of fates. And a colourful rainbow puts itself out, Like a storm with the blackest of wings.

Rivka Kopé

(Shtern in Mein Shoib [Stars in My Windowpane], Paris, 1961, p. 121)

Rena Waga, née Braun, was born on 19th May 1901 in Warsaw. She was orphaned at a very young age and was, therefore, forced to seek a means of existence. In 1922, she arrived in Częstochowa and opened a modiste salon. She was a great specialist in this field. In 1937, she married Szlojme Waga, and they led an ideal family life.

On 1st September 1939 the Second World War broke out, whereupon the collective Jewish troubles, in general, and hers as an individual, commenced. Immediately following the Nazi occupation of the city of Częstochowa, the "Bloody Monday" pogrom ensued, and her husband Szlojme Waga was detained as a hostage ("zakładnik"). Here began the first chapter of her difficult and tragic experiences - the running about in search of connections and aid to rescue her husband from the murderous Nazi hands. All doors were closed to Jewish intercessions. There were no ears to listen to the agonies that were boring deep into her heart. After a month, the hostages were released and, among them, was Szlojme Waga. A horrific period ensued - all were in grip of the Nazis, without any way out or possibility of saving themselves from their desperate situation.

The Nazis in Częstochowa, knowing that among the Jews there was a considerable number of professional workmen, wanted to use these skilled workers for their private purposes - for themselves and their families. They tasked the *Judenrat* with its established workshops, in which the best professionals would work, to carry out the private orders of the German men and women stationed in the town. For the convenience of the Germans, so that they should be able to come to the craftsmen and be measured for garments, shoes and other items, a special building was set aside for the craftsmen at [Aleja] Najświętszej Maryi Panny 14. This building was called the "Czternastka" [Pol., Fourteenth], and Jews referred to it as "the White House".

The specialist workmen set up workshops in this building, in which they employed the corresponding number of qualified workers. Only private orders, for the German holders of power, were produced in these workshops.

Rena Waga, as a specialist in her trade, had a workshop at the "Czternastka" and, in this manner, she was able to support her family for the time being.

The "Czternastka" craftsmen's house played a significant role for the resistance movement, and also for Jews wishing to escape from the "Small Ghetto". This was done thus:

The residents of the building, the professional workmen, had the right to enter the "Small Ghetto" under the guard of a Jewish ghetto policeman. Each time, liaison people arrived from the resistance movement in Warsaw and from other cities. They would go together with the professional workmen, into the "Small Ghetto" and fulfil their duties. On their way back out, they would be accompanied by such Jews as wished to escape from the "Small Ghetto". The "White House" was on the "Aryan side" and, once they arrived there, they vanished to realise their plans.

Despite the multiple assurances from Hauptmann Degenhardt, the arch-murderer of Częstochowa Jewry, to the effect that nothing would happen to the "productive Jews" of the "Czternastka", he nevertheless failed to keep his word - as was the norm for the Nazis. During the time of the massacres and deportations in the "Big Ghetto", on 22nd September 1942, the building was raided by gendarmes, and all the elderly, numbering some twenty-odd individuals - the parents of the professional workmen - were taken away to their deaths in the Treblinka gas chambers. This event was clear proof that the Nazi authorities paid no regard, whatsoever, to any promises. If all the professional were not killed then, it was only because the Germans were still interested in their working capacity.

At the end of February 1943, Zygelman's cap-making workshop at the Craftsmen's House was raided by Gestapo men and he - the cap-maker - with his wife and sister-in-law, were arrested and later shot. Their workshop was immediately ransacked by the Nazis. This was the second sign that the fate and existence of the "White House" were in question. Events were not long in coming - a fortnight after the incident with the Zygelmans, on 9th March 1943 at six o'clock in the morning, the building was raided by a group of gendarmes, under the leadership of the arch-murderer Degenhardt. All the craftsmen were driven out of their workshops and dwellings and led away to the "Small Ghetto". Thus ended the chapter of the "White House" in Częstochowa, with its perceived security.

In the "Small Ghetto", there was not a safe minute. Death hovered over every individual. Rena Waga, with her husband Szlojme and son Ludwig. fled the "Small Ghetto" and hid in a bunker until the collapse of the Nazi regime.

In 1948, Rena Waga arrived in Montreal. Immediately upon her arrival, she became active in the *Landsmannschaft*. At the same time, she also belonged to other organisations, such as Pioneer Women¹, Cancer Research, and an entire array of others. The objective of the institutions, to which Rena Waga belonged, was to provide financial aid to those suffering poverty in Israel and also here in this country. With her activities, she served as a model and example to others. She, herself, would donate generously to all these institutions and, at the same time, recruited others.

She performed her activities, her good deeds, with an inner, hearty devotion and with a smile on her lips. Her life was an expression of the highest level of humanity and devotion to the

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 $^{^1}$ [TN: Most likely ref. to French-based women's Zionist group, known in French as the "Femmes Pionnières".]

people. She created a family-like atmosphere in the institutions and societies to which she belonged. Rena Waga was the one to give expression, with her advice and deeds, to her maternal and sisterly feelings towards those who felt lonely and despondent.

In 1956, Rena Waga fell very seriously ill. There is no doubt whatsoever that her illness was a result of the Nazi persecutions from those times when she was in hiding, for twenty-two months, in a living sepulchre. She became a very frequently called upon on the doctors, who could do very little to succour her. She was even abroad, in Italy, for several months and, upon her return, it seemed that her physical state had improved. Her physical suffering tormented her extensively. The Waga family heard of a great specialist in Toronto, and they believed that this expert would be able to help her. Due to the fact that the cure was a long one, at the end of April 1958, the family moved to Toronto. In Toronto, her condition worsened even further. She was in hospital more than at home.

On 31st October 1958, she closed her eyes forever, increasing with her demise the number of victims of Nazism.

May her soul be bound in the Bond of Life.



Three young men at work during the Big Ghetto period.

The first from the left, Leon Unglik, survived. The two others were destroyed by the Nazi murderers².

² [TN: This photograph bears no connection to the article above.]