

Shadows in the Night¹

The images of horror and destruction rise up in my mind and thoughts as from a mist. Here I see an image of dashed hopes:

It is Thursday, 25th September 1942 - the third day of the “resettlement”². On that day, the Jews of the Old Market Square [Stary Rynek], the first parts of ul. Garncarska and ul. Nadrzeczna and the adjacent alleyways are sent to their deaths.

At noon, shouting reaches everyone’s ears - “*Yidn, mazel tov*”³! *Yidn, a miracle has happened!*” The Jews run out from the streets that have not yet been “resettled”. They emerge from the buildings and bunkers, where they have been holding out in mortal anxiety, their faces deathly pale from fear and starvation, their eyes red and swollen from tears and sleepless nights and their hair wild and dishevelled, and they gather in the narrow alleys. We hear everyone wishing another “*Mazel tov!*”; people fall on each other’s necks and kiss one another with joy. They are now witnessing the miracle that the Almighty worked at the last minute.

Here, we hear one recounting the “miracle”, in detail, to a group of Jews standing around him, “The *akcja* has been stopped. Jews are returning from the wagons in which they were to be sent away.” Other Jews comment that, apparently, a command has arrived to halt the *akcja*, and yet others say that it is nothing other than the world has intervened and forced the Nazi murderers to cease the extermination!

In fact, we soon perceive women, men and children arriving with packs on their shoulders. Yet more cruel, shocking scenes of people falling on each other’s necks and weeping with joy. They relate that, before boarding the wagons, a command came for them to return to the ghetto.

In the middle of this wild, most profoundly desperate outbreak of joy, a son stands in a lonely room and pleads with his father, “Papa, do come down to the street, too, so we can also rejoice with all the Jews”. The elderly, pious father stands motionless, looking through the window at the pictures of madness, of people turned wild by the suffering and pain, skeletons celebrating in the street, and tears streaming from his eyes.

The son continues pleading at length, until the father can contain himself no longer and responds, “My child! Do you not see this cruel image of mass insanity? Do you not see what is happening here? How can we rejoice, when millions of Jews have already been annihilated, when almost all towns have already been emptied of Jews? How can we rejoice in that they

¹ [TN: This article was originally published on pp. 268-270 of the book “Czenstochover Landsmanshaft of Montreal”.]

² [TN: Euphemistic term used by the Nazis in ref. to the deportation to the death camps.]

³ [TN: Jews, congratulations/hurrah!]

will let us live? After all, the entire joy that they will let us live is false. We must share the same fate as all the Jews.”

Rifle shots are heard from the Ukrainians standing guard, immediately followed by the last dying cries of those whom the bullets found. In fear and in panic, the Jews return to their hideouts and bunkers. The last rays of hope of a possible deliverance vanished. It afterwards became clear to everyone, that the reason the Jews had been sent back from the carriages was because, on that day, the “quota” had been surpassed.

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Another image appears before me from the dense darkness:

In one of the chloroformed [fig.] wagons, crammed with Jews, which is making its way to the gas chambers in Treblinka, stands the old father. He barely holds himself up. He is pressed by the mass of people. He stands barefoot, because the Germans forced him to take off his boots and leave them behind before boarding the wagon. The tight crowd, heat and chlorine suffocate him. He summons his last strength and his lips murmur a prayer to the *Riboino shel Oilom* [Heb., Master of the World] to, at least, spare the lives of his family, the lives of his children, from whom he was just now so murderously and brutally separated.

And now I see the tragic, naked death march of men, women and children before entering the gas chambers, as they are driven by the murderous Nazi whips.

Here, I also see the old father among the naked people/skeletons marching. Blood runs from his limbs and he is forced, by the killers, to move his feet to the beat of the music being played in the background. In his last minutes of separation from this world, his lips are murmuring an entreaty to God - a plea for the lives of his children.

* * *

I try to drive the horrific and spectral images away from me, but new shadows emerge before me from the dense darkness of the night:

Now I see a scene from before a “resettlement”. Children stand, attempting to convince their old and sick mother to go into the “bunker”, where they managed to secure a free place for her. And now I see the children accompanying their mother to the murky, dank cellar under the ground, where the bunker is located. I watch them say goodbye to her - how she stretches out her emaciated, ailing hands and kisses each child separately, as tears stream from her eyes. I see her protruding eyes, opened wide with fright, as if they were asking, “Children, how are you leaving me?”

I see her in her suffocating despair, which no human words can express. I also see her in the subsequent horrors of the bunker - the lack of food, the lack of water and also the lack of air. I watch the long death throes of the sick mother - her eyes staring, entreating, her hands outstretched, calling for aid, her last stifled mother’s scream, unheard by anyone, of wishing to see her children, at least once, before her death.

In the dense darkness, the mother's eyes grow to impossibly enlarged dimensions and her sick, thin hands stretch out to me.

* * *

A cold sweat douses my body. I am truly burning, as if glowing coals were lying under me. I spring out of bed, switch on the light and open the window to breathe in a little fresh air. But what is happening here? Am I dreaming? Is this a continuation of the spectral images I just saw? I rinse my eyes. But no! I am awake. What I am hearing now is not an echo of those days of destruction, but the singing that reaches my room from the Munich streets are the sorrowfully notorious tones of the *Horst-Wessel-Lied*⁴ and *Wenn Judenblut vom Messer spritzt*⁵. Now I hear this today, once more, in the streets of Munich from the homicidal children marching. Thousands of them are marching in the Munich streets. It immediately comes to mind that these are now the *Fasching* [Ger., Carnival] days for them. And here is the carnival parade, in which the entire population takes part. They started singing the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* from the middle of this holiday parade. Applause from the thousands standing all about soon followed - and here I already hear the whole multitude singing the song of the Night of the Long Knives⁶.

I close the window but, for a long time, I still hear the jarring tones, "*Wenn Judenblut vom Messer spritzt.*"



The Nazi murderer Kessler [aka (Heinrich) Köster] stands, with his head bowed, before the court in Częstochowa. Next to him, to the right, stands the witness Aron Owieczka, who declares that the Nazi killer Kessler burned Jews alive during the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto". Among others, his wife Jadzia Owieczka, 32 years of age, and little daughter Halusia, 5 years of age, were burned by the Nazi murderer. The court sentenced the Nazi killer Kessler to death by hanging. The verdict was carried out in Częstochowa.

⁴ [TN: The Horst Wessel Song was the official anthem of the Nazi Party from 1930 to the end of their regime.]

⁵ [TN: Ger., "When Jewish blood from the knife sprays (then it's going to be good again)"; words added probably c.1921 by anti-Semitic German troops to the already existing "Heckerlied" (Hecker's song), a revolutionary song of the Baden Revolution of 1848-1849. The latter version was popular among Nazis.]

⁶ [TN: This is presumably the same antisemitic variant of the "Heckerlied", as apparent from the context.]