

The Revolt in Treblinka

Sz. Wilenberg was born in 1923 in Częstochowa (Poland). In 1942, he was transported to Treblinka. He was active in the camp's underground and participated in the revolt. Following the revolt, he fled wounded to the Treblinka woods and, after wandering, managed to arrive in Warsaw. He took part in the Warsaw Uprising, and later, as a partisan, fought in the Puszcza Kampinowska [Kampinos Forest].

With the liberation of Poland, he joined the army, where he served as a Lieutenant until 1947. In 1950, he emigrated to Israel, where he now lives¹.

And then came that unforgettable day, 2nd August 1943. We rose from our bunks, excited and anxious. Thousands of thoughts raced through our minds, which burned with the fever of anticipation. No one among us dwelled on the fact that he was eating his last breakfast, standing in the yard for his last roll call, going out to work for the last time. Peace reigned all around us - a humdrum state of affairs, to the point of boredom. The familiar sentinels stood at their posts in the watchtowers and gazed, with disinterested eyes, at the prisoners' activities. S.S. men ambled about in the yards, as they had done yesterday, the day before yesterday, a week and a month ago. Nothing predicted a change. Routine prevailed throughout and led our enemies' wakefulness astray. Our hearts were filled with hate and lust for revenge. Only with great difficulty were we able to conjure a nonchalant smile each time we encountered our henchmen. The smoke billowed as usual from the chimneys. The clamour of chatter was no different than on any other day. Even so, the knocks of the axe on the tree stumps, the cries we uttered - every sound was a portent of unsettling tidings and it is curious that the all-knowing Germans perceived nothing. They did not sense what was about to happen in another instant.

For some weeks already, relative tranquillity had prevailed in the camp. The henchmen left us to ourselves. No one was shot. But we were actually suspicious of this stillness, of this lack of cruelty, of the Angel of Death's respite.

The hour of the rebellion was set for the afternoon. The pre-agreed signal - a pistol shot. We were divided into groups, each of which had its special task. Some were to kill the guards in the watchtowers, some to attack the barracks with hand-grenades and some to fall upon the S.S. officers rounding the camp. We forgot no detail and no individual. We planned cutting the telephone lines, setting fire to the supplies of petrol and other flammable materials and ransacking the arsenal.

Until noon, we worked as usual in the area of the camp. Nothing went wrong. There were no "transgressions" and no one fell into the hands of the murderers. And then, the conversations, the confessions and the whispers grew quieter. The sun blazed with greater intensity.

The affair began close to three o'clock in the afternoon. Two prisoners, young lads who served as messengers for the Germans, were given the weapons-storeroom key, which was in the plotters' possession. They immediately took a stretcher, which was used for transporting rubbish and rags, as well as a few buckets and crept, unseen, into the storeroom. It was an incomparably auspicious hour for this mission. The sentries and the S.S. men were weary with the heat of the day and paid no attention to what was happening all around. The youths were permitted to saunter in the vicinity of

¹ [TN: Samek Willenberg sadly passed away on 19th February 2016.]

the Germans' barracks, as their task required this. The entrance to the arsenal was left unguarded, for several reasons. Firstly, it was securely locked with iron doors [in front] and a barred hatch at the back of the building. Secondly, builders were working next to the storeroom, installing a water-boiler. Thirdly, the guards in the watchtowers were required to watch over events that occurred in the open and not inside the buildings.

The boys locked themselves inside the storeroom and began passing out guns, ammunition and grenades through the bars of the hatch to the builders, who had been brought into the secret. They then sneaked back out, circled the building and conveyed the armaments to the centre of the camp in the rag-covered stretcher. The grenades were carried in buckets, which were also covered with rags. Everything was concealed in heaps of potatoes which were at the distribution point of the weaponry. Bit by bit, the rifles and bullets were carried away. Anyone who knew how to use hand-grenades was given some. We also had several pistols at our disposal. Additional weapons were supplied by the storeman, a young and extremely ugly lad from Warsaw, whom we nicknamed "The Monkey." It was he who, that morning, had supplied the conspirators with a large quantity of axes, cutters for barbed-wire and a few pairs of pliers. Many among us had hammers, knives, cudgels, [and] tins of petrol.

But, then, something happened in the yard which had a significant bearing upon the success of our meticulously planned scheme. Each of us had prepared money and gold for himself pending the escape. This "little" was relative, if compared with peacetime, because there was such an abundance of gold in the camp, that two canteens filled with gold were considered trivial.

It was nigh on four o'clock when one of the prisoners passed through the yard running and dropped a twenty-dollar gold coin on his way. To his misfortune, this was noticed by Chaskel², who turned him over to Kiwe. The interrogation was not very lengthy. Kiwe simply carried the detainee off to the "Lazarett"³ and, as usual in such cases, shot him.

We heard the shot, and mistook it for our signal to start the revolt.

I recollect that moment very well. I remember the image of the camp in every detail. There was much movement around me. I was working with a friend, cutting wood. It was uncommonly warm. We worked either just in shirtsleeves or bare-chested. The S.S. man [Franz] Suchomel passed by on his bicycle and shouted something at the labouring prisoners. Weary sentinels dozed in the watchtowers. By the gate, which led to a green garden – our own handicraft, one of the S.S. men stumbled about.

The instant I heard the shot, I sprang from my post to run to the barrack and fetch my coat, in which I had concealed the gold intended for my escape. But, at that very moment, a shout of "Hurrah!" rose up, which made my feet turn in a completely different direction.

The storming had begun.

Shots rained down on the guards in the towers. The sound of one, two, three explosions shook the air. Our comrades hurled grenades at the barracks and the camp's buildings. From all sides, prisoners came running. They formed units which grew increasingly and, yelling, they attacked the guards, the Ukrainians, [and] the S.S. men.

² [TN: A Jewish butcher from Warsaw, where he was also known as a thief. In Treblinka, he was an informer for the S.S.]

³ [TN: Ger. "Infirmiry." Under the guise of a field-hospital, victims who were unable to walk to the gas-chambers were taken there and murdered.]

A mighty and prolonged roar went up, which became stronger with every second and echoed deep into the forest. Some way off, grenades severed the telephone wires and the barbed-wire fences. Words cannot describe the pandemonium. One of the wooden barracks, dried by the sun and the heat-wave, burst into flames. Among the crowded multitude of humanity, I noticed a few Germans running in the yard, seized by panic, who hid behind some trees, joining a group at the far end of the camp.

Two Jewish drivers, one a Pole and one a Czech, set fire to the pools of petrol and oil. The flames rose to the heavens, billows of black smoke clouded the sky. From the six watchtowers thundered rifles and machine-guns. Our side responded with just a few volleys. The S.S. man standing by the garden turned around upon hearing the gunfire and yelling [and] made a movement as if to flee for his life. But a bullet perforated him. The German writhed and his body plummeted to the ground. His dread of impending death had contorted his features into a sort of demented satanic leer. As he lay on the ground, he still convulsed, as with a bothersome fit of coughing. One prisoner passed by him running, then a second and a third, closely followed by an entire host. A machine-gun fusillade suddenly struck the group. The bullets claimed numerous victims. The multitude retreated in panic. A cry of terror arose, but above the sounds of agony and fear, was carried the thunderous roar of "Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Someone set the pine branches alight that were woven into the barbed-wire. The dried-out wood burned with a clear, crackling flame which continued to spread. And then the barracks were ignited, followed by the garages, the workshops, the storerooms, the building with the gas-chambers. Everywhere, the blaze intensified, the heat struck our faces and, from all edges of the camp, the prisoners came and gathered.

From the heights of the nearest tower, the machine-gun spits forth volley after volley of fire. The bullets reach our men, thinning our lines. Circumstances in this sector become hazardous. A man by my side is holding a rifle, but does not open fire. I snatch his weapon away, aim slowly and composedly and finally pull the trigger once, twice and thrice. The dark silhouette at the top of the watchtower collapses on the railing. The machine-gun falls silent. Now, the path is clear.

"Strike, strike, kill!" – someone shouts in my ear.

"Back, the fences are down! Slowly, don't push!" The sound of the commands in Polish blends with curses in Yiddish. Someone prays in a language incomprehensible to me. One calls to God in Hebrew, another in Yiddish. The smoke burns the eyes, it suffocates. Projectiles whizz by one's ear, like [violin] strings breaking. At the far end of the camp, the Germans organise, but their fire is still intermittent. The panic and surprise temporarily prevent them from assessing the situation and responding effectively. The same as mice, they hide in the corners of burning buildings, attacking with caution. The weapons and ammunition we have are too few. That accursed Chaskel! Had we been able to complete our preparations, our standing now would have been altogether different. Again a machine-gun is rapping. Its fire forces us to slowly retreat. We dash from tree to tree, going towards the fence. Many of us are unarmed. Three more leaps, two, one - I am at the fence. The severed wires dangle limply.

Now, running, we must traverse the 50-metre long open space to the jumble of barbed-wire and the anti-tank defences. The machine-gun fire intensifies. Behind me, tragedies are happening. The brave climb onto the tangle of iron and barbed-wire and there the bullets reach them. They fall with a cry of despair. Their corpses hang on the wires and spatter a trickle of blood onto the soil. No one takes heed of them. Over the quivering bodies, other prisoners, who have just now arrived, pass. They too

are cut down and collapse. Their madness-stricken eyes stare at the camp, which now resembles a gigantic torch.

“Onwards, onwards, onwards!” – a voice emerged nearby.

“The inferno is behind us!” - I roar like a madman - “The inferno is behind us!” - these words instil strength in me, they bring me back to my senses, they force me to proceed cautiously.

Here, I crawl across the open ground and reach the barricades. I look around. To my rear, the slain made a sort of bridge over the jumble of barbed-wire, over which a fleeing prisoner crossed every instant. Beyond the barricades is the redeeming forest - freedom.

And, again, thoughts torment [me]. If we had finished the preparations, the weapons would have reached every corner. Once the agreed-upon signal was given, the shots would have hit all the S.S. officers and sentinels. We would have simultaneously paralysed the guards in the towers and vanquished all the cores of German resistance. When Kiwe’s shot rang out, the piles of potatoes still contained many weapons that had not been distributed - a large number of hand-grenades had not yet reached the hands of the conspirators. Now, numerous prisoners were forced to run from the fences back into the centre of the camp to fetch the rifles, to later retreat under lethal fire. It is no surprise that many of our men fell. Had our plan fully succeeded, we would now have two armoured vehicles at our disposal and we could have crossed the river Bug in cohesive lines to join the partisans.

Once more, I carefully raise my head and check what is happening around me. The machine-gun’s rat-tat-tat continues, but there is no time to linger any longer. With one leap, I climb onto the bridge of cadavers. I hear a round, feel an impact, but one more bound and I am at the edge of the woods. In front of me, to the sides and at my back, people are running. It is difficult, today, to determine the number of survivors. I suppose that in the same direction I fled, about two hundred men had burst from the camp. On the other side, some one hundred and fifty had escaped.