

מזרמע עראינערונגען

[Prison Memoirs]

פון
משה צעשינסקי

[by
Mojśze Cieszyński]

ניו יארק

1915

[New York, 1915]

טורמע עראינערונגען

פון

משה צעשינסקי.



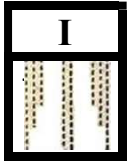
[Prison Memoirs

by

Mojsze Cieszyński]



[The Arrest¹]



It was Friday, 23rd January 1914, at about midnight. The Częstochowa streets were silent. Here and there, one could still notice a belated passer-by flitting past - a lonely night wanderer hurrying home with all possible haste. The sole official representatives on the streets were just the nightwatchmen, guarding that the rich, Heaven forbid, should not be robbed of their property, of their wealth. Next to them were also their companions - large dogs and as well as smaller ones.

In all my life, that historic night was an exceptional one. The streets were also different from all other times, in their particular appearance and the disturbance of the [usual] peace.

This happened for the following [reason]: the upholders of the law – those, who supposedly had the utmost welfare of the city's residents in mind, had received a *донос* ([Rus.] denunciation) to the effect that Jewish workers, who lived in the Jewish quarter and toiled day in and day out, carrying on an embittered, hard struggle for their lives and existence and earning barely enough to make a living and feed themselves, their wives and children - that they, these weak, pale people were revolutionaries and wished to affect an overturning of the world. The Russian police and gendarmerie, who have always distinguished themselves with their enforcement of searches and repressions, carrying them out with all stringency, embarked on the work of fulfilling their mission.

Already on Friday, during the day, the police received a wink from the higher authorities to be ready for the evening. And, late at night, they set about the work, dividing themselves into groups, to catch, in a net of pain and slavery, the people wishing to create a more beautiful and better life, built on better foundations than up until now.

Like bandits in the Middle Ages, who took weaker people who could not defend themselves into captivity, thus they now set about carrying out the command of their higher chieftain, whose sole purpose and desire was to stifle all that blossoms and wishes to blossom and develop itself.

¹ [TN: Although this work was originally published as one unbroken story, we have divided it into three chapters for the reader's convenience.]

The sole enjoyment of this chieftain and his servants is to drown, in an ocean of pain and human suffering, the nation's best sons, the world's best children, who arrive with their new outcries that everything should belong to everybody.

On Friday evening, 23rd January, one does not notice the habitual, deadly silence like all other times. The night watchmen are very merry. Police officers appear alongside them, marching in large groups and inquiring after addresses etc. The night watchmen display all their mandatory meticulousness, aiding them in all their inquiries - they are, after all, close *mechitunim*².

The weary residents sleep peacefully in their homes after their daily travail. Here and there, in paltry dwellings where there are entire families, where the bleakness and need reign in every little corner, people do not sleep well. Sometimes one hears the cough of those who have caught cold from the cold, humid weather, and are not well-protected by warm winter clothes, and also due to the stuffy, suffocating air in which it has befallen them to live.

Personally, I had work enough - I had nothing about which to complain. And my mother, whom I value sacredly and dearly, would always say to me, "Mojsze'le! What good are 'those fellows' to you!?" I never answered her, not wishing to cause her any grief, and worked [all] the more devotedly for the liberation of the Jewish workers.

Sometime before that Friday, I had already been tormented by the thought that my time of wandering about, with all the free people, was soon [to end] and that, before long, I would be taken away from my nearest and dearest.

From day to day, and especially every night upon going to sleep and getting up at daybreak, seeing that the early morning was already greeting me through my window, which was near my bed, I felt truly lucky in the knowledge that this day already belonged to me. It was not so much prison that I feared, with its thick, grey, damp walls and huge, locked bars, but the thought, which was ceaselessly burning in my mind, was that my current arrest would bring my whole career to a halt and would ruin our entire family's household.

Above all, I imagined what difficult moments of unending suffering my dear mother would be forced to endure, while I would be imprisoned in jail, cut off from the living world.

² [TN: Heb. word (מחזיתנים) extensively used in Yiddish, lit., "in-laws", viz. close associates, as the respective in-laws are in arranging their children's wedding etc. We have transcribed all the Hebrew and Yiddish words that appear in this work as they would have been pronounced by the Jews in Poland and not as in modern Hebrew or "university Yiddish".]

I also very much wished to live together with all my close comrades, friends and acquaintances, who had always been near and dear to me, and were I to be separated from them, I knew that they would miss me every step of the way.

From day to day, my life became more sorrowful and discouraged, Despair and dejection filled my heart, pressing down strongly and weighing upon my soul.

Every early morning, it seemed to me that only today would I still belong to my cherished parents and be master over myself and, in the night, they would come - those beasts in human shape - and abduct me, flinging me down into their dank, murky, lonesome grave.

Every day, I went through my clothes and drawers. I searched, ransacked and rummaged everything before the storm. I understood that, sooner or later, they would come visit me and things would not be so carefree for me. For what, then, was not *treife*³ to them? Even legal, kosher things, too. And, more than once, I would light a fire - a large fire - and its main fuel was always literature and correspondences.

For hours on end, I would stand by the fire weeping and lamenting the loss of the documents and treasures, of which nothing was left but a mountain of ash.

These were the most sorrowful moments for me. I felt as if I was a mourner standing over a *bar minon*⁴. The only difference was that, in that case, one was interring a dead skeleton – whereas, here, documents, which one day could have been of colossal value for future humankind, when there would be different conditions than now, were being burnt.

The time finally came. The heavy, brutal paws had spread their net to catch not fish in the river, but human beings.

I still remember it like today. Outside, the wind is whistling mercilessly. Our house's window panes are about to crack, telling us, as we lie in our beds, that outside it is no game, that winter is here. My father has already long been drowsing. My younger brothers are still awake in their beds. I, myself, am also still lying awake - I do want to fall asleep already, but that is not working.

³ [TN: Heb., non-kosher food; in this context meaning improper and illegal.]

⁴ [TN: Aramaic, lit. "far from us" or "except us"; this expression is used in Judaism when referring to a certain mishap or calamity which one is discussing that he wishes not to befall on himself, or, as in this case, to a corpse.]

My dear mother, who nowadays is far away from me⁵, was also not yet asleep. During the day, I had already known that she would need to repose after her hard day of work. I thought that this Friday night she would sleep as never before. But we had all been wrong - our mother was also not sleeping.

We were all awake, as if preparing for something, as if we sensed that a storm was about to erupt. The clock strikes twelve, telling us that half the night has already passed. There seems to be a disturbance. We sense that things are not all right outside. There is whispering next to our window. The bell, which serves as a telephone to our night watchman for the frequently tardy neighbours, is pulled. Tonight, the bell rings louder than usual.

My mother, thinking that I am already asleep, quietly calls to me in order not to surprise me, "I think the police are ringing" and, immediately, we hear their steps already in the courtyard. My mother tries to reassure me, [by saying that] perhaps they are not coming to us but, in any case, calls my attention to whether I am really kosher⁶.

"Poor, poor Mother!", I think to myself. "Are you sensing what my heart is reflecting? You understand so much, but you still do not know exactly my entire inner life. This current visit by the police and gendarmerie could spell a separation from you, and our whole family and friends, for a long time."

But my mother does not feel as much as I do. She is not familiar and well-read regarding all the cruelties of the Russian prisons, where many good and honest sons and daughters have ended all their years in their cold cells, never again to see the wide, bright world of which they dreamt and thought about, wasting their strengths and suffering unwritable torments.

My thoughts are cut short by a knock on the door, which already provides a clear indication that they mean none other than yours truly.

"Oy!", my mother sighs. She rouses my weary, drowsy father and she summons the courage and energy and goes open the door to let in the unwelcome guests - the destroyers of her child's joy and the darkeners of our family life - she could do nothing else, she had to open the door – after all, putting up a resistance against police, armed with weapons, is not a little game.

⁵ [TN: The author was living in New York at the time he was writing this work.]

⁶ [TN: Presumably meaning whether he had any illegal literature or compromising papers in the house.]

I sit up in bed. There are already some twenty policemen around me, accompanied by a drunken, coarse gendarme, who looks as if he was born just for such a gentle profession. I receive a hearty *shulem aleichem* [greeting]! He explains to me, in Russian, that I am the one whom they are after. They begin to search our dwelling, ransacking every little corner, as zealously as when my father checks for *chumetz*⁷.

In the end, after finding a few legal books, photographs and other unimportant documents which, in their eyes, are now a whole priceless treasure, I am ordered to dress as quickly as possible. They are inviting me over for room and board, so that I should not need to worry about earning a living.

That is when the true sorrowful family tragedy is first played out. My mother falls on my neck, drenching me with her warm, motherly tears. My father and brothers also do not stand afar. For a few seconds, the keepers of the law stand as if petrified. They cannot tear themselves away from this image. But this lasts for only a minute. They remind themselves that they have military obligations upon them to fulfil, and that such a tragedy is not the first for them, nor the last, and they order me to accompany them.

My entire family is weeping and gushing with tears. They, too, wish to go with me, but they are not taken. They are not allowed to go because I, alone, am the transgressor, the criminal.

I looked around me with a deep gaze one more time, at my nearest and dearest, at my grey father and my pallid mother. I said goodbye to my siblings – now, perhaps forever? I had a good look at our dwelling, contemplating every little corner where I had lived for years, wishing them the last “*Zait gezint!*”⁸, [thinking], “Do not worry - sooner or later, the time of my release will come.” and I left my house, under the escort and heavy guard of the police officers.

My father still managed to throw me an old garment of his - a warm *palto* [Pol., overcoat], so that I should not be cold.

As I leave, my mother whispers a silent prayer - I hear every word and they torture me like poisoned bullets. I, too, answer only one reply - I grind my teeth and shout out, “*Nekume, nekume!*” [Heb., revenge].

⁷ [Heb., leavened products, which one is not allowed to have in one's house during Passover and for which each homeowner searches assiduously in every corner with a candle on the night before Passover.]

⁸ [TN: Yid., lit. “Be healthy”; traditional farewell akin to “Keep well” in English.]

I am let through the gate by our night watchman - a *tzoirer Yisrael*⁹, who never shows a friendly mien towards any of the [Jewish] neighbours. Now that I look at him, I sense that he, too, is sorry for me; naturally, not as his friend of his - I am, after all, a “*żyd*”¹⁰ - but some hatred towards the police is awoken within him. He also senses that, for a time, he will lose the brass coins that I would give him at night every time I came home late. I also feel that he is thinking about me – I had always been a silent, peaceful “*żydek*” and now it turns out that I am actually a political criminal.

Oh, you foolish Gentile! Had you understood how I always feel the suffering of all the oppressed and weak, that I wish to see your Polish people in a better state than now, that you should also be like all the free nations, in your own land - had you known this, you would surely have let me know, in advance, that the police were looking for me, and you would have given me a chance make myself scarce.

My musings are interrupted. I am getting further and further away from all that is near and dear to me...

Walking on our way, we come upon a night watchman, who jokes with the policemen at my expense. He asks them “*Господа, поймали вы бунтовщюки?*” [Rus., Gentlemen, have you caught the insurgents?] Triumphantly, they answer him, “*Da! Da!*”

A new flame is ignited inside me. If my strengths were with me, I would have shown them the power, like *Shimshon Ha’Gibor* [Samson the Mighty], but I feel that I am now without any force against them and therefore maintain my silence.

Finally, after walking for a few minutes, we stop next to a building and, by means of a calculation made in advance and also at an indicated address, they rouse the owner of the building, who shows them where one of his tenants lives. They enter a small, narrow apartment, dragging me along with them as their prisoner.

A *Yidl*¹¹, on whose face one recognised that he meddled little in politics, who only knew things were bad for him and wished to improve his unhappy situation, his financial state, a diminutive Jew some forty-five years of age, with several

⁹ [TN: Heb., “oppressor/foe of [the people of] Israel”; traditional term for antisemite.]

¹⁰ [TN: Although the Polish word “*żyd*” means simply “Jew”, it was used by Russians and Ukrainians as a racial slur; “*żydek*” (little Jew), however, is a derogatory term also in Polish.]

¹¹ [TN: Diminutive form of *Yid*, or Jew in Yiddish, used affectionately in ref. to a fellow Jew.]

small children and also a wife, who needed food to still their hunger - that was the type of Jew I encountered upon entering the house.

He, the supposed *крамольник* [Rus., sedition-monger], the revolutionary, whom they had now come to arrest, looks at me. I look at him. He has some understanding of what this smells and he, somehow, cannot believe it. He cannot speak either Russian or Polish. He is an ordinary Jew.

After doing in his house what they did in mine - the same search - they order him to also come along with us. What choice does he have?

The little children cried, "*Daddy, don't go away!*", and he reassured them that he would be back soon, that he was not going away for long.

Now, I have received someone to accompany me, but this brings me little joy. I am thinking of how they have managed to capture another victim, another innocent man.

We finally leave the house of my new friend and we are taken, on the same street, into the house of another Jewish labourer.

They search the home of our new friend, too and, instead of *treif*, illegal literature, all they find are pigeons of various colours and breeds. The police declare that he is also detained and that he, too, is invited into the prison. This friend's wife and mother-in-law, as well as his little children, are already more practical. They have already had a taste of this before. They comprehend that, regardless of the outcome of the arrest, this will be a mortal blow for them - they will be forced to suffer hunger and necessity. But they remain silent. The third friend, before leaving, tells them not to worry. He gives a look at his pigeons and the several canaries, who are precisely now singing sweet, lovely tones, making it seem as if they were protesting and lamenting the departure of their provider.

"Poor, poor little birds!", I think to myself. "Even you will now be forced to suffer hunger and thirst. You understand this - you feel it - and that is why you are trilling your dulcet tones, intermingled with sorrowful melodies."

Now, there are already three of us. My mind is working like a machine. As we march together down the street, escorted by the police guards, I wonder who else they are going to snatch up now into their bloodied, filthy and vile paws.

One policeman urges me to walk a bit faster “or else...”. He does not scare me much because, after all, things are already as bad as they can get.

Once more, we are brought to a halt in front of a building. The police ring the owner’s doorbell. With sleepy eyes, a friend of mine - the owner’s son - comes out to open the gate. He sees me, surrounded by police guards, and already understands what this is smells of.

The police ask him where a certain person lives in this building. Due to a mistake in writing down the name, they do not have the correct address and, to his good fortune, they are unable to find out where he lives and they go away as if whipped - agitated, with their bestial blood boiling. They seemed to me as wild beasts, which eat and are never full.

Leaving there, not having found the one for whom they are looking, I cast a glance at my friend, who has not been arrested and sing a silent song:

*“Bind us in iron chains
Tear us up like bloody beasts;
You can only kill our bodies
But not our sacred spirit!”*

I also whisper to him to tell my mother that my arrest is connected to the bakery workers, and to give her my regards.

I was already sick of going about raiding with the brutal band and I gave voice, at first quietly and then more loudly, that they should take us to the detention centre and not drag us around to see them raiding others’ houses and disturbing the repose of the peaceful, tired residents.

Eventually, my protest worked and we were sent to the prison under the escort of a few guards, while the others continued on their hunt.