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Episodes From the Nazi Vale of Tears²

A legend tells that when Dante, the author of *The Divine Comedy*, would show himself in the street, passers-by would fall to their knees and the women would hold up their children, saying to them, “There goes the man who was in Hell”.

It was in this manner that people should point to the *Surviving Remnant*, those who struggled between life and death in the ghettos and the concentration camps of the Nazi Vale of Tears.

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When the great historian and sacred martyr Professor Szymon Dubnow was being taken to be killed, he called out to the surrounding Jews, “Write and record!”. That was the great historian’s last will and testament, which binds every Jew, who lived through the *Nazi Vale of Tears*. It is in fulfilment of this will that I wish to present several episodes and facts to which I was an eyewitness.

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***Metalurgia*, October 1942**

Following the mass selections, shootings and deportations, Częstochowa Jewry was utterly destroyed. The “ [Big] Ghetto” was emptied, without any sign of life. The houses stood neglected, desolate and vacant, open and free for the Nazi robbing hands. The small number of Jews, who had been selected, were barracked in the factories, performing slave labour and were at the mercy of the killers’ whims. They slept on the concrete floors of the factory halls, in the worst imaginable unsanitary conditions, in addition to which they suffered hunger, scarcity and need.

During this period, I was at the *Metalurgia* factory on ul. Krótka. The Chairman [of the *Judenrat*], Leon Kopinski³, sent for me and told me that he had been at the *Stadthauptmann’s*, where there had been also other Germans, and that they had decided to establish a small ghetto. They made a map of a few narrow alleys, where the ghetto was to be set up - but the designated area was too small. After lengthy haggling, pleading and begging, he managed to convince them to also include the Kozia alleyway within the blueprint.

Chairman Leon Kopinski tasked me and my team of professional workmen with arranging the “Small Ghetto”, which consisted of old, half-collapsed, derelict little houses. First of all, we

¹ [TN: This article was originally published in the book “Czenstochover Landsmanshaft of Montreal”, pp. 248-256.]

² [TN: The Vale, or Valley, of Tears is mentioned in Psalm 84:6; although most likely a ref. to an actual geographical location, the Sages in the Talmud (Eruvin 19a) interpreted the name “The Vale of Tears” as a symbolic name for Hell.]

³ [TN: The author was married to Leon Kopinski’s sister, Dora Kopinska.]

needed to repair the little houses, so that rain should not enter through the broken roofs, [then] build a kitchen capable of cooking for several thousand people and set up the most essential institutions - somewhat of a hospital, dispensary and offices. There were no building materials or money with which to buy them and I only had a handful of professional workmen in my workgroup.

I cannot recall all their names - I shall therefore only mention those whose names have been etched in my memory: Herszl Frajman, Moryc Gonsiorowicz (known as "Tarzan") - these two were qualified professional workmen; Milsztajn - a lathe operator; Prajs - a very good metalworker; Herszman - a carpenter; Harry Klein, who was a printer by trade, became a glazier; Jakub Hofman, who prior to the War had been a paint merchant, became a house painter; Beniek Zylbersztajn, Władek Markowicz, Jakub Rychter, Natek Epsztajn, Litwak and others. The only *zdun* [Pol., potter] the group had was a fine Chassidic young man from Kraków named Kohen. The group's secretary was the lawyer Estera Epsztajn, who is nowadays Mrs Pratt and lives in Los Angeles.

Under the guard of Polish constables armed with loaded rifles, I proceeded with the professional workgroup to the area of the projected Small Ghetto. The Polish policemen led us down the middle of the street⁴, because the pavements were forbidden for Jews. It was a horrifying feeling to walk down the middle of these streets, whose every stone I knew. Everything all about resembled a living graveyard. We did not see a single living being – we only heard the sound of our own footsteps and the screeching of the broken windows and doors. Corpses lay strewn about in the abandoned houses. Some were people who had hidden during the time of the selections and deportations, and had perished of hunger and thirst, because both running water and the electrical current had been cut off, and others had been shot by the Nazi murderers, who had come to rob the houses and had shot any Jew they encountered.

Inside the "Small Ghetto" Area

Once the work of preparing the 'Small Ghetto' had commenced, Leon Kopinski and Jeremiasz Gitler instructed me, confidentially, to enlarge the workgroup to include an entire array of *chalutzim*⁵, who had organised themselves in a *kibbutz* [Heb., commune]. Their main objective was to organise a resistance movement - a combat organisation to fight the Nazi regime. It was, therefore, important that they should be together to plan and prepare their activities. I am unable to recall the names of them all, but some of them have become engraved in my memory by their daring, selflessness and heroism. They are: Rywka Glanc, Izio Fajner, Fiszlewicz, Kantor, Lewkowicz, Potaszewicz, Roziner, Władek Kopinski, Dresler, Wiernik, Abram Czarny, brothers Lajzer and Zyskind Szmulewicz, Szczekacz, Gliksman, Rajs, Falk, R. Fajgenblat, Zylberberg, Zylberman, Szyldhaus, Kaufman, Mandelbaum, Erenfryd, Willinger, Bolek Gewirc[man] and a whole series of others.

⁴ [TN: It is known from other accounts that in those times, when there were still a great many horses about, the middle of the street was filled with muck, and people would normally not have walked there during peacetime.]

⁵ [TN: Heb., "pioneers"; viz. members of the Ha'Chalutz movement, which prepared Jews in the Diaspora for emigration and settlement in Palestine.]

The initiators of the Combat Organisation were members of the former Zionist youth organisations, but they extended their activity. All the factions, from the extreme right to the extreme left, and also the non-partisan, joined it. The organisation became a general one and was given the name "Jewish Combat Organisation" – "*Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa*" in Polish, or "ŻOB" for short.

The Combat Organisation's first preparatory works were:

- 1) to build a subterranean channel [viz. tunnel] to connect the "Small Ghetto" with the "Aryan side";
- 2) to raise funds to purchase weapons;
- 3) to produce armaments inside the "Small Ghetto" itself
- 4) to conduct training exercises with the members of the Combat Organisation and also the combat units - the so-called "threes" and "fives" - on how to move about with short-range weapons and how to organise partisan fighters to operate in the woods.

A Story About a Cart of Bricks

As soon as it was decided to construct an underground channel, work began immediately. The projected plan was [to dig] from ul. Nadrzeczna, under the barbed wire, to ul. Jaskrowska, which was already on the other side of the ghetto. My brother, Gustaw Zylberszac, was in charge of the work and his assistant was Szulek Szlezinger. To this purpose, a large quantity of bricks was necessary in order to construct fortifications. They did not think long, [but] harnessed horses to a large cart and drove to the ruined houses in the former "Big Ghetto", loading a huge cartload of bricks. With the fully laden cart, they drove to the "Small Ghetto".

Here, the Nazi murderer, *Schutzpolizei* Officer Sapport, suddenly sprang up as if from under the ground. He immediately came out with the question, "What do you need these bricks for in the 'Small Ghetto?'" I remained composed and, at once, replied that the bricks were necessary for repairing the ruined houses. The Nazi killer, as it seems, was satisfied with this answer and he told everyone to go to the police guardroom, where each person was given a portion of bread, which that same murderer had confiscated in the morning from other Jews.

Everyone was encouraged by this event, which could have ended in a tragic manner. They and applied themselves to the work of finishing the channel - the "subterranean bunker" - with diligence, energy and enthusiasm.

4th January 1943

At six o'clock in the morning, like on every other day, the workgroups of the HASAG factories marched out to work, guarded by *Werkschutz* men. Altogether unexpectedly, the "Small Ghetto" was suddenly surrounded by tight cordons of German and Ukrainian guards. A command was immediately issued for everyone to assemble at the Warszawski Ryneček marketplace, which bordered the "Small Ghetto". Anyone remaining in the "Small Ghetto" would be shot on the spot. Everyone was in a vice. This happened with lightning speed and

there was no time to consider what to do. All lined up according to their workgroups. My friend's wife, Bronczka Markowicz, wanted to hide with her mother, Mrs Niemirowska. They were immediately shot.

All these signs indicated that preparations were being made for a selection to be sent away to Treblinka.

Meanwhile, everybody was lined up according to his workplace. As it happened, my group, along with the members of the *kibbutz*, was first [in line] and I was the first one at the front of the group. The Nazi killer, Lieutenant [Felix] Rohn, approached me and inquired as to the nature of the group. I replied that we were craftsmen.

"If that's the case", said the bloodthirsty murderer, "get these *Faulenzer* [Ger., idlers] away from me!"

A cold sweat doused me upon hearing these words. I felt as if struck by lightning and, although I do not consider myself a hero, I nevertheless controlled myself with a superhuman courage and declared, "*Herr Leutnant* – there are no *Faulenzer* in my workgroup. All of them are first-class professional craftsmen."

The killer was astounded by my audacious response and said to me, "If so, [then] *you* will go."

Even though I saw that I would fall victim, I gathered up my courage and replied, "*Jawohl, Herr Leutnant!*" [Ger., Yes, sir, Lieutenant!].

The murderer was surprised by my response, and it happened as if by a miracle of Providence, that the Nazi killer ceased harassing my group and me, and went on to the second group and began pulling out Jews from the rows. He did the same with all the groups.

Meanwhile, other Jews saw that my group had emerged unscathed and nobody had been taken out. A large number of Jews from other groups ran over to my mine, thus saving their lives - for the time being. Among those who ran over to my group was Rabbi Benjamin Borzykowski, who currently lives in Montreal, where he is the dean of the Meor Ha'Golah yeshiva.

Meanwhile, another incident occurred. Two youths from the Combat Organisation, Izio Fajner and [Mendel] Fiszlewicz, set upon the Nazi assassin Rohn with revolvers. A gunfight broke out and the two heroic lads were shot. A large Gestapo squad arrived at once, with machine-guns and grenade-throwers. They ordered all the assembled Jews to immediately raise their hands. At the time, there was a great frost and, standing in such an uncomfortable position with one's hands up for several hours, froze and tortured everyone. The murderers immediately reported the shooting to the Governor, saying that it was an uprising, and awaited orders. The Governor's orders were that, in reprisal, twenty-five Jews were to be shot on the spot. The killers set upon the assembled Jews and, with lightning speed, captured twenty-five Jews from the rows. They then led them to a wall at the Ryneckek and ul. Kozia, and shot them all before our eyes. I shall never forget this image, and the cries of the victims, when the Nazi

murderers aimed a salvo of bullets at the Jewish heads will always resound in my ears—“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord!” [Deuteronomy 6:4⁶]

Following liberation, a mass demonstration took place at the wall, where the twenty-five martyrs had fallen. They were [exhumed⁷ and] brought to a Jewish grave in accordance with the Jewish rite. The Polish government named the square “*Plac Bohaterów Getta*” - Square of the Ghetto Heroes.

Conferences with the Combat Organisation

Following the events of 4th January 1943, the Combat Organisation’s High Command held several conferences with me. The matter of speeding up the production of armaments was discussed. This could only be done in the workshops of the “Small Ghetto”, of which I was in charge.

The first thing which we discussed was that we were to hide the two large metalworking lathes of the workshops, so that the Germans should not notice them, otherwise they would have immediately confiscated them and taken them away. Secondly was to choose the best professional workmen to immediately begin the work of producing hand grenades and, thirdly, to acquire the necessary materials.

To carry out these three tasks, first of all, the lathes in the workshops were concealed, so that no one should notice them. Then, Prajs, who was the best metalworker, and Gonsiorowicz (“Tarzan”), who was the best welder, were chosen. In addition to them, there were also other specialists, such as chemists and electricians who, with their knowledge and professional skills contributed greatly to the development of the production of grenades in the “Small Ghetto”.

Thirdly, the raw materials were smuggled into the “Small Ghetto” by the professional workmen employed at the Enro, Wulkan and other factories. This was done in the following manner: canisters of soup were sent out from the “Small Ghetto” for the Jewish labourers. Once the soup had been distributed, the professional workmen, members of the Combat Organisation, who were working there, prepared the required materials, which were put inside the empty canisters, and it was in this manner that the necessary raw materials were smuggled in. Understandably, this had to be done with the utmost caution and secrecy. A considerable amount of Combat Organisation members was linked to this work. Each one of them deserves to be mentioned with the greatest honour and even with a biography. Regrettably, I do not recall their names.

Several weeks prior to the liquidation of the “Small Ghetto”, the Combat Organisation constructed a position, for a heavy machine-gun, in an attic on ul. Garncarska, which was meant to control the “Ryneczek” [and] the Old Market Square in case of a selection or liquidation.

⁶ [TN: In Hebrew in the original.]

⁷ [TN: According to Dr Benjamin Orenstein in his book “Churban Czenstochow” (p. 197), “By orders of the German authorities, the bodies of those shot were to be left lying [in situ] until late at night, so that all the Jews returning from work should see the murdered. It was only after that that they were buried at ul. Nadrzeczna 74.”]

After the Purim Massacre

The mood in the “Small Ghetto” was oppressive. The entire leadership of the “Small Ghetto’s” internal administration had been destroyed. Gustaw Landau, who before the War had been the chief accountant of the Ignasiński Manufacturing Company and an active figure of the General Zionist Organisation, was chosen to replace the late Leon Kopiński. I was chosen to replace Bernard Kurland, who had been in charge of the *Arbeitseinsatz* [Labour Deployment]. My position, as manager of the ghetto workshops, was taken over by Dawid Koniecpoler and my brother Gustaw Zylberszac.

The Role of the *Arbeitseinsatz* in the “Small Ghetto”

The *Arbeitseinsatz* was subordinate to the *Judenrat* leadership and its duties were:

- 1) Counting and recording the number of labourers going out to the workplaces every morning;
- 2) Distributing ration coupons for lunch, which consisted of a soup, to the foremen - for each group according to the number counted.

Besides these official duties of the *Arbeitseinsatz*, such things were done as put in peril the lives of the entire personnel, which consisted of Marzej Krauze, Tadek Fisz and myself. This was working closely with the Combat Organisation.

Firstly, following the Purim massacre, the Combat Organisation intensified its activity by sending out as many fighters as possible to the partisans in the Koniecpol woods, in order to engage in offensive warfare against the Nazi forces, and also “threes” or “fives” to carry out acts of diversion, by unscrewing railway tracks to disrupt the trains transporting Nazi troops and munitions to the Eastern Front. In addition, emissaries - *shlichim* [Heb., envoys] - were sent to other ghettos. To that end, the extraordinarily heroic fighter Rywka Glanc came to me every other day. She would give me the number [of people] who were to leave the ghetto and with which workgroup they were to be sent, in order that they should be as near as possible to their intended destination. The departing combatants were not counted, so that the tally of labourers would match at the workplace.

Secondly, the members of the Combat Organisation, who were working in the tunnel and in the production of munitions etc. and who, for the large part, did not go to any work, received as many food coupons as they needed.

Thirdly, only those who would be able to carry out their tasks with the greatest speed and secrecy were sent, with the soup canisters, to the factories from which various raw materials and even whole parts were “taken”.

Fourthly - “special tasks”. Let us here mention one of these special tasks. The Combat Organisation was in need of a complete setup to publish announcements. Without thinking too long about it, a typewriter, a copying machine (*powielacz*), *klisze* [Pol., negatives], paper

and ink were taken from the *Arbeitseinsatz* in pieces, and members of the Combat Organisation put everything into their pockets and under their clothes. They were sent out along, with the Kaminka work group and, from there, they proceeded to the Koniecpol woods, where they safely carried out the task that was, for those times, extremely important and extraordinary. This allowed them to prepare announcements and bulletins to rouse and encourage the fight against the Nazi regime.

The Liquidation and Uprising in the Small Ghetto

As there is already an account of the liquidation and uprising in the “Small Ghetto” in this book, I will only add that, if the rebellion was able to be maintained for a week, the *Arbeitseinsatz* had a large hand in that, because a significant amount of food was needed, which was prepared at the appropriate time. Had the Nazi assassins not blown up, with dynamite, the buildings, which flew in the air along with the dismembered bodies of the heroic fighters, the uprising may have lasted longer.

HASAG

Following the uprising and liquidation of the “Small Ghetto”, the then surviving Jews were imprisoned in the HASAG factories. The *Arbeitseinsatz* and I were in HASAG-Pelcery. This was for nearly nineteen months, from the end of June 1943 until 17th January 1945. An entire array of events occurred during this period, each of which was a struggle between life and death. Lightning-quick reflexes, self-sacrifice, perseverance of resistance, faith, belief and heroism were demanded very often. ,

For example, a typhus epidemic broke out in the camp. Its consequences could have been very sorrowful. Everyone, both the sick and the healthy, would have been killed by the Nazis. What was done about it? Without the knowledge of the Germans, a hospital was set up inside the camp. There were doctors, but this was still too little. We needed to have medications. Leaving the camp. In order to procure the necessary anti-typhus injections, was forbidden to Jews under pain of death. After intensive efforts, we managed to receive permission for my wife Dorka [née Kopinska] Zylberszac and Dr Przyrowski to leave the camp under Nazi guard- and, truly by miracle, from the Polish physician, Dr Witold Siciarz, they received several thousand injections absolutely free of charge, which quite simply saved the camp from disaster.

The people, who were ill, could not eat the clay-like bread and *brukiew* [Pol., turnip/rutabaga] soup, because such food would simply have killed them. A field kitchen was therefore arranged for the sick, whose benefits were also already enjoyed by the small number of children. The same must also be said regarding the hastening of the construction of the barracks, so that the workers would not need to lie on the concrete floors and be exposed to the hazard of epidemics due to the unsanitary conditions. Another issue was the manipulation of the x-rays taken, in order that those with tuberculosis should not fall into the cruel hands of the Nazi hangmen, Heaven forbid - and even such prosaic matters as resolving conflicts between workers and foremen.

[An endeavour] of a very different character was the sabotage act of setting fire to the *prochownia* [Pol., gunpowder magazine]. It was engulfed in flames, and a multitude of fully-armed Gestapo men, with metal helmets, were standing ready to shoot everyone. It was quite simply a miracle from Heaven that there were no victims then.

All these concisely enumerated issues, as well as the ones not listed, to persevere and not cave in, could only have occurred as a result of a profound belief and faith that the forces of evil, murder and robbery would fall in the end, and that Jewish hope would prevail.

On the night from 16th to 17th January 1945, the Nazi regime in Częstochowa fell and the sanguinary rulers of the HASAG factories and camps fled. Thus, the few remaining Jewish survivors in the Częstochowa camps were saved from the Nazi *Vale of Tears*.

Following Liberation

Despite the fact that the Nazis suffered a devastating downfall and the enslaved Jews were set free, there was nevertheless no great joy. On the one hand, it was indeed a great historic event that the murderers were defeated. However, on the other, everyone was pervaded by agony and sorrow for the great misfortune that had taken place. Each individual searched his own soul as regards the destruction of [sic and?] death.

My Parents

My father, Reb Izrael-Szulim Zylberszac, was a well-known industrialist. He was a scholarly Jew, both in religious and worldly matters. Thanks to his general knowledge and intelligence, he gained many friends both within the Jewish and Polish circles. He was a specialist in straightening out the most tangled affairs. The Częstochowa lawyers would send him the issues which they were unable to resolve through the courts. He gave a great deal of his time to the *Din Toires*⁸, in order that one Jew should not have any conflicts with another.

In 1935, my father Reb Izrael-Szulim Zylberszac emigrated to [the Land of] Israel, together with my mother Brandla [née Zylbersztajn]. There, my mother died. In 1938, my father travelled to Poland on communal affairs and, regrettably, was unable to make the journey back because the War had broken out.

During the time of the selections and deportations, he perished along with Częstochowa Jewry in sanctification of the Name [of God] and the People [of Israel]. With his demise died a personality, which was characteristic of Polish Jewry and, nowadays .is no longer to be found.

⁸ [TN: Disputes brought before a rabbinical court, as opposed to a secular one.]

My Brother⁹

My brother Gutek Zylberszac took an active part in the technical work of the resistance movement. He always encouraged and comforted everyone. He died [in 1950] after the liberation, leaving behind his wife Anka and daughter Stefa, nowadays a doctor in Haifa, Israel. Her husband Fred [Ferdinand] Zawistowski is a professor at the Haifa University.

Władek Kopiński

Władek Kopinski, the son of [*Judenrat*] Chairman Leon Kopiński, was a heroic personality. In the Purim *akcja* against the intelligentsia, he managed to escape from the van and evaded a certain death at the time. A few months later, he and several partisans were captured by the Nazi killers and he was taken, in chains, to be executed at the cemetery. With the chains on his hands, he attacked the murderers, in the hope that, as a result of the tumult that would break out, he and his comrades would manage to save themselves. He was shot half-hanging on the cemetery fence.

This episode was recounted to me by a Polish labourer, who was working in the cemetery at removing the marble headstones, which the Germans robbed and took away to Germany.

The Kopiński Family¹⁰

Of Leon Kopiński's family, the only one who survived is his son Jerzy, who is an engineer and lives in Poland.

Here, let us Jakub (Jankiel), a brother of Leon Kopiński, who lived all his years in New York and was an involved activist of the *landsmannschaft*, to which he devoted extensive time, effort and financial means. Sadly, he died in 1960. He left one son, Dr Irwin [Jerome] Kopin, who is a prominent scholar and engages in medical research. He lives in Washington.

⁹ [TN: Although the author only mentions his brother Gustaw/Gutek in this article, according to the official Częstochowa records, Izrael-Szulim and Brandla Zylberszac had at least fourteen children together.]

¹⁰ [TN: As we mentioned above, the author's wife was the sister of Leon and Jakub Kopiński.]