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Resistance in HASAG-Pelcery



At the end of June 1943, the “Small Ghetto” in Częstochowa was liquidated, thus ending a chapter of heroic struggle and Jewish resistance to the Nazi beast.

The liquidation of the “Small Ghetto” was accompanied by horrendous slaughter and the Germans were able to temporarily instil fear into a large part of the remaining 4,000 or so Jews. The despair was particularly great due to the fact that the most active and dynamic elements, which consisted of ŻOB combatants, had been torn away. The news, which came regarding the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, the mass-liquidations in other localities, as well as our own tearful experience of the liquidation of the “Big Ghetto” in Częstochowa itself, no longer left any doubt that for us, too, Hitler’s murderers were preparing a plan of total annihilation.

The killers were aware of our sentiments against them, which implied a readiness to take revenge. They therefore prepared their plans of annihilation in such a manner so that they would have the fullest certainty of achieving an easy victory over us.

The mass-slaughter in the “Small Ghetto” was, therefore, carried out with a small number of people present. They took advantage of the fact that almost all the Jews of the ghetto worked in two shifts at HASAG-Pelcery, in order to conduct the killing in a refined manner. One shift worked from 6:00 to 18:00, the other, from 18:00 to 6:00. One day, when the morning shift came to work at HASAG-*Apparatebau* [apparatus construction], it was so arranged that the night shift was not allowed to leave the factory. In this way, only a small number of people remained inside the “Small Ghetto”, mainly old people and those who were not fit for slave-labour at the munitions factory.

Leon Tenenbaum’s Heroic Reticence

Meanwhile, the Gestapo arrested a group of members, among whom was Leon Tenenbaum - an active member of ŻOB in the “Small Ghetto”. Tenenbaum was cruelly tortured during the interrogation and, later, was brought to HASAG-*Apparatebau* to betray any resistors working there. The labourers in HASAG were arranged in rows, along which Leon Tenenbaum was led. The Gestapo men demanded of him that he point out those who had collaborated with ŻOB. This, of course, did not go well for them and they shot Tenenbaum, together with other people whom they suspected.

Murders and Torture

The foremen, the production managers, the engineers, the administrators and the factory security all participated in the bloody acts of terror against Jews in HASAG-*Apparatebau*. Each foreman beat and tortured his slaves as much as he pleased. The German forewomen also did not remain underrepresented and they often surpassed even the men with their bestiality. After finishing work, the factory security would come inside the barracks [and] beat, tortured and would shoot through the windows - especially in the women’s barracks.

Selections were often conducted in HASAG-*Apparatebau*,. Already, in the first selection, 500 victims fell.

The wretched ones were, first of all, thrown by the Germans into dark cellars, which were on the territory of the so-called "*Kolonie*" [Ger.; colony]. Later, their hands were bound and they were thrown up onto freight vehicles. While doing so, the German foremen and security guards would hit the victims on the head with a hammer to stun them. The construction foreman Oppeln, who was later nicknamed "*Morsz*"¹, particularly distinguished himself in this. In this manner, the Jewish victims were transported to the cemetery and, there, were shot.

Dreadful Conditions

Hell, however, did not end with the selection. Each day brought new victims. Here, the security force shot ten people, there, the German foreman Hausner shot a woman. None of them was required to render an account of their sanguinary deeds. Jewish blood was for the taking. To murder a Jew was - a good deed.

The "living" conditions were no better. A prisoner's rations, for an entire day, consisted of 200 grams of bread (if one could call it "bread"), half a litre of barley coffee and half a litre of dried beetroot soup. The hard labour was done for twelve hours, without any rest. For every break one took, one was beaten by the foreman and the security force. The crowdedness of the barracks was unbearable. Hundreds of people lay on stacked bunks, one next to another. This tightness caused terrible filth, accompanied by lice, fleas and bedbugs.

On top of everything, there were also the *łapanki* [Pol.; round-ups], which were conducted by the security guards after the twelve hours of strenuous toil. The *łapanki* were carried out in order that those apprehended could perform special, extra duties.

In these dreadful conditions, the majority were filled with feelings of apathy and resignation. People were sick of life and instances of suicide began to appear. Some drowned themselves in the river, others ran into the electrified wires, etc. There was danger that the suicides would spread and take the form of an epidemic. Collective depression does not spare even those with a strong character.

From this tragic situation, there emerged the necessity for one to stand up against these apathetic tendencies and to strengthen the faith in the fall of Nazism.

The specific conditions in the HASAG-*Apparatebau* camp compelled the resistance groups to engage in fierce, conspiratorial activity.

In the ranks of these resistance groups were forty men and women, the most active, remaining, Jewish fighters from the "Big Ghetto" and the "Small Ghetto".

They were organised into groups of five individuals, according to their living quarters. The first goal the organisation set itself was to conduct informational work amongst its members. This political-educational activity was necessary in order to fortify the fighting spirit.

There were problems with which we dealt at every meeting and which never lost their relevance. The leadership's meetings took place once a week. Besides this, the working conditions in the various

¹ [TN: In the book "*Widersztand un Umkum in Tshenstokhoyer Geṭo*" (*Resistance and Destruction in the Czestochowa Ghetto*), p.140, the reason for this epithet is given. It seems that the fiend, after savagely beating a prisoner, would yell at the victim to get up and "march." But speaking in Polish with an accent, instead of "Marsz!" he would yell "Morsz!"]

departments of the factory were also dealt with, paying particular attention to the Jewish “*kapos*”. In the pressing plant, there was a metal-worker² who was an informer and he would bring everything to the German foremen. We created such an atmosphere around this individual, that he should feel our contempt of him.

Social questions, such as how to alleviate the hunger conditions, were also handled at the leadership’s meetings.

We put ourselves in contact with the camp kitchen, which enabled us to acquire extra portions for those in [greater] need. Fela Hofman aided us extensively in this. We also procured medications for the sick, through our contacts with the outside world.

There was a Jewish radio-technician in the camp, whom the Germans had provided with a separate, little room in which to repair radios and, while “testing” the apparatuses, we listened to programmes from abroad. We also gleaned news and material from the Nazi weekly *Das Reich*. From these articles, we could form an image, for ourselves, of the situation at the front. Jews faced the death penalty for reading *Das Reich*. For reading the “*Krakauer Zeitung*” [Kraków Newspaper] or the “*Warschauer Zeitung*” [Warsaw Newspaper], one received twenty-five lashes.

Our resistance-struggle was conducted, first and foremost. in the direction of not allowing ourselves to be turned into spiritual slaves and of not letting our morale be broken by the sanguinary German terror.

Thanks to this activity, we were also able to realise the second part of our plan – the sabotage and acts of diversion in the production [line]. One of the primary tasks we took upon ourselves was to slow the work down as much as possible.

Marian Imiołek

Among the Polish labourers who came to HASAG from the city, there was one metal-worker named Marian Imiołek, who worked in the mechanical workshop. I, too, worked there. Over time, good relations were established between us. As it turned out, for many years, this Imiołek had worked in Belgium and France and had returned to Poland before the onset of the War. It seemed that we could put a certain trust in him. But, we then discovered that he belonged to the underground movement of the sadly renowned *Armia Krajowa* [Home Army], which had on its conscience thousands of murdered Jews and among the victims - very many active Częstochowa ŻOB members also.

Nevertheless, at a meeting of the organisation’s management, it was agreed that, due to the great importance of the matter, we should risk it and take advantage of the opportunity to establish a contact with this Imiołek. For safety’s sake, we did not connect him with the organisation, but with just one individual.

Through this Polish labourer’s intercession, we began regularly receiving periodicals, illegal literature and other material. At the same time, he also brought medicine for the sick, for which he received payment.

Our underground organisation’s successful decisions, at the time, were a result of the fact that we adapted our resistance-struggle against the Nazis to the specific circumstances in the camp.

² [TN: The word used in the original Yiddish is “*schlosser*,” which can mean metal-worker, locksmith or mechanic, depending on the context.]

Sabotage

Those who worked at machines needed to systematically neglect them, so that when a machine was damaged, one was not to make this known immediately, but to keep it running until it had almost broken down. We exploited the fact that not all the German foremen were experts and that they were not proficient with the machines.

At the mechanical workshop - the *Maschinenbau* [construction of machines] - where the damaged production-machines were repaired, we employed other methods of sabotage.

This workshop was divided into different groups of mechanics, who were required to service certain departments in the factory, for which they were answerable. Thus, the Polish mechanic Imiołek and I were allocated to the steam-machines for the infantry department. There, casings were joined to bullets for rifles and machine-guns.

When a production-machine malfunctioned, we "repaired" it in such a manner that it could then no longer be operated in high gear. We used to drag the repair out for as long as we possibly could and, when a part of the machine was damaged, we did not bring in a new part, but took out a similar part from another machine. Over the course of time, in this manner, we caused several machines to be put out of order. The fact that the German foremen trusted the Polish mechanic Imiołek aided us greatly in these acts of sabotage. [Even] in serious malfunctions, it was enough that he should certify the reasons, for the German foremen to take his opinion into account.

J. Józefowicz

Another fact, which helped us, was that the unofficial foreman of the *Maschinenbau* mechanical workshop was the renowned Częstochowa locksmith-mechanic Jakób Józefowicz. Józefowicz was the *de facto* workshop manager, because the German foreman acknowledged his great capabilities as a mechanic and favoured him greatly. This same foreman was later sent to Oświęcim, together with another German foreman, for having assisted a Jewish couple to escape from the camp.

Józefowicz was later sent, together with thousands of other Jewish labourers at HASAG, to Buchenwald, where the writer of these lines was also. Józefowicz was sent from Buchenwald with an external workforce, to be later brought back. Afterwards, he was [taken] away with a Jewish transport on the last journey, in which he perished, together with thousands of other Jewish concentration camp inmates.

Plans for an Active Resistance

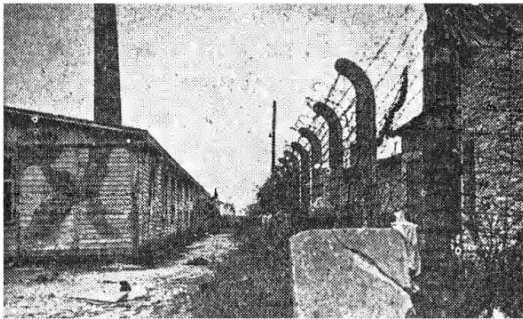
The influence of the underground in HASAG spread further and began encompassing ever-widening peripheries. Each group in its barracks, as well as each [individual] member of the underground, was given the concrete task of encouraging his closest neighbours in the bunk in which he slept, or at work. It was an obligation to report the Germans' constant defeats at the fronts and particularly at the Eastern Front. Different groups gradually began to organise. A group was established under the leadership of the renowned Bundist activist Liber Brener. A second group was created, headed by the active *Poalei Zion* Left activist Izrael Szymonowicz. Groups, which occupied themselves with cultural work, were also established.

Under these new conditions, the idea ripened to create a unified coordinating-committee of all the existing groups, to lead all resistance activity in the HASAG-*Apparatebau* camp. The coordinating-committee which was established, consisted of five members: Adam Sztajnbrecher, Liber Brener, Jakób Wajnrajch, Ajzik Diamand and Izrael Szymonowicz. The creation of a unified organism in the

camp encouraged all the active forces. The contacts with the outside world were also broadened and a stable connection was established with the Raków camp, through the active resistor Jacek Wiernik.

The unified coordinating-committee's first step was towards preventing the possibility of the camp being liquidated. It was decided that, if such were to be the case, we would put up an active resistance - even though we had no weapons. According to the plan, with the beginning of the liquidation, a selected group would attack the security force's guardroom and disarm them. Simultaneously, larger groups were to cause an upheaval in the camp and call [others] to flee in direction of the [barbed] wire fences. The groups, who were to throw themselves on the wires, were to have special cutters prepared by Józefowicz, Widman and Sztajnbrecher. We took into consideration that such an operation would cost many victims, but we thought that, no matter how few managed to escape, it would also be a victory.

Events developed with incredible speed. The defeats of the Germans, at the fronts, [directly] impacted our conditions in the camp. Our plight worsened with every day. The bloody terror intensified from all sides - both on the part of the foremen at work and by the security force after work. Herszel Użanski, our comrade from the underground, was murderously beaten by the foreman Oppeln "Morsz". At the same time, rumours spread, one more gruesome than the next, concerning the fate of the camp and its labourers. The German foremen ran about like mad dogs, beating their slave-labourers. Each day brought new victims.



The HASAG labour camp, where a multi-branched conspiratorial activity was conducted

In one of the coordinating-committee's meetings, it was decided to implement the aforementioned plan of active resistance, if the rumours of liquidation were corroborated. All the groups involved received instructions regarding readiness for mobilisation. Meanwhile, we made efforts to attain accurate information from outside. We were interested, above all, in the situation on the Eastern Front, which was the nearest to us. We were also deeply engaged in the question of how it would be possible to hide the people who managed to escape from the camp during the [proposed] uprising. Due to the exacerbated situation at the camp, the Germans

ceased to bring their radios in to the Jewish technician for repairs and we lost one of our most important sources of world news. At that same period, the mechanic Imiołek stopped coming to work in the camp and we lost our contact with the Polish side. Because of the stricter searches, the Polish labourers, who had always brought us newspapers and illegal literature, also stopped doing this. They did not wish to risk bringing even ordinary German newspapers.

On a certain day, we remained absolutely alone. The Polish workers no longer came to the factory and, all at once, we were completely cut off from the outside world. Before we were able to orientate ourselves in the newly created camp, squads of S.S., Gestapo, *Schutzpolizei* [uniformed constabulary] and the factory security force fell upon our barracks and everyone was driven out in the direction of the platform, where the [railway] carriages, which transported us to Buchenwald, already awaited.

Those Jews, who remained there, were liberated that very same day.