

Szlojme (Stefan) Grajek

The Struggle of the Częstochowa Jews

The inhabitants of the Częstochowa ghetto and the [Zionist] pioneering youth there in particular, have written a glorious page with their struggle to uphold the honour of the [Jewish] People and to be in constant defence against the Nazi enemy.

The Częstochowa ghetto is in the same category as the ghettos in which the fighting force, the readiness for battle and the will for rebellion beat in the hearts of the youth trapped within its walls. Almost never for even one day did the [Jewish] Fighting Organisation in Częstochowa cease its clamour for revenge and self-protection. This, however, was not always granted them, for the Germans' cunning would catch the members of the Jewish Fighting Organisation unawares, with sudden surprises, causing them heavy losses.

The partisans from the Częstochowa ghetto, who went out to the woods around Koniecpol in order to continue the fight against the Germans, also sacrificed needless victims who fell at the hands of the antisemitic Polish partisan units affiliated with the N.S.Z. (*Narodowe Siły Zbrojne*; [National Armed Forces] the nationalist antisemitic faction of the "A.K.").

Despite these great challenges, the members of the Fighting Organisation in the ghetto displayed extraordinary courage and self-sacrifice, both in active resistance and in organising the population to passive resistance.

When the second "Akcja" took place on 4th January 1943, the Jewish Fighting Organisation (ŻOB) had just one pistol and the organisation was not yet ready for action.

Nevertheless, two fighters - [Mendel] Fiszlewicz and Izio [Icchok] Fajner - were daring enough to fall upon S.S. officers Rohn and Sapport, when they stood in the square of the deportations to the death camps, together with the multitudes of Częstochowa Jews.

During the entire course of the War, communication was maintained between Warsaw and Częstochowa. This was mainly in the hands of Rywka Glanc, who travelled often to Warsaw to receive aid, obtain information of events in the different occupied territories and to transmit the Underground's journalism, to serve as instructive material for operations. She was, as they [rightly] called her, "The Mother of the Ghetto," inasmuch as the care she took of the group in Częstochowa, the ŻOB and the youth in general. She was the "driving force" in organising the groups of combatants.

At the start of 1943, when Rywka brought news from Warsaw regarding the preparations for armed self-defence, once the annihilation of the majority of the Jewish population in Poland had become known, a hastened search for armaments began and the members of the Fighting Organisation in Częstochowa started producing hand-grenades and stockpiling explosives.

Mojtek [Mordechai] Zylberberg, the ŻOB Commander, and Zvi [Hersz] Wiernik were active in procuring explosives and in setting up a laboratory for the production of grenades, which were stored in the Organisation's bunker. Inside this bunker, a tunnel was dug to the Aryan side, by which to escape outside the ghetto following the battle. The hand-grenades were produced with materials that were available in the German factories in Częstochowa and which were smuggled out by the Jewish

workers. Molotov cocktails were made following plans given by the ŻOB Central in Warsaw, which were transferred through contacts.

The debate that was being held in many ghettos - whether to stay [and fight] or to join the Partisan Movement in the forests - also persisted in the Częstochowa ghetto. The ŻOB walked both paths - preparation for a confrontation with the Germans inside the ghetto, as well as sending groups into the woods.

On 25th June 1943, Marek Folman arrived in Częstochowa from Warsaw, as an emissary to organise and carry the uprising in the ghetto through. At a meeting of all the Organisation's members, he spoke of the rebellion in the Warsaw ghetto, its liquidation and on the ways to continue the struggle.

At the close of this meeting, the Germans entered the ghetto in preparation for its liquidation. The members of ŻOB were trapped by the S.S., who surrounded the bunker.

Mojtek, the ŻOB Commander, who was in the bunker wounded, was able to swallow a pill of potassium cyanide, thus committing suicide. Rywka Glanc and Marek Folman, together with other members, succeeded in passing through the tunnel to the Aryan side, but were discovered by Germans as they were escaping, upon which a skirmish ensued. Marek hurled a grenade at them and was able to escape. Rywka fired several shots with her pistol and then fell, shot by the Germans.

One German was killed in the fight and several were injured.

Following the defeat in the bunker, when the members of the organisation were left without weapons, the decision was made to transfer a group of people outside the ghetto in order to join the partisans in the woods. However, only a handful made it to the forests, for the most of them were killed on their way there. At the HASAG-Pelcery and HASAG-Raków [labour] camps, the members of ŻOB continued their underground activities, in the face of hunger, sickness and death, both by organising aid in the form of money and food and by sabotaging the German production. Coordinators from Warsaw visited these camps - Władka Peltel did this several times. Contact was also maintained with the group of combatants in Koniecpol. This group passed through the *Seven Gates of Hell* in seeking ways to join the partisans in the forests, in preparing a location where to receive the ŻOB members from the ghetto, in ensuring refuge with Polish farmers and in providing for the members' physical necessities.

Whilst they were successful in establishing the first contact with the Poles in Koniecpol, who were understanding and supportive, the fighters suffered many casualties at the hands of the nationalist Polish, antisemitic partisans, who continued doing Hitler's deeds, by killing every Jew they came upon.

Another hideous murder came from the side which we least expected.

In the summer of 1943, a coordinator named Krzaczek¹ (from the PPR [*Polska Partia Robotnicza*; Polish Workers' Party]) came to the fighters in Koniecpol. Back in May, he had helped transfer the remaining fighters from the Warsaw ghetto to the Łomianki woods. He [now] offered to go purchase weapons and the group entrusted him with the money they had [for this]. Together with him went a member of the fighters' group - Icchok Windman ("Lala"). He never returned. It was later discovered that Krzaczek had murdered Lala in one of the groves near Radom, taken the money and then disappeared. The Polish Underground issued a death warrant for the killer Krzaczek.

From the Central in Warsaw, we maintained contact with the group in Koniecpol and, with its aid, also with the [labour] camps in Częstochowa. In 1943, the group was visited by Władka Peltel, Frumka

¹ [TN: *Nom de guerre*; his real name was Władysław Gajek.]

Płotnicka, Chawka Folman, Leizer Geller, Tosia Altman, Arie²Wilner (“Jurek”) and Symcha Rotem³ (“Kazik”).

Seeing as how our connection with the survivors in Częstochowa, who were among the most active of all the ghettos, had been interrupted following the Polish Warsaw Uprising in August 1944, our greatest concern was to renew this connection and to maintain it consistently.

In the winter of 1944, we managed to renew the connection, when I joined the ŻOB coordinator Marysia Sawicka, a Pole who worked together with us in Warsaw during the whole duration of the War. This Marysia used to procure shelter for all our emissaries and would risk her life daily to visit the group of combatants who were hiding at farmer Hajdas’ in Secemin village, by the Koniecpol woods.

I knew that the group needed encouragement [and] news of current events, besides the monetary aid that the coordinator was to bring them. By various modes of transportation, on the train (as a Pole) and a long journey filled with adversity on a farmer’s cart, we arrived at the Hajdas house in Secemin village. They were expecting us, as Marysia had informed them in advance. The farming family therefore awaited us at home, without any fear.

For a long while, we waited inside the house to ensure that we had left no trace of our journey and that no one was approaching from outside.

When we went down to the group of fighters’ hidden bunker, the joy was great. The members even prepared us a “Welcome” in Hebrew, as a sign of their happiness and anticipation.

We talked with them of those who had fallen and of the remaining survivors. I told them about the continuation of our aid operations for those in the camps and in hiding on the Polish side. They lapped up every bit of news, especially regarding the Land of Israel.

The combat group wished to continue the struggle against the Germans, but the inability to act immediately and the hostile anti-Jewish surroundings in particular, left no choice but to await liberation, if it came in time, without adding victims from among the remaining survivors. Before we parted company, we established the guidelines for our communication into the future.

Two months later, on 16th January 1945, when the Soviet army entered, the group was liberated, together with the handful of Jews who had remained alive in the [labour] camps in Częstochowa.

² [TN: Real name Izrael Chaim. He had two pseudonyms –“Arie” (Heb.; “Lion”) and “Jurek.”]

³ [TN: Born Szymon Rathajzer.]