

**Zvi Rosenvein**

## **Notices From a Different Planet**

The episode, which I shall relate here, began in November 1942, in the Częstochowa "Small Ghetto".

It was soon after the "resettlement" of the large city where, in the course of a short time, more than 40,000 Częstochowa Jews were sent away to Treblinka. The remaining, nearly 6,000, Jews were crammed into parts of the narrow ul Nadrzeczna and ul Garncarska alleyways.

All the survivors had lost family and friends. It is very difficult to put in words the emotions and feelings of the Jews with whom I found myself, at the time, in the "Small Ghetto".

There was a mood of the deepest despair at having lost everything and everyone - the home, parents, children, sisters and brothers. There was an atmosphere of hopelessness. We felt lost. We knew that our days were numbered and we were afraid of our own shadows. It all seemed alien - [like] shadows from another world. The nights were filled with terrifying nightmares and screaming in one's sleep. Many then fell to drinking alcohol and led a life of abandonment.

We, a group of surviving members of the *Ha'Chalutz* youth and [other] organisations, got together at the time and began to think as to how to proceed forwards in this hopeless situation.

Eliezer Geler, an envoy from Warsaw (who had a leading role in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising), was also present at this discussion, and he proposed that he smuggle himself out with two other members to Będzin, where a large and active Jewish community was still in existence - but the shadows of doom had already let themselves be noticed.

Eliezer Geler then gave us the address of a Pole in Raków - a smuggler - with whom he was in contact. Raków was a suburb of Częstochowa, and getting to Raków from the "Small Ghetto", at the time, was not among the easier things.

In order to come out to the "Aryan side" from the "Small Ghetto", one had to pass through the building at Aleja [NMP] 14, which was a passageway house from the "Small Ghetto" to the "Aryan side".

This building at Aleja [NMP] 14 had been given over by the Germans to the so-called "useful Jews". Good Jewish tailors, seamstresses and other worthy craftsmen were living there.

The two unmarried Firstenfeld sisters who, before the War, had been our very close neighbours on ul. Garncarska, had a small apartment in this building.

When I came into their apartment on that snowy evening, they drenched me with tears and implored me not to go, that evening, to the Gentile smuggler in Raków, warning me what a mortal peril it was to go out into the street, where the Germans and Poles were lurking about, in every corner, to catch a Jew.

However, I did not allow myself to be dissuaded from my decision, even though they were much older than myself and certainly had my own good in mind. From every rational standpoint, the two sisters were right, that it was a mortal peril for me to go to Raków that night, but an irrational force drove me to actually go.

Despite the many stumbles along the way, I arrived safely at the smuggler's house. There, I already found my two other comrades, with whom I was to be smuggled [to Będzin], but we could not leave Częstochowa together.

We were forced to stay with the smugglers for a few days and, each day, was for us like an eternity. We feared they would hand us over to the Germans. They constantly told us that the road was not safe. Until, finally, one evening, when there was a strong blizzard, they told us to accompany them. As it indeed turned out, this was the correct moment to smuggle us over, because when we finally arrived at the square where we had to enter to take the train to Będzin, we saw that, in a house at the railway station, two Germans sat, and one called the other's attention to the fact that I looked to be Jewish. But the other, half asleep on that wintery night, made a motion with his hand that he should allow us to board. And, in this manner, we arrived in Będzin in the middle of the night.

As regards the activity of the great Jewish community of Będzin, in those tragic times, I shall perhaps have the opportunity to recount on another occasion. Będzin, Sosnowiec and the entire Zagłębie region were annexed to the Third Reich, and the local Jews were still hoping the destruction would spare them.

There was a large and warm Jewish community there, with much heart and soul. Our friends from *Gordonia* [Zionist youth group] welcomed us with particular warmth, and they made great efforts for us to somehow settle down, knowing very well from what fires we had emerged.

There were, in Będzin, also other fellow members from Warsaw, Łódź and other [places], among them being Dr Natan Ek, a well-known writer and pedagogue.

We found ourselves in Będzin illegally, and the danger of falling into the hands of the Germans was always present.

Due to the fact that the Jews in Będzin belonged to the Third Reich, they were able to maintain written contact with the neutral countries, which were not at war with Germany. Our members in Będzin took advantage of this, and kept in touch with our fellow member in Switzerland, Natan Schwalbe [aka Schwalb].

At the time, the regular liaison woman with Natan Schwalbe in Switzerland was the extremely active and dedicated Hanka Bornsztajn from Będzin. She then travelled over to us,

the Jewish refugees in Będzin at the time, and informed us that the possibility had been created to receive South American papers for several of our members. She then asked us for pictures and various personal details, and sent them over to Switzerland, to Natan Schwalbe.

Sometime later, the South American passports arrived and, in April 1943, escorted by the German police, we arrived at the internment camp in Tittmoning, Bavaria.

We made active use of the rights which we possessed, as internees, to correspond with Switzerland and other countries, and we even kept in touch with Poland - with Poles, who delivered our letters to Jews in the neighbouring camps.

Of the life in the internment camp, I hope to write separately. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that, during the whole time that we were in the internment camp, we lived in constant fear that the Germans would someday send us off to Auschwitz - which is what actually happened in a similar camp, in Vittel, Southern [sic Northeastern] France, where there were 173 Jews with South American passports, among whom were also Icchak Kacnelson<sup>1</sup> and his son Cwi.

On 17<sup>th</sup> April 1944, the Germans surrounded them, with German SS men, and they were led away to the concentration camp in Drancy, France. From there, the whole transport was sent off to Poland, and nothing more was heard of them<sup>2</sup>.

As mentioned, in the Tittmoning camp and, later, in Laufer, where we were subsequently found ourselves, we lived in mortal fear that the same could also happen to us, and we sought ways to save ourselves. Our fellow members in Switzerland also contemplated how they could rescue us.

And, here, I come to recounting a story about a letter, which I received a few weeks ago from Jerusalem, from my very dear friend Dr Shimon Frost<sup>3</sup>, with whom I was, at that same internment camp until liberation, on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 (Dr Shimon Frost was, for many years, active in the Yiddish scholastic system in New York, Nowadays, he lives with his wife, Peggy, in Jerusalem).

In his letter, Shimon writes to me that he was in Tel-Aviv, at the [Pinchas] Lavon Institute (a people's university of sorts, and a research institute for the [Israeli] Labour Party), and that that is where the archives of Natan Schwalbe (who, to this very day, lives in Jerusalem) are to be found.

Searching through this archive, Shimon Frost found a remarkable document - a "Christmas card", which we sent to Switzerland to Natan Schwalbe in December 1943 - and with this card were enclosed two passport photos of Shimon Frost and myself.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Renowned Polish-Jewish teacher, poet and dramatist.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: According to historical sources, Icchak Kacnelson and his son Cwi were indeed murdered in Auschwitz.]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: See Dr Frost's obituary and brief biography here:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0021624930600102?journalCode=uji19.>]

In a bid to find a way to aid us at the time, Natan Schwalbe wished to send us, through the Jewish Agency in London, two certificates to the Land of Israel (Palestine, at the time) - which is why he needed to have our passport pictures.

[But] how does one send over passport photographs, which must pass the Gestapo's censure? It occurred to us, as it was Christmastime just then, to send our photos along with a Christmas card.

Although, in the end, it did not need to come to that, because the Germans allowed us to remain in the internment camp with our South American passports until the end of the War, it is nevertheless an authentic document regarding our wrangle between life and death during the times of the German [reign<sup>4</sup>].

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: The last word of this passage is illegible in the scan of the original text at our disposal.]