

Mojsze Konsens

It Began Even Before the War

When Hitler rose to power, we lived in the town of Praszka, on the Polish-German border.

My father, Leizer Konsens z''l, was headmaster of the local school and, by request of a wealthy farm-owner named Sudowicz, we moved to live on the farm. This farm-owner persuaded my father that we should come live on the farm, even without paying rent, and my father accepted his proposal, so as to be able to learn agriculture, which would prepare him for *Aliyah*.

One Saturday afternoon, when I was in the farmyard, I suddenly saw a half-naked man running. This was a German Jew named Tischler, who had escaped from his home, at noon, because the S.S. bruisers wanted to kill him. This happened in 1934, when I was 9-years-old, but it has remained deeply etched into my memory. From then on, these types of incidents occurred frequently.

After some time, we moved from Praszka to Częstochowa, through the influence of Mr J. Goldsztajn, President of the Jewish *Kehilla*, who had known my father since childhood. Only once he had promised that we would emigrate to Palestine as soon as possible, did I accompany my father on his visit to Mr J. Goldsztajn, who used to hold the Third *Shabbes* Meal for several people, and I witnessed and heard everything that was going on in the city. On Saturdays, we prayed at the *Ha'Mizrachi* synagogue, on the First Aleja 10.

On Yom Kippur 1937-8, before *Kol Nidrei*, my father began his speech ("*And Moses went up*"), as if his heart had told him that the Holocaust on the Jews of Częstochowa would commence the day after *Yom Kippur*. With the onset of the Second World War in 1939, the *Kehilla* board of management began organising rescue and relief operations. Following the directives of Mr J. Goldsztajn, my father, A. Dancyger and a few other people, I became an emissary for good deeds, particularly to respected individuals, who did not agree to receive aid openly.

Once, when I rebelled against this system, my father admonished me and taught me a verse: "*Blessed is he that considereth¹ the poor: the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble.*" [Psalm 41:2]. And, indeed, from the day after Yom Kippur 1942 - the day of Częstochowa Jewry's Holocaust - when I alone remained of my entire family, I felt an invisible hand saving me from all troubles. When I was 17, I was so debilitated and emaciated, that I looked 14 and, every time, there was a selection, I was the first to be taken out of the line. At the time the "Small Ghetto" was opened, I was taken one day to work at the Nowy Rynek [New Market], in a group of twenty people, under the supervision of a drunken German nicknamed *Fessale* [Yid.; "Little Barrel"], who shot his pistol right and left.

Our assignment was to move furniture, which had been removed from the Jewish houses, from one side to the other. We all had to load cupboards on our backs and carry them running to the other end. I once witnessed the sale of Jewish possessions at the churchyard, where a large queue of Poles stood pushing, with money at the ready, to buy Jewish property. A German stood there on a high platform, loudly announcing each item. The Poles, pushing and shoving each other, almost made this German fall down. He became enraged, and flung bowls, household objects and glassware at them to make them disperse - the commotion was great.

¹ [TN: See Volume One, column 548. The sages (in *Midrash Rabbah* on *Leviticus*, Ch. 34) interpreted this verse to mean that one has to give charity in a cunning manner so as not to shame the beneficiary.]

In the course of that same day, when we had finished our work, a head-count was conducted and the German suddenly realised there was one man too many in our group. He began counting again and, finding one too many, he decided to take one out. It fell to my lot to be chosen and the German took out his pistol and made ready to shoot me. At that moment, I remembered that I had a certificate in my pocket, which I had received two weeks prior. I showed him the document and he started counting again and calmed down.

On 4th January 1943, the Częstochowa ghetto rebellion broke out. When I heard the sound of the trumpet in the ghetto, I did not understand what was happening. I saw people going out to the ghetto square, so I went there to. A German stood at the entrance to the ghetto. He stopped me and asked me how old I was. I answered that I was 18. Upon hearing this, he ordered me to go up above the courtyard of the Polish Guard. I immediately realised I was in trouble again, because there were many people in the square and I was not put together with them. I ascended above the courtyard of the Guard and a horrifying image was revealed. Earlier, the Germans had already concentrated women, children and babies there. They had been caught in the bunkers, where they had somehow been able to hide until then. The women tore their hair and were hysterical and the babies wept bitterly.

There were women who kissed their children and there were women who strangled their children. It is impossible to set out such a scene on paper. In the meantime, other people arrived, all young, and among them was Fiszlowicz, with whom I was not yet acquainted. Among them was my friend Hajman, with whom I had studied at the vocational school. They huddled in a corner and my friend motioned to me to come nearer. When I came to him, he said, "We know where they're taking us and so we need to revolt. We've got one pistol and some knives and, if necessary, we'll even fight with sticks."

Fiszlowicz began planning how and when to start the rebellion. Just then, we heard shouts, "Go down!" Polish policemen and Germans began driving us out with yells and blows.

We were around 70 individuals - twenty youngsters, the rest being women and children. Outside, in the square, some 3,000 people were already standing. Our group crouched next to them, and this was the last order Fiszlowicz was able to give us.

We stood there, heavily guarded by fifty Germans with bayoneted rifles. One German was commanded to take the numbers off our clothes. At that moment, a Jew began to escape from the group standing in the square. Some five Germans fell upon him with cudgels and bayonets to bring him back to our lines. In those instants, when the five bloodthirsty Germans launched themselves at the Jew, there was a stir among the lines. A commotion ensued and our group dispersed. The Germans were startled upon hearing Fiszlowicz's war-cry. Fear seized them and they did not notice me pushing my way out between two Germans. I sneaked out towards the houses which stood outside the ghetto and began fleeing among the abandoned houses. I ran, often falling because the snow was deep. I ran with all my strength, with shots ringing in the air.

Passing the houses, there was a snow-covered field. I ran without stopping until I suddenly heard shouts in Polish, "Stop, Jew!" I saw around twenty Polish youths chasing after me. I stopped, and turning around for the first time, I saw many Poles standing around the ghetto, laughing. The boys caught up to me and asked me, "Where are you fleeing to?" I understood their intentions and produced ten *złoty*. It was all I had. I told them that my money had already been seized earlier and they advised me to escape into the forest.

I began walking, not knowing to where. I was in shock and did not know where to turn, with a Jewish appearance and wearing wooden clogs. I wandered about on the three *Aleje*, among Poles and Germans, indifferent to whatever would happen to me. Then, I decided to go to my former workplace, a German military camp which was called the "Eastern Camp". I stole into the army base, when a group of Jews passed through the courtyard carrying coal. I joined them and all knew, at once, that something had happened. Due to my traumatised state, I was unable to tell them anything. But, on our way back to the ghetto, we passed another group of Jews who were also returning from their work. They knew all about what had taken place in the ghetto. They told us that twenty people had been killed in the ghetto - among them, a young man named Sztal, with whom I lived in the same room, as well as my cousin's husband, Wygodzki.

The Germans, fearing a mass revolt, began ferreting about in the ghetto with detectives and informers. They discovered that a rebellion had, indeed, been planned.

One day, several houses on ulica Nadrzeczna were raided. Bunkers with weapons and ammunition were discovered there, as well as German clothes. Dozens were killed during this raid.

