

Aron Gelbard

Nineteen Days in Treblinka

Treblinka – a point which did not exist on any map, and I doubt whether anyone in the entire Polish Jewry had ever heard of such a place, not to mention within World Jewry.

A place with which millions of Jews are now connected, for it became the burial ground of their nearest and dearest!

Where is Treblinka?

On the road from Warsaw to Białystok, there was a place called Małkinia [Górna] - a station with many train lines. One small line led to a tiny village called Treblinka. Its residents, who had had never thought of or known about the civilised world's technology, continued working their field primitively and hacking down branches and trees from the nearby woods to warm their houses and to cook something to eat.

Then the year 1941 arrived and the Nazi beasts ordered the forest to be cut down. They erected a *Factory of Death*, with all the German precision.

The felled forest was encircled with barbed wire and fully camouflaged with branches from the trees, which had been cut down, so that no human eye should be able to see what was being done there. Thus, concealed from the world, thirteen gas-chambers were quickly built - with the purpose of annihilating the Jewish people.

Over the course of the nineteen days when I was in Treblinka, not one day went by without the arrival of three or four transports, each of which numbered 6,000-8,000 Jews. There were also cases of transports arriving during the night. (The *akcja* of the Częstochowa policemen also took place during the night.)

A special railway line ran directly into the camp. When a transport arrived, it stopped at the Treblinka station, from which the locomotive would travel into the camp with six carriages each time. There, the S.S., Ukrainians and also Jewish units, who were forced to do the dirtier jobs, were already waiting in readiness.

One group was called "The Blues," because they wore blue arm-bands. Their task was to drive the people out of the carriages quickly and to throw out the [discarded] luggage, for many passengers had by then understood they would not be needing their belongings any longer. They were also required to take the corpses of those who had suffocated in the crowded carriages. They hurled the cadavers into the [fire-] pits which blazed continuously, with human bodies and rubbish. A different group worked in a large square, which was directly next to the platform. These were called "The Reds" (due to the red arm-bands they wore).

They called out, "Men to the right! Women to the left!" and "Strip naked!"

Women, with children, were taken naked by armed S.S. to have their hair cut off. The people were thereupon conducted along an avenue, which they called "The Avenue of the Garden of Eden," to the gas-chambers. They were being taken to be "bathed," as it were.

Meanwhile, the men were forced to gather the clothing that had been taken off and, running naked, haul it off to a far-off square.

All this transpired in a tumult of horrendous shouting and blows, instigated by the murderers, that the victims should not have the presence of mind or the time to grasp what was happening. When six new carriages arrived, there was already no trace left of the people who had arrived earlier.

Then, a group worked at the "Red Camp," which was the same camp, but from the other side, from which they had to take the dead bodies out of the chambers. The chambers were sloped - they were high at the entrance and became progressively lower the further one went inside. There were doors at the back too and, when they were opened, the bodies would fall straight into pits, which an excavator buried day and night, as well as preparing pits to receive the fresh victims to come.

But some corpses always remained. They needed to be dragged out. Those performing this task did not survive for more than a few days, because they were poisoned just by entering the chambers.

The day after *Yom Kippur*, 22nd September 1942, the liquidation of the Częstochowa Jewry began and transports were sent to Treblinka at intervals of three days between one *akcja* and the next. I went with the fourth *akcja*, arriving in Treblinka on 2nd October 1942.

Our shipment numbered up to 8,000 people, crammed into the railway carriages, unable to make the slightest movement.

I must present the image - when a woman wished to suckle her baby, we were forced to hold the infant in the air and she raised her breast in such a manner that the baby should be able to, at least, get something. As a rule, we held all small children above our heads so that they should not suffocate. We travelled thus for twenty hours.

I do not know what I should call this - "luck?" I did not consider this a great fortune, but it is a fact. Proportionately, more people from the Częstochowa transports survived than from other cities. Fate decreed that, at the very same time when transports had begun to arrive from Częstochowa, a shipment of personal belongings that the murderers had wanted to sell to a German firm had been sent back, with the stipulation that they could only buy goods which were already sorted - shoes separately, linen separately, clothes separately, etc.

They required labourers for this and, when young men were chosen from the transports to sort the luggage, I was also among those selected. There, I already found Częstochowa Jews from the earlier transports - Aron Berliner, Mojsze Glik, the two Gelber brothers and others whose names I no longer recall.

My task consisted of cutting thin rope into 60cm. long sections, which were given to each individual when the transport arrived, with which to tie his shoes together. I admit and confess that the first two days, I had no idea what was happening with me or around me.

But, once I regained consciousness, I already witnessed with my own eyes the tragedy and the destruction of our people.

So, I at once decided that I must not remain here, for with our every actions, we were indirectly aiding the annihilation of our folk.

I had also set myself another goal - to come to the few remaining Jews in the ghetto and to the underground movement, to be able to enlighten them and call them to resistance in order to save all who could yet be saved.

I met my friend and teacher, whom we had saved - one of the most respected social workers in our city - Gerszon Prędko. I tried to convince him to join me in my plans for escape but, sadly, the man was so broken in morale and physique, that he said to me, "This is the grave of my wife, my child, and all our nearest ones - so it shall already be my own grave too".

But he encouraged me and called me to carry through my plan, that I should be among those to avenge the innocent Jewish blood spilt.

Over the course of the nineteen days that I was in Treblinka, we endeavoured to save anyone we could. How? As we ran with the clothes which the people had shed, we would throw the naked person into the mountain of personal belongings and cover him with baggage. Afterwards, we would secretly give him a pair of trousers and a shirt. Thus, the saved also stood at once and sorted the luggage. How many people needed to be at work - the Germans did not know, for every day a few dozen labourers were shot. So they kept no accurate tally of how many were supposed to be at work. They reasoned that - either way - they were all in their hands and sentenced to death. Sadly, many did not grasp what we meant by throwing them into the mountains of things. They got up and continued running. In this manner, we managed to rescue Jews from Częstochowa – Jakób Ajzner (now in Israel), Rapaport ("*Po Pięć*" – lives now in America) [and] Izaak Zajdman - [who was] killed while escaping.

I also wish to mention [two] people whom we very much desired to save. These were the lawyer Asz, our rabbi's son, and my dear friend Jakób Aronowicz. But we were not successful, because they were extremely unsettled and, during the running, they lost their spectacles. I also wish to mention several who, as I recall, also managed to save themselves by escaping - Pacanowski (lives in Israel), "*Bombe*" [Yid. "Bomb"] (lives in America) [and] "The Angel of Death" (that is what he was called, I think. [He is] in Australia).

As I have mentioned already, I fled after nineteen days. This was on 21st October 1942. But on the following day, Poles caught me in the woods - 8 km. from Treblinka. They stripped me and left me in my undergarments, without any means of survival.

This was the "aid" one could receive from the Poles.

In mid-November 1942, I returned to Częstochowa, this time to the "Small Ghetto," where I found the remnants of Częstochowa Jewry.

Regretfully, I am forced to mention that, when I met with a group of people in the ghetto kitchen and I told them what my eyes had seen in Treblinka and what was being done to our people, they spoke among themselves [saying] that I was not normal, that I had slightly departed from clear reasoning.

Later, I began working at the "Furniture Camp," and put myself in contact with the [Jewish] Fighting Organisation. Through a Polish railroad worker, we contacted those Częstochowa people still alive in

¹ [TN: See above, Volume One, col.343.]

the camp [?], sent them Polish documents and called them to participate in the uprising, which would make escape possible.

Sadly, things did not work out the way we wanted. In June 1943, the insurrection planned in Częstochowa fell through and the best of our fighters fell in their positions. At this opportunity, I wish to mention my dear brother Izaak Gelbard, who also fell when the Fighting Organisation was liquidated, together with the "Small Ghetto".