

An Atmosphere of Fear Reigns in the Ghetto¹

On Yom Kippur, in the morning of 21st September 1942, the streets of the ghetto looked as they did on any ordinary day. The workgroups were going to their workplaces. The Jewish women were not going to pray, but were cleaning the floors, windows and doors in the various German offices. The teachers, lawyers and all other intellectuals were marching, in files with brooms on their shoulders, to their workplaces. All the other Jews, who only had somewhere to work, were rushing down the street with quick steps, tapping out the slave-beat with their wooden clogs.

Only here and there, one saw figures shuffling along the walls, as if taking care not to be noticed too much. These were elderly people going to the synagogues, to remain there all day in prayer.

At the offices of the *Judenrat*, the officials sat without any work. Today, no applicants came. An official held a conversation with the German chief, Herr Frentzel. He told him of the fear that reigned, amongst the Jews, that there would be a “resettlement”. Frentzel was angered, and said, “*Ihr seid alle verrückt geworden - es kommt nichts vor!*” [“You’ve all gone mad – nothing will happen!”] At the official’s request, Frentzel rang several places and assured that nothing would happen because, otherwise, where would he find the thousands of people that he needed to have for the work?

Nevertheless, an atmosphere of fear still reigned in the ghetto. Some [even] said that, on the following morning, on 22nd September, the “resettlement of Jews” would take place in Częstochowa. News came from the “Aryan side” that there were already Latvians and Ukrainians in the city, who had boasted somewhere that they had come here to put an end to the Jews. A Polish lady, the owner of a restaurant, said that Ukrainians and Latvians, who had come from Warsaw the previous day, were being fed at her restaurant. They had told her that they had been there for two months, in the ghetto, and had liquidated the Jews. Now they would do the same with the Jews of Częstochowa. This information swept across the ghetto like a windstorm and, from minute to minute, the terror grew.

The Akcja of 22nd September 1942

The assurances of the *Judenrat*, the Germans and all the other sources still could not calm all the Jews. The bad signs, promising the contrary, were all too evident. The lawyer Pohoryles, the organisation chief of the *Judenrat* – a older and composed man – came to the Craftsmen’s House and assured that he knew, from reliable sources, that there was no reason to be afraid. Tomorrow - and not only tomorrow, but in general - nothing would happen.

¹ [TN: This piece consists of abridged excerpts from pp. 140-181 of Szlojme Waga’s 1949 book “Churban Czenstochow”.]

As a result, many people did not sleep on the night after Yom Kippur, but stayed up in their homes. The streetlights were turned off due to "*Luftschutz*" [anti-air-raid protection]. But the people, who were awake, were astonished when they suddenly saw, through the windows, that all the electric lamps lit up all at once, just as brightly as before the War. All of a sudden, the *Luftschutz* had become unimportant. An electrician from the municipal electricity facility drove throughout the ghetto streets and inspected all the power lines.

At about five o'clock in the morning, we heard shooting and shouts from Germans. The shots and voices continued until daybreak. All of a sudden, we saw a great mass of Jews, with packs on their shoulders, being herded by the Germans to the square where the gendarmes had yesterday held their discussion.

The *akcja*, accompanied by shooting and yelling, stretched on in this manner for several hours. Suddenly, we noticed a Jewish policeman entering our building. Yesterday, he had left his wife here with relatives. A few of us ran down to him, to the flat which he had entered. We saw him standing and weeping like a small child. He told us that horrible things were happening in the ghetto.

When the Jewish policemen arrived, before dawn, in the police station, they were given a command from the *Hauptmann* [captain] of gendarmerie Degenhardt, who was in charge of the entire *akcja*, that they were to accurately carry out the instructions which they would receive. Whoever did not comply with the command would be shot on the spot. The first task, which the Jewish police received, was to go to all the Jewish homes in the streets that would be indicated to them, and to tell all the Jews - men, women and children - to come out in groups onto the street and proceed, in lines one behind another, to the New Market Square [Nowy Rynek]. They were only allowed to take small packs with them. The dwellings were to remain open, with the keys in the door. Whoever hid would be shot.

At about three o'clock in the afternoon, the Jewish policemen, who lived together with us in the Craftsmen's House, arrived. They looked tired and broken. After they had composed themselves a little, they began telling us what had happened in the ghetto.

The nights are dark, but the ghetto is brightly illuminated. We hear shooting and we already know that each shot signifies that a Jew had been shot while attempting to cross the street, while opening a gate, while climbing over a fence somewhere and the like. In the ghetto, no one sleeps, no one takes off his clothes for sleep. There begins to be a lack of food, one helps another. We cannot eat at all, for the misery. Thus, time passes, until Friday, 25th September.

The Second Akcja

A day before the second *akcja*, the Jewish policemen received an order to report, on the following morning at four o'clock, to the Jewish police station.

The second *akcja* was carried out exactly as the first. The Jewish policemen went to the homes to tell the Jews the news that they had to position themselves, with their packs, at the gates of the buildings. After that, gendarmes, Ukrainians and Polish policemen arrived and drove them out from the gates out into the market square.

Just like the first time, the elderly and the sick were shot on the spot, because they were unable to walk as fast as the murderers wished.

At the marketplace - again as in the first *akcja* - a "selection" took place. With his baton, the *Hauptmann* pointed at strong men and young women, whom he ordered to retain, in order to, afterwards, take them away to slave labour. Quite often, the healthy-looking men were asked their profession. Metalworkers, carpenters, electricians [etc.] were quickly driven over to the other side - to remain. And, once more, tragic scenes were played out upon being separated from relatives.

The small number of "selected" for slave labour were taken away to the shop, just like the last time and the thousands, sentenced to banishment, were driven like cattle, to be loaded onto the carriages.

Hunger in the Ghetto

After the second *akcja*, 25,000 Jews still remained in the ghetto, awaiting their uncertain fate. The hunger became more acute.

The poor populace, who lived on their daily earnings and had no reserves, immediately upon the second day after the *akcja*, had nothing to eat.

Bunkers

In the ghetto, there were Jews, who made, for themselves, bunkers in attics and cellars and in all possible places. A large number of bunkers were known to numerous people. Five, ten, twenty, fifty and also one hundred men, women and children sat hidden in each of them. They provided themselves with food enough for a few days, thinking that the "bad time" would soon pass and that they would then be able to return to their homes. No one anticipated that, after deporting the Jews from their houses, policemen or Germans would be stationed to guard the residences. The fate of these Jews in the bunkers was very sad.

The Third Akcja

On 28th September 1942, the third *akcja* took place, following the same course as the two previous ones.

The residents of several ghetto streets were led out to the marketplace, where *Hauptmann* Degenhardt, surrounded by his assistants, made a selection of young people and professional workmen, who were retained and thus separated from their families. The familiar heartrending scenes, just like in the previous *akcje*, took place before the several thousand Jews were loaded into the cattle cars.

The Subsequent *Akcje*

On 1st October 1942, the fourth *akcja* took place, which transpired in the same manner as those previously. This *akcja* also included all the Jews, who were in the *Quartieramt* [Ger., Billeting Office], which was supposedly under the protection of the *Stadthauptmann* [City Captain]. Hauptmann Degenhardt gave the order to drive out of there, into the marketplace, not only all those who had snuck in there surreptitiously, by climbing over walls and fences, but also the labourers and professional workmen. *Hauptmann* Degenhardt did this to spite the *Stadthauptmann*.

In the fourth *akcja*, like in the previous ones, a selection was made and they were subsequently sent to various [forms of] slave labour. Thus, the Polish municipal management received an allocation of some of these “selectees” for highway work and to pave streets. Others were led away to the HASAG firm’s munitions factory.

A third group was sent to the “Raków” ironworks, which belonged to the same HASAG firm and where the same conditions, as in the munitions factory, reigned.

The Polish leader of the Jewish police received an order, from *Hauptmann* Degenhardt, to compile a list of fifty Jewish policemen, who would remain in their posts, and the others, numbering about two hundred, would be sent away with all the other Jews on the nearest transport.

A panic ensued amongst the Jewish police. Each ran to the police leader and to the Jewish deputy in order to promote the merit of remaining amongst the fifty who were to be retained. One sought to outdo the other with large monetary sums in order to save himself from being sent away barefoot in the cattle wagons.

The Polish leader of the Jewish police compiled a list of fifty names - it is obvious that, when making the list, the leader took into account the sum of money he could expect from each one.

On 4th October 1942, it became known that Jewish policemen - those remaining - had been booked for the following day at daybreak to the *akcja* that was to take place – the fifth *akcja*.

The fifth *akcja* began like the earlier ones. But it was immediately apparent that a special plan had been prepared for it. Firstly, it was conducted at a faster pace than all the previous ones. The Jews were driven into the New Market Square [Nowy Rynek] at daybreak, earlier than all the [other] times. This time, more Jews were shot in the streets than during the previous *akcje*. The *Hauptmann* directed more energetically and savagely with his baton, and the clubs and braided [leather] straps fell upon the Jewish heads more often. The aides did not permit anyone to stop in front of the *Hauptmann* and to beg for mercy. The railway wagons were filled earlier than during the earlier *akcje*, and the thousands of pairs of shoes grew more quickly into a mountain.

After the march of the thousand Jews to the wagons had concluded, Degenhardt ordered his chauffeur to take him and his close co-workers to the ghetto. There, first of all, he visited the

assembly point on ul. Katedralna and ordered that all the Jews be taken from there to the wagons. He then ordered that the Jewish policemen, who were being held under arrest at the synagogue, be led there with their wives and children.

Finally, the *Hauptmann* went, with his servants, to the Jewish Hospital and had all the doctors and nurses, who had remained at their posts throughout all the previous *akcje*, summoned to him.

The *Hauptmann* ordered the assembled doctors and nurses to inject all the patients in the hospital with poison, in order to make their end come as quickly as possible. The physicians tried to save the situation with pretexts to the effect that they did not have the appropriate injections - to which the *Hauptmann* replied that, if everything was not carried out within two hours, he would order the patients, along with the entire hospital personnel, to be shot.

Following a long and painful deliberation, the doctors decided to put the patients to death by injections.

After that, the *Hauptmann* visited another hospital - [that] of infectious diseases. The director of that hospital, Dr Kagan, made efforts to put the patients on their feet throughout the duration of the *akcje*. But now, during the fifth *akcja*, all the patients and the greater part of the hospital personnel were sent away to the railway wagons. Only some of the personnel was led off to quarantine.

At the very end, the *Hauptmann*, with his chauffeur and close aides, went to [the] Craftsmen's House [at] Aleja 14. There, they first created a great commotion in the courtyard and bellowed that all the Jewish residents were to quickly come down to the courtyard and leave the dwellings open. The craftsmen descended with their wives and children, each with his papers in hand.

The people were ordered to line up according to the separate workshops - each master with his family and his people registered in the *Stadthauptmann*'s note stood separately. But the *Hauptmann* did not look at the papers. He inquired of each one how old he was and what was his profession. He ordered the very young men and women to stand separately and the older ones and children also separately. I, with my wife and child and three women, who were inscribed in our note, stood together. The *Hauptmann* asked me how old I was. "Forty", I replied, "a factory foreman by trade". Then, he looked at my wife and child and said, "You must separate".

After interrogating and sorting the old and young, he said to everyone², "*Ihr kommt weg! Die alte Leute kommen in Lager und ihr, die Jüngere, wird arbeiten. Ihr müsst nicht gerade bei eur Schneiderei und Schusterei beschäftigt sein. Ihr wird andere Arbeit leisten kennen.*" [You are getting out (of here)! The old people are going to a camp and you, the younger ones, will work. You need not necessarily be employed in your tailoring and shoemaking. You will be able to do other work.]

² [TN: This statement appears in the original in German written in Hebrew characters and not in Yiddish.]

The New Ghetto

Following the five *akcje*, through which 35,000 Jews were deported from our city, the ghetto was left emptied. The houses were left deserted, the shops closed. From my second-storey balcony at the Craftsmen's House, I saw a watch patrolling the ghetto streets. This was to guard against the Polish population looting the belongings and goods that were left behind by the deported Jews.

Hauptmann Degenhardt ordered that a “new ghetto” be set up, a smaller one than the previous, to contain the Jews who still remained after the *akcje*. He assigned the former president of the *Judenrat* to establish a new *Judenrat*, a smaller one than the first, and he ordered the police’s assistant leader to form a police station from the remaining fifty Jewish constables.

All the slave labourers from the factories and also all those who were in the quarantine - the doctors and their families, the nurses and the remaining hospital personnel – needed to be brought to the new, smaller ghetto.

The *Hauptmann* found three narrow, filthy alleys, without plumbing or sewers, and ordered the newly-organised Jewish “representation” to establish the new ghetto [there].

Under the supervision of the Jewish police, Jewish workers erected tall posts around the three ghetto alleys, each post at a distance of three or four meters from the other, and enclosed them with barbed wire. A wider space was left open for a gate. Thus the “new ghetto” was established.

The *Judenrat* allocated lodgings for six to eight people per room, or for three or four couples together. “Furniture” was also distributed - old broken tables and chairs - for all that was still good for anything was removed by the Germans, [and taken] into their warehouses. A kitchen was set up. The *Hauptmann* allotted products to it from the municipal management, and thus the new, wretched life was, once again, organised.



*Doctors and nurses of the Jewish Hospital
Częstochowa Jewish public
in Częstochowa, at Zawodzie*



*Henryk Markusfeld, renowned
activist and philanthropist*