

Arie Kudlik

I Was Freed By the Revolt

On 6th October 1942, I arrived in Treblinka together with multitudes of Częstochowa Jews in sealed carriages. Upon the train's arrival, I was among the first to descend from the carriages. By orders of the Germans, we ran to the camp's yard, where we were made stand by a row of barracks and go through a selection - men to the left and women to the right. They then ordered us to undress.

I had already taken off my shoes and coat, when a S.S. man suddenly came and asked, "Who knows how to work with knitwear?" From among those who replied [in the affirmative], he chose ten. I was also one of those who shouted that they knew how to work in this, but many people stood in front of me and they therefore did not hear me. In that moment, it occurred to me to jump over the heads of people and thus I joined that group of ten which had been chosen. However, another S.S. man suddenly sprung up from nowhere, as it were, and demanded to know what I was doing there. As it turned out, he had seen from afar how I had joined the group. I replied that the first S.S. man had told me to join. He seemed to believe me, a fact which decided my future fate. Our group went to a place where there were piles of clothes, which we had to sort by type. As I performed this task, I saw how people, who had arrived together with us, already ran naked with their clothes in their arms, which they brought to put in our piles.

Everything was done with dazzling speed and, within a quarter of an hour, these people were already being led to the gas-chambers. This spectacle continued all day long and it encompassed thousands of people.

For some time, I worked at sorting belongings, but I was unable to continue, because I could not come to accept the horrors. Through acquaintances, I tried to get myself transferred to different work and I was then sent to a place where fountain pens were packed into cases. I worked at this over several months. Meanwhile, the number of transports increased and more labourers were needed to sort the belongings. They therefore returned me to my previous workplace. But, luckily, I was soon taken to yet another field of labour, this time to prepare a plot intended for a zoo. This was a large square shed which housed deer, ducks and all kinds of birds.

My task was to arrange the paths leading to this shed, to plant the flowers in the garden and to set up the wooden décor surrounding it.

People cut down trees in the forest and brought them to camp and, from these, I had to make the mosaic [?]. For some time, I also worked at installing the new barrier for the train that entered inside the camp.

One day, something happened that shocked all the prisoners in the camp. In this period, the vigilance was not as yet excellent and many considered escaping. But the perils and difficulties were so great, that only very few could actually contemplate fleeing. And if someone did escape, his neighbours were held responsible and punished with death (in the camp, there was only one punishment).

And here, two individuals decided to escape despite everything. They prepared money for themselves in advance, which they took from the pockets of the clothing they worked on during

sorting and which they put in packs. Later, as the time of the escape neared, they thought to take the money from the packs and hide it in their clothes. But, to their misfortune, they were caught in the act by Ukrainian guards, who then put them into the hands of the Germans. In retaliation, they took them to the centre of the camp, stripped them and began beating them cruelly - until they lost consciousness. They then gathered all the people of the camp, made them stand in rows all around and, in their presence, erected a gallows in the centre of the square. The poor fellows were bound hand and foot, and then hanged with their heads facing downwards. They hung like that for a long while, with a Ukrainian by the gallows, standing guard over them. I remember something that I shall never forget. When they regained consciousness, the two shouted, "Jews! Don't look at the food, think only of revolt!"

Their desperate call echoed widely. It may be said that the first seeds of revolt had been sown. This was the match that lit the fire and, from that moment on, this thought pervaded the minds of the people and did not lessen its grip on them until the actual rebellion broke out. Upon hearing their proclamations, the Germans appeared immediately and ordered the Ukrainian guard to shoot them dead.

Another incident, which also influenced the consolidation of the people's awareness towards the idea of revolt, was a similar murder. A young man from Częstochowa (whose name I no longer recall) worked at sorting coats from the piles of clothes and was required to empty the pockets of any contents. One time, an S.S. officer, whose nickname in the camp was "Kiwe¹", arrived and began testing samples. He ordered the young man to open one package of coats and to turn the pockets inside out. Unfortunately for him, one of the pockets contained a "mark of disgrace" - a yellow Star of David. When he saw this, the S.S. officer ordered all the young men to present themselves at a certain spot, where he made them stand in a row, with the youth, who had been caught in his "transgression", standing in front of them. He then told a different S.S. man to "see to him". The man called a Ukrainian guard and ordered him to shoot the young man. As the Ukrainian was aiming his gun at the back of the Jew's head, the S.S. officer told him to shoot him precisely from the front, so that he should "look straight at death". After the Ukrainian had shot him, he still remained alive, whereupon the S.S. officer took out his pistol and killed him.

As these incidents became more common, people began thinking and talking more and more about an uprising. The goal was to kill the German staff, burn down the camp's barracks and installations and then escape! In the midst of all the thoughts and thinkers, there were also practical people who decided to translate this into action. I shall not elaborate on the preparations for the revolt - these are described in detail by our *landsmann* Mr Willenberg in his article. I will only note that the people in the camp knew nothing during the entire time, because there was a danger that it may leak out and fall on undesired ears.

And then, when the day of the rebellion came, when everything was in readiness, something occurred which made this first attempt fail. It turned out that the grenades that had been taken from the warehouse were without explosives and so the matter fell through. A different date was therefore appointed and the time for the revolt was set for five o'clock. But, due to unforeseen circumstances, the affair was moved three hours forward. One man, who was in on the plot, was apprehended by the S.S. and there was a danger they might execute him. Therefore, the rebellion started earlier [than planned]. On this day, all those held in the camp already knew and had made preparations - some for action and some for escape. At about one o'clock in the afternoon, a shot was heard, followed by explosions [and] shouting and everyone began to run towards the gate and the fences.

¹ [TN: Karl (Fritz) Küttner.]

I, too, was among the escapees. I ran to the gate. To my right and to my left, I saw hundreds of people - multitudes - running towards the fences and gates (there were several) and shots at us were also heard.

Once I had passed the gate, I regained my composure, but I continued running with all my strength until we reached the road. Here, we halted a few seconds, looked back, crossed the road and continued running and walking, running and walking, until we reached the woods. Now, it was difficult to continue running and, anyway, we were also exhausted. So we stopped.

At this point, I noticed that I had been wounded in the arm. Meanwhile, an argument ensued amongst the fugitives as to whether to continue forward *en masse* or to split up into small groups. Both courses had proponents. However, the majority preferred that we divide into small groups. As if on their own, without any leadership or deliberate intent, separate groups formed. I, too, instantly belonged to a group of nine people. We separated ourselves a bit from the others and continued our progress. In the meantime, dusk fell and, when we reached the end of the forest, we noticed a village nearby. We decided to approach the village and investigate, for which two of us volunteered - me and one other friend (his name is Rajzman, and he lives now in Canada). When we came to the village, people were standing by the fence. They already knew that the Treblinka camp was burning and they asked us if we had escaped from there. We answered that we had and asked them for a little food and drink. Without a word, they gave us a jug of water and some bread. We wanted to pay them, but they would accept nothing in return. We told them we had other friends in the woods, upon which they gave us food for them as well. We returned to the forest and gave our friends the details of the encouraging meeting. Since the food was not sufficient, we wanted to return to the village, but as we neared it, we heard shouting in our direction, "Run away! Quickly! The entire area is surrounded by Germans!"

By then, it was completely dark and, when we heard gunfire, we dived into a ditch, where we stayed all night. In the morning, we crawled out of the ditch and went into a potato field. Suddenly, we heard rustling noises, but did not know what they were. I cautiously raised my head and, just a few metres away, I saw a woman with a girl harvesting potatoes. When they noticed us, they told us to put our heads down, because Germans were prowling about nearby. We told them we were extremely hungry, but they explained to us that, at the moment, it was dangerous for them to be around us and that, consequently, they could not offer us aid. That said, the woman pointed out a lone tree standing in the field and said that she would place a loaf of bread there, which we could retrieve at night. We lay that way the entire day, hungry and thirsty. Once darkness fell, we went up to the lone tree but, to our great sorrow, we found nothing. So we left the field and continued walking until, from afar, we saw a farmer travelling with a wagon. We were extremely hungry and thirsty, exhausted, and battered. We could no longer continue so, having no other options, we said to ourselves, "Either way, we have nothing more to lose".

So, we turned to the farmer, told him the truth and asked his advice. He took pity on us. He took us to his home, fed us, gave us cool water to drink and hid us on his premises for the night. His son was a member of the Polish Resistance A.K. [*Armia Krajowa* – Home Army] and he cautioned us to flee the following day. Indeed, the next day we did flee the area and we actually proceeded onwards specifically during the daytime, for we knew that the Germans searched for fugitives, mainly, at night. Next to the village was a dense forest and we had agreed with the old Christian that we would hide there. We spent a prolonged period there and the man, whose surname was Golos and who shall be remembered as one of the *Righteous Among Nations*, manifested sublime uprightness, brought us food and drink every so often.

If we paid him, he returned the change. This man kept us alive until joyous day of liberation.