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The “Kapo” Changed his Mind

In 1942, when I was sixteen, I worked at “Raków-HASAG”, in the transport from the factory to the iron foundry. At the beginning of 1943, a youth of about eighteen joined me in my work and I discovered that he had been sent by the Partisans to organise a group of fighters and to take them to the woods. He, of course, wished to take me along as well, but I was together there with my brother, who alone remained of our entire family, and I did not wish to leave him. This young man sometimes left the work group through a secret passageway and I acted as his lookout.

Once, as I was exiting the bomb-shelter, the Jewish camp coordinator [viz. kapo] suddenly caught me. To his inquiries as to what I was doing there, I replied that my work tools were inside the bomb-shelter. He laughed and told me that he knew about the man in the bomb-shelter and that he would take me to the German officer.

I knew what fate awaited me, yet I had no option but to go with him. On the way, I met my brother and told him that I wanted to “finish off” the coordinator.

The kapo overheard our conversation and could not stop laughing. This made my blood boil, so I said to him, “Look, I *will* be killed, but before they do so, I’ll tell the Germans that you’re hiding your little boy with Poles.”

He blanched visibly, and denied everything. But from that moment on, he treated me differently. He took me to his room, told his wife to prepare whatever food I desired and began begging me to reveal the partisan’s hiding place to him, because he had received orders from the German officer to bring the man to him, or ten other men would be executed.

I answered that I would not reveal the place, even if it cost me my life. Once he realised he would hear nothing from me, he transferred me to work as a cleaning attendant inside the camp, under his direct supervision, so that I should have no contact with the outside.

Between Burning Furnaces

One day, looking out the barracks window, I noticed the same German who, the previous day, had overseen the transport of railway carriages loaded full of people to some unknown destination. He halted by our barracks and began talking to himself out loud, “Tell them first that we are taking the prisoners away - or surround the camp with troops, so the Jews don’t disperse?”

I quickly ran to my brother, who was sleeping in the barracks after a day’s work. I woke him up. We ran out and crossed the fence leading to the factory. I told anyone whom I met on the way what I had just heard and a few Jews joined us. We looked for a hiding-place and found one between the factory’s two, huge furnaces. It was a narrow and dark place. The heat there was unbearable, for the furnaces were of red brick and their fires raged day and night. We all got burn marks from sitting in this “shelter”.

After several hours, we heard a tremendous booming of artillery and we knew the front-line was nearing. I decided to wait until the next day, but I fell asleep for a long time. When I awoke, my

friends told me that several days had probably passed. I went outside with another lad to see what the situation was. On the way, we chanced upon a German who was a civil servant. He informed us that the time was three o'clock in the afternoon, 17th January. We asked him for news, but he did not wish to speak with us. I took up an iron rod and threatened him that unless he opened his mouth - I would kill him! He fainted from the fright. I scooped up a handful of snow and smeared it in his face, to bring him to. When he revived, he began weeping and begging us to spare his life because he was "just a clerk and had had no dealings with Jews". He told us that the Russians were coming and that he, himself, was looking for a place to hide. The German led us to the roof, from which we saw the Soviet army approaching in the distance.

We let the German go and, at that very instant, the Russians spotted us. They ordered us to come down from the roof, because they took us for Germans wanting to escape. We got down and, when we came closer, they saw that we were Jewish prisoners from the camp and allowed us to go freely on our way.