

Szlojme Waga



Szlojme Waga is the author of the book *Churban Czenstochow*, which appeared in Buenos Aires in 1949, published by the Central Union of Polish Jewry in Argentina. The book has 225 pages and is filled with a myriad of episodes of the Nazi barbarity, robbery and murder.

There are such episodes as the Nazi raid on the Lenczner family and the tragic fate of the patients and medical personnel in the two hospitals. Before analysing these episodes and the significance of this book — as well as other works by Waga - it is, first of all, necessary to become acquainted with his biography.

Szlojme Waga was born, in Częstochowa, on 22nd December 1900. Aged eighteen, he graduated from the Jewish Crafts School in Częstochowa, which quite famous in Poland. In 1919-1922, Waga was in Dortmund, Germany, where he worked as a mechanic. Concurrently, in the evenings, he studied and successfully graduated from the Technical University of Dortmund.

In 1922-1924 Waga served in the Polish military in Nowy Dwór [Mazowieckie Province], near Modlin, in Poland's only machine-gun battalion. While in the military, for one year, he studied at the Officers School and was the only one who graduated with honours.

Following his military service, in 1924, he returned to Częstochowa and, until 1931, ran a glass grinding plant along with his father and brother, after which he opened a factory with machines which he had made himself, manufacturing steel insulation tubes. This factory was one of [only] three which produced this type of product in the whole of Poland. As soon as the Germans entered Częstochowa, the factory was requisitioned and put under the German industrial centre. During the first period of Nazi occupation, Waga was employed in his own factory as a specialist. It is a characteristic fact that the factory exists to this day and has been nationalised by the Polish Government.

As soon as the Nazi troops marched into Częstochowa, Szlojme Waga, along with other distinguished figures of Częstochowa Jewry, was arrested as a hostage. The Germans threatened to shoot the hostages should the civilian population assault a German. Once the Nazis had established their administration, the hostages were gradually released.

A difficult wrangle begins for Waga, as for all the Jews. The situation becomes more bitter and more horrific from day to day. Waga, knowing every stone, every house and every Jew in Częstochowa, suffers not only for his own troubles, but also for those of all the people. Each day brings victims, shootings and arrests. All these were Waga's friends and acquaintances.

Each event, of this character, physically ruined him. He takes an interest in all these events and makes efforts to receive information regarding the state of the Jews. Here, he speaks with escapees from the Łódź Ghetto, who have arrived in Częstochowa seeking protection. There, he speaks with escapees from the Cieszanów camp, where the Nazi murderer, Major Dolf¹, cruelly reigned. He speaks with members of the *Judenrat* and with ghetto policemen - and all these pieces of information give him a clear picture of the tragic situation and gruesome fate of all the Jews, who have fallen under Nazi rule.

Waga witnessed all the events in Częstochowa, including those most tragic - the selections, resettlements and deportations, in which his parents (his father Reb Jakow-Cwi and his mother Bajla-Gitla *née* Binder), his brother Mojsze, a great number of family members and a whole town of friends and acquaintances were annihilated.

Following these bloody events, the community, that was once blooming and vibrating with life, was transformed into a slaughtered town, with the houses like tombstones for the former residents.

The hastily-created "Small Ghetto" was for the younger people who were still alive and were used by the Nazis for slave labour. Waga could not maintain himself in the "Small Ghetto", as it was a wrangle between life and death. He flees the "Small Ghetto", together with his wife Rena and his son Ludwik, and they hide in a suburb of Częstochowa, in a bunker of the house of a Polish family - for a large sum of money, of course. This bunker comprised a living grave without sunshine, without air and without a window. They needed to be hidden from [any] human eye. The cruel eyes of Polish criminal elements were lurking everywhere, [seeking signs] of Jewish life.

It was in this dark tomb that Waga wrote his book *Churban Czenstochow*, the manuscript of which contained 600 pages and was [only] partially printed in that book. What did Waga write? Only that which he personally experienced, saw with his own eyes and heard from the primary sources.

First of all, for Waga, himself, his own experiences are material for several books. His book actually begins with the entrance of the Germans into the city and the gruesome events of "Bloody Monday", the Nazi yoke, the procedure of taking the hostages and the moral and physical tortures. The subsequent chapters deal with the desperate Jewish plight in the "[Big] Ghetto", the resettlements and life in the "Small Ghetto".

The description, on pp. 49-52, of the raid by the Gestapo bandits on the Lenczner family is a historical document [showing] that every German - every Nazi - who was in Poland was a bandit, a murderer and a criminal, who had murdered innocent people in his eagerness to rob Jewish property.

What he writes about the two hospitals is most horrifying. On pp. 173-174, Waga tells of an order from Degenhardt, the arch-murderer of Częstochowa Jewry, to the effect that the medical personnel were to poison all the patients by way of injections.

¹ [TN: Although often mentioned in Yiddish sources as "Dolf" with an "F", his actual surname was **Dolp** - SS-Sturmbannführer Hermann Dolp.]

In a whole series of chapters, Waga expresses his opinion regarding the role of the ghetto police. He does not just pass on random criticism, but provides facts - and these facts speak for themselves [even] more than a verdict of guilt. On p. 194 [sic 149], Waga relates that the arch-murderer Degenhardt called the Jewish ghetto police together, shortly before the first deportation and gave them instructions regarding their tasks. Waga literally writes that the ghetto policemen "*sensed the sorrowful role they had to carry out, but nevertheless set out to fulfil the task*".

In light of the facts written in this book, and in the conditions under which the manuscript was written, there is absolutely no doubt that this book constitutes a historical document and a contribution to the documentary literature of the Third Destruction².

Dr Wolf Gliksman writes that

"Waga's book is an impressive inscription on the headstone of Częstochowa Jewry."
(See Czenstochov, New York, 1958, p. 209.)

Harry Klein declares that "*Waga's book is a historical document aching with blood and pain. This is a book of the suffering, pain, destruction and heroism of Częstochowa Jewry.*" (*The Anniversary of Two Books [and the Departure of Szlojme Waga]*, Montreal, 1958, p. 13.)

Szlojme Waga has published an entire array of articles, namely:

- 1) *The First Resettlement in Częstochowa – Morgen Journal*, 22nd October 1950.
- 2) *The Last Days of the Small Ghetto in Częstochowa* (for the seventh yuhrzeit) – *Hemshech* [Continuity], organ of the Association of Survivors [of Nazi Oppression] in Toronto, 1950.
- 3) *A Happy Holiday with Sad Thoughts* (Pesach article) – *Hemshech*, Toronto, 1950.
- 4) *The Destruction of Częstochowa Jewry - Pages of Destruction and Struggle*, Czenstochover Landsmanshaft of Montreal, 1958, pp. 7-10.
- 5) *My Dream – Pages of Destruction and Struggle*, Czenstochover Landsmanshaft of Montreal, 1958, pp. 29-31.
- 6) *The Blood of the Annihilated Screams from the Ground* – Czenstochov, New York, 1958, pp. 52-56.

Regarding the importance of Szlojme Waga's writing, suffice it to cite the meaningful opinion of the authoritative figure in this field, Chaim Lieberman³, who wrote the following about Waga's [article] *The Blood of the Annihilated Screams from the Ground*:

² [TN: In traditional Judaism, the two greatest tragedies to befall the Jewish people prior to the Holocaust were the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 587/586 BCE, which ended with the exiles of Jews to Babylon, and the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, which also culminated in the mass exile of Jews.]

³ [TN: Chaim (Herman) Lieberman was a political columnist for the Yiddish newspaper "Forverts" from 1924 to his death in 1963 (from his obituary in the New York Times of 17th May 1963).]

"It is an image which may serve as a symbol for the entire Holocaust. That young girl symbolises the beautiful Knesses Yisroel⁴ of European Jewry, whom the Nazis murdered. I can imagine nothing more shocking than this."

(Forverts, Wednesday, 25th November 1959.)

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Following the collapse of the Nazi powers, Waga and his family emerged from their "bunker" to freedom. For the first time in twenty-two months, they were able to breathe fresh air and see the radiant brightness. The Wagas were preparing to leave Poland. In the meantime, Waga was communally active in various fields.

It is a characteristic fact that the Central [Office] of Keren Ha'Yesod [United Israel Appeal] in Łódź turned to him in a letter dated 7th January 1948, asking him to organise a branch in Częstochowa and, obviously, to conduct a collection of funds. The result was that one month and seven days later, there was a well-organised branch of Keren Kayemeth [sic Ha'Yesod] in Częstochowa, with a committee and one hundred and forty-four declared contributors, and a sum of 1,650,050 złoty had been raised⁵. We know this from a report in a letter by Keren Ha'Yesod Central in Poland, numbered 919/48, dated 19th February 1948.

In December 1948, Szlojme Waga arrived in Montreal, Canada. His wish was to meet with his only sister, Chaja'le Waga-Rotman who had, for many years, been living in New York.

Immediately upon his arrival, Szlojme Waga became active in the Society, holding the main offices of Chairman, Secretary, Public Relations and others. At the time, [when] the newly-arrived *landsleit* were not yet properly settled and were unable to participate in all the works, Waga performed all the communal tasks himself. His house was transformed into a *landsmannschaft* with a secretariat. He maintained the correspondence, replied to all the letters, prepared long reports and was in contact with practically all the *Częstochower* institutions around the globe.

He raised money and sent it to those in need. He made appearances at the *akademie* [Pol., ceremonies/functions], gatherings and parties of the Society. He participated in the publications of the *landsmannschaften* in New York and Montreal. With his dedication to the Society, he has gained a most favourable reputation and serves as a [role] model and example for the Executive members.

⁴ [TN: Talmudic Heb., "The Congregation of Israel"; feminine term employed in religious literature in ref. to the Jewish people, or more accurately to its collective spirit. Throughout the literature, "Knesses Yisroel" is referred to as female counterpart (or attribute) of God (see Babylonian Talmud, Brachot, 32b) and while God is considered the "father" of the Jewish people, she is considered their "mother" (there, 35b).]

⁵ [TN: As Professor Dariusz Stola has informed us, 12,000 złoty was considered a better-than-average monthly salary at the time; thus, the sum of 1,650,500 złoty would have been the equivalent of 137.54 such wages, or almost 12 years of work for a single individual. With this sum, it would have been possible to purchase about 44.6 tonnes of bread or 8.7 tonnes of beef at 1948 retail prices (not wholesale).]

At the end of April 1958, Waga moved to Toronto. Despite that, he is in constant contact with the *landsmannschaft* in Montreal, sends in his contributions and, when he comes to Montreal, he takes part in the Executive meetings.

