

Szlojme Waga*

The Germans in Częstochowa

It was already clear, on the first day of the War, Friday 1st September 1939, that the Germans would occupy Częstochowa. With shocking strength, they faced the Polish troops that were diverted deep into the country.

The city's population was engulfed in an atmosphere of panic and began to follow the retreat of the army, leaving everything behind. The last trains and private automobiles, that went in the direction of Warsaw, Kielce and other cities, were full of people.

To escape, as far away as possible, was the only thought of the people who were filled with fear of the arriving Germans. On Friday, the first day of the War, thousands of peasants and their families from the surrounding villages marched through the city on foot and in wagons, with their cattle and with anything that they could take with them.

The highways and roads were so overflowing with wandering masses of people that the retreating Polish army had to make a great effort in order to break through a road for its further retreat.

Bloody Monday

On Monday, the fourth day of the War, the first German decree was issued - that all businesses should be opened immediately. The residents of the city began to move through the streets but, suddenly, the passers-by were shocked to see, with guns pointed, the Germans leading a large, heavily guarded group of people with their hands raised in the air.

Many of the people were half-naked. This image made a distressing impression on everyone, for it became clear that the terror was beginning. Two hours later, when I was at home, we heard shots that, each moment, grew increasingly stronger. And, even as we stood frozen with fear, we heard frantic knocks on our door and someone desperately crying, "Have mercy! Let us in!" We immediately opened the door and several Jews entered our residence and told us that the Germans were chasing people in the streets and shooting passers-by.

Before long, the Germans began breaking into private residences and driving everyone out. They did not pass our apartment by. Beating on our door with rifle butts, they demanded to be let in. When we opened the door, they stormed into the premises and ordered us to raise our hands and go outside.

We were hurriedly driven out to the courtyard, where we found some of our neighbours.

The Germans led us out into the street, where people were being pursued, as we had seen earlier. The streets were full of troops. Their weapons were aimed at us and, when our eyes met theirs, they laughed in our faces. When they noticed a Jew, they hit him over the head with a rifle butt.

* An excerpt from his book "*The Destruction of Częstochowa.*"

Marching through the streets, we met other groups which were also being driven out of their homes. We were taken to a location where they began to sort us - men separately and women separately.

They counted out 200 people from our group and ordered us to proceed, with our hands in the air, to the Municipal Administration Building. When we arrived there, we noticed large diggings, which had been once intended as [air-raid] shelters, and German soldiers with machine guns next to them. Upon seeing us, one of them called out, "There they are, the dogs. They'll all be shot soon and thrown into these pits".

An immense fear fell upon us. Due to exhaustion, we could no longer hold our hands in the air. They fell to rest on our heads. Barely moving our lips, we asked each other - Could these be our last minutes?! Some murmured silent prayers.

At this juncture, an occurrence, characteristic to those dramatic moments, took place. A Jew in his thirties, who was standing with us in the row, wet his trousers. One of the officers, noticing this, approached the man and asked him, "Why are you shaking, you swine? Now you're afraid. Why did you shoot at our troops?"

Hearing such words, we immediately realised what was happening, but our thoughts were interrupted when a Pole, who also stood with us in the row, suddenly called to the officer in broken German, "Cursed Jew, he is guilty, we are innocent." However, the officer at once reassured him, "We'll soon be finished with the Jews".

After holding us in a standing position under the burning sun for about two hours, ten military men emerged from the building and began to search each of us. Whoever was found with a razor, a pocket knife or any other sharp objects on his person, was forced to jump immediately into one of the pits, which were surrounded by soldiers who shot at the people in them.

If no sharp objects were found during the search, the man's fate hung with whoever had conducted the search, viz. whether he found him pleasing or not. The selection of people for death was done at such a pace, that queues of people awaiting their doom had already formed near the pits. Seeing the executions before their eyes, people tore their hair out and flung themselves to the ground, screaming in great desperation and crying out for help and salvation.

I stood in the group and awaited my turn to be searched. Some secret strength pushed me from the line. I went up to a German, who seemed to me to have more lenient glance. I unbuttoned my overcoat and emptied out the contents of the pockets - a pencil, a pen, a wallet, and a handkerchief and, giving everything to the German, I said to him, "See, I have nothing more with me. But I've left my old parents at home, and they cannot live without me."

Meanwhile, new groups of people, from all parts of the city, were brought. They shared the fate of those before them.

Who knows how long the executions would have continued, had an air alarm and the immediate shooting at the Polish airplanes that appeared over the city not been heard. The Germans ordered everyone to lie on the ground, warning us that, if anyone moved from their spot or lifted up their head, they would immediately be shot. Their soldiers also got down on the ground with the muzzles of their guns pointed at us. We tried to bury our heads as deeply as possible in the soil and the shooting intensified. Bullets literally whizzed over our bodies and we were sure that we would not emerge alive.

Jews said, *Shema Yisroel* and recited Psalms. Christians also called to their saints for aid. All feared lest the Germans should hear their prayers and become upset.

When the shooting, which lasted a long time, had ceased, we were ordered to stand up and go to the horses' stables. But not everyone stood on their feet. There were casualties in our group.

Upon entering the stables, we fell exhausted on the horse manure and fell asleep, as the Germans locked the stables from the outside.

The mass execution that we had witnessed was not the only one in the city. Similar killings took place in all parts of the city, including the courtyard of the Jewish Crafts School at Garncarska 19. Murders of Częstochowa residents also took place in the churches, schools and in all public buildings and lots. They set fire to whole houses and burned them down with the tenants inside them, who were not allowed to leave. If someone tried to jump out of a window of a burning house, he was immediately shot. The Germans set up machine guns across the entire city and shot, without warning, at any Jew who appeared on the streets.

Thus transpired *Bloody Monday* in Częstochowa.