

Chunon Kiel¹

The Hero Machel Birencwajg z''l

There were various workplaces in the Częstochowa ghetto, but the only place where Jews had the possibility of being saved and [actually] *were* saved, was the furniture camp [Moebellager], at the head of which stood Machel Birencwajg.

He was a man, in the true sense of the word, and a warm-hearted Jew. During the entire time during which the furniture camp existed, his life and that of his family were every minute in jeopardy, for his entire work was dedicated to helping to save young and old.

Machel Birencwajg had declared a silent war against the Nazi murderers.

The furniture camp consisted of various workshops and had [its own] separate transport-convoy, which had a special permit to move freely about the whole city. This entire group was infused with a spirit of heroism, which Machel Birencwajg had implanted in them. Their duty was to take the furniture out of the Jewish dwellings, following an *akcja*. When they found children there, whose parents had been taken away to their deaths, they concealed them inside chests and wardrobes and then took them to the furniture camp. They needed superhuman heroism for this, because it could mean going straight into the arms of the Angel of Death.

Machel Birencwajg and his brother Pinkus quite surreptitiously organised a network of bunkers in the furniture camp. [Only] those, who were 100% trustworthy, were engaged in this activity. In the first days, food was a problem - above all, for the children who were hidden. Machel Birencwajg and his family gave up their own reserves, until the convoy of porters smuggled in food.

When a large number of persons wished to save themselves [by going] to the "Aryan side", the furniture camp was the only workplace from which it was possible to do so and Machel Birencwajg was the only Jew who helped and who gave others the possibility of helping to save people from death.

An Exceptional German

Every morning, when the labourers came to the furniture camp from the "Small Ghetto", a German named Lange stood there. People called him "Der *Chazan*" ["The Cantor"]. He was responsible for the *placówka* [institution]. This German was the exception and he should be favourably mentioned. When Machel Birencwajg counted the groups, he would quietly ask him how many would be going over to the "Aryan side".

Those unable to manage would return. Machel Birencwajg arranged [lodgings] with Christians for many children who, thanks to him, survived. Among them were Kurland's son, Brener's daughter, etc.

The Jewish Fighting Organisation (ŻOB)'s best recourse for being in contact with the outside world was through the furniture camp. All this, Machel Birencwajg knew and permitted. This was superhuman heroism on his part.

¹ [TN: Yiddish writer, born on 31st January 1910 in Częstochowa. Original surname Kielczyglowski.]

But the only gate leading to freedom, too, was eventually closed. Machel Birencwajg, his wife and his elderly mother paid dearly for their good hearts and for risking their lives to rescue others.

The following details are known regarding his last minutes:

Chanka Kongrecki, with her two children, were in one of the bunkers in that building. Her little boy would often go outside the bunker and his mother simply could not hold him back.

One day, he was caught by the Germans and, frightened by their threats, showed them the bunker's location. As a consequence, Chana and her children, as well as all the other people in the bunker, were shot.

On 19th March 1943, the foe Degenhardt, with his band of helpers, came out of the blue into the partisans' room and, after conducting a search, found weapons there. Six victims from the finest figures of Częstochowa youth fell on that occasion: Moniek Flamenbaum, Alek Herszberg, Jerzyk Rozenblat, Heniek Rychter, Janek Krauze and Szlamek Szain.

Apparently, the Germans had been informed of the goings-on at the furniture camp and, on the second day of *Shavuos* 1943 [10th June], the *Schutzpolizei* arrived, led by the arch-hangman Degenhardt, may his name be obliterated, in order to liquidate the furniture camp for good.

Degenhardt ordered Machel to gather his relatives together, but Birencwajg understood what this meant. He went off to call his relatives, as it were, but he immediately disappeared. As the Germans were unable to find him, they shot his mother on the spot, as well as other people. His wife Chanka was driven away in a freight vehicle to the prison in Zawodzie, where she too was shot. They hacked Pinkus Birencwajg's teeth out and ordered him not to move from the spot - or everyone would be shot. In the wild pursuit after Machel, they forgot about Pinkus. Together with other labourers, he went to the ghetto, where he hid for some time with a group of partisans. He later went away with Aryan papers to work in Germany, where he awaited liberation.

Meanwhile, Machel, had hidden in a back yard of the furniture camp and the Germans had not found him. His closest friends maintained contact with him and he told Leon Zilbersztajn to bring him a bit of jewellery from a hiding-place, with which he believed he would save himself. Machel went to hide with a "good" Pole of his acquaintance, who betrayed him. He called the Gestapo and Machel was arrested. He was taken to prison, where many Jews sat, including Yidl Kolin, who lives in Israel. Mr Kolin recounts that, when Machel found out that his nearest and dearest had been killed, he lost the courage to fight and was shot in the gaol courtyard.

Chanka Birencwajg was also arrested with a young woman [named] Sobe Rozenaft. She, too, was shot in the prison courtyard.

In the history of the martyrs of Częstochowa, Machel Birencwajg will be entered as a hero and all those, who survived thanks to him, will never forget this heroic figure.