

Szlojme Waga

## Extermination

The Gestapo rummaged through the remaining archives and examined all of the materials from which they could follow up on “political suspects” or anti-fascists, whether they be Jews or Poles.



*Arthur Szyk: Awaiting the Bitter Fate*

They searched mainly for the intelligentsia. Arrests took place every day and every night. People were detained and, after a short time, completely disappeared. The residents of the village of Olsztyn (near the forest) told of people being taken from the prison to the woods in the morning hours, where they were forced to dig graves into which they were then flung and shot. Food brought by the relatives of the arrestees was accepted twice a week at the prison. The food was often returned with the statement that the relatives were no longer in jail.

The wives of those men who disappeared then began going from one office to another in order to learn the fate of their missing ones. Finally, they received a severe answer - that they should stop taking an interest in where their husbands are. Always, therefore, when women or children came to the prison with food for their husbands or fathers, they feared lest the food be brought back.

The secrets of the Olsztyn forest were soon no longer a secret and returned food meant the relative no longer was alive. Therefore, a heart-breaking lament was often heard on the prison street. Wives and children, or parents of those who had suddenly disappeared, threw themselves onto the ground in despair, tore at their hair and screamed in wild voices. The policeman would chase them off at once with his gunstock.

The arrestees' family members would wait entire nights for the return of the vehicles that took their relatives to the Olsztyn forest. They stood from afar – because one was not permitted to go near – and saw how, before daylight, the Gestapo suddenly appeared and surrounded the prison street. Then, vans pulled up to the gate and were loaded with people. When the vehicles drove by where the relatives of the detainees were standing, heartrending cries of agony would break out and the wails accompanied the departing vans as at a funeral.

Every few days, prisoners would be sent to the concentration camps. After every transport, the prison would again be filled with new arrestees and thus the procedure continued constantly with arrests and deportations.

After some time, it became known that in the town of Oświęcim [Auschwitz], not far from Kraków, there were concentration camps to which thousands of people were transported and, shortly afterwards, killed.

The families of the people sent there would receive a notice that their relative had “died.” After a while, the family would be called to the Gestapo where they were given some of the deceased's clothing. The relatives of those sent to Oświęcim made efforts for them in various offices, but it quickly became apparent that, for those who made the greatest efforts, the murder of their relatives was hastened and they immediately received the notice “has died”.

There were some people among us who had returned from the Oświęcim camp. Special efforts had been made for them through people with great influence. How they had been freed and what had generally happened in the camp remained a secret, because they did not say even one word about it. They had been warned that, if they said anything, they would be sent back.

In the summer of 1940, all the Jewish lawyers in our city were arrested and put in the cells intended for the prisoners to be sent to Oświęcim. The families of the lawyers made every effort to save them. The *Judenrat* also attempted assisting - and Wajnryb was particularly occupied with this matter. At first, the actions were carried out jointly, with the aim of saving all of them. Then, each family began acting separately, for fear lest until aid arrived, the prisoners would be sent away and all would be in vain.

After some time, it became known that the Gestapo had arrested more Jews from various classes. Their families also appealed to the *Judenrat* and to Wajnryb for aid. They were willing to give everything that they possessed, but no one was prepared to do anything for them. They were then sent to Oświęcim.

Soon afterwards, the lawyers were freed, and suspicions arose that the lawyers had been saved at the expense of the other arrestees, for whom no one had been willing to intervene. If this version is true or not - will forever remain a secret. In any case, the families of those sent to Oświęcim went about despondent and filled with rage at the *Judenrat*, whom they suspected of having had a hand in this "exchange". The suspicion was also strengthened by the fact that the lawyers had paid the *Judenrat* a great deal of money which had been demanded for the release.

Meanwhile, new arrests took place and new transports again went to Oświęcim, after which the wives were notified that their husbands had "died."

### **Ghetto**

Rumours arose that a ghetto would be set up with separate quarters for Jews and for "Aryans," as had already been done in Warsaw and other cities.

These rumours caused a panic and people ran to the *Judenrat* to learn the details. The Chairman and the other members of the *Judenrat* calmed and reassured everyone that "this can never happen here, for we give the Germans all they demand of us". However, the rumours soon turned out to be true.

There was a "housing office" in our city, whose purpose it was to furnish the Germans who came here with lodgings. The administrator of this office was a German named Lindermann. This German was a frequent visitor to the Jewish craftsmen, who would do all sorts of work for him and his wife for free or at half price, as they did for other German officials, in the hope that sometime they may be granted some "favour".

And it happened that, once, a Jewish tailor was measuring Lindermann for a new suit and cautiously asked him what news he had heard concerning the ghetto. He answered, "Things are going very well. Soon the leadership will hold a meeting regarding the allocation of separate living quarters for Jews."

When this news became known, the panic grew even more. People wished to provide a roof over their heads while there was still time. Small carts laden with furniture began transiting the city streets, from the elegant quarters to the poor part of the city, where the Jews thought the ghetto would be located. Other wagons made their way from the Jewish streets to the Polish neighbourhoods - these were Jews taking their belongings to "Polish friends" to keep "till times should change."

However, the *Stadthauptmann* [mayor] quickly issued a decree that no furniture or other objects could be transported from one place to another without special permission. It became clear from this decree that the ghetto would indeed soon be instituted, which caused further alarm. People wanted to save whatever they could of their possessions. Men, women and children went back and forth, loading themselves with clothes and other items to take to their Polish acquaintances.

As all this was occurring, Jewish carpenters received orders to prepare large wooden signs forbidding Jews to proceed further on pain of death. The Jews were immediately notified that, at the *Judenrat's* housing office, residences would be allotted to the Jews, who were to move from the "Aryan" part

of the city into the “Jewish living quarters.” The Jewish ghetto thus became a reality and a period of five days was given to move.

Polish policemen were stationed at the exits of the streets that were designated as the ghetto. Jews were not permitted to go out onto the “Aryan” streets. For the Poles, who were required to leave the ghetto streets, a special housing office was created, which gave them lodgings in the “Aryan” part of the city where, until then, Jews had lived.

There was a great crowd in front of the Jewish housing office. Those driven out of the “Aryan side” wanted a bit of roof over their head. The allocation of apartments was conducted very sluggishly.

A Jew from Gdynia named Kolenbrener was appointed Chairman of the Jewish housing office. He had come here and been able to establish contacts with German officers, who ordered the *Judenrat* to employ him. This is how he had become “chief” of the housing office and in his hands lay the entire matter of distributing accommodation.

This manager kept no regular office hours and never hurried, despite the fact that long queues of Jews stood outside his office.

The ghetto was eventually established. Jewish workers dug holes in all corners of the ghetto and erected large yellow-coloured signs, on which they painted the following notice in German, Polish and Yiddish:

*Jews leaving the Jewish housing district will be punished with death; Aryans entering the Jewish housing district for the purpose of trading with or buying from Jews will be imprisoned.*

In April 1941, two days before the Christian holiday of Easter, all of the Jews in Częstochowa began living together in the ghetto - without Christians. Yet, our ghetto was different from the ghettos in other cities. There were neither walls nor fences. Although the Polish population was not permitted to trade with Jews, they were allowed to pass through the ghetto. Our city was thus built, that it was impossible to separate the 40,000 Jews in such a manner as to completely prevent the Christians from accessing the ghetto streets.

This gave us hope that our ghetto would not be completely closed in and that we would not be exposed to hunger as elsewhere.

When all of the Jews were already living in the ghetto, a small number of Jews still remained temporarily on the “Aryan” side. These were the “chosen” Jews - craftsmen who worked for the Germans.

### **Mass Hunger**

The Jewish population’s plight in the ghetto became even worse during the winter of 1941-1942. People’s clothes became threadbare and they no longer had the means to buy coal and potatoes. Hundreds of half-naked, poor people stood in the streets and begged for donations, but no one paid any attention to them.

Unfortunately, it was also an unusually harsh winter. A fierce cold filled the air and penetrated one’s bones, and the snows piled high.

Thousands of workers, dressed in rags and with wooden clogs, hurried to their workplaces in the early morning, with naked body parts peeping out from behind their torn clothing.

The young ones, literally children, who toiled all day in the frost and wind, bound their heads with torn kerchiefs, while their mothers and the small children remained at home – lying in bunks, freezing and starving. In the different shelters, homeless people lay on their dark cots, covered with old sacks and rags. In the streets, the peddlers sat freezing, without seeing any customers for their meagre bit of goods. In addition, they were persecuted by diverse harassers, civilian informers, and policemen - German, Polish and Jewish.



Food Ration Card

The relief committee made desperate efforts to alleviate the need, but the necessity was so great that they were unable to help everyone.

At night, gendarmes would raid Jewish houses, taking all the men out, giving them a beating and transporting them outside the city to clear the roads of snow. They would be held there all day without food and be brought back late at night - battered, injured and dead-tired.

These raids, and dragging the men away to clear the roads, continued all winter long. Besides this, new troubles emerged - at night, German policemen raided the houses that were at the very edge of the ghetto, driving the Jewish residents out in such haste that they barely had time to get dressed and take

anything with them. This was done so as to make the ghetto smaller, by annexing the houses that had been cleared of Jews to the "Aryan" side. As a result, hundreds of the now-homeless needed to be crammed into the already crowded ghetto. This was also manifest in the ever-growing list of poor people requiring aid, and it was necessary to add another several litres of water to the cauldron.

The "TOZ" played a great part in the relief operation. It was headed by the renowned aid worker Rozener, who approached the authorities, with the help of the *Judenrat*, to obtain permission to arrange several theatrical events in the ghetto.

After many difficulties, the organisers were able to put on a number of shows, which brought in money for the relief fund. Amateurs, who once acted in the theatre, took part in the performance. The newly homeless cantor from Poznań also organised a mixed chorus of former singers. Children from the orphanage also performed, and others [as well]. In general, great pains were taken that the performers be clothed as well as possible and to provide a set of sorts.

The Jews actually rushed to the theatre for two reasons. Firstly, everyone wanted to contribute to the aid fund and, secondly, the theatre in the ghetto was a real attraction, for it had been already three years since the ghetto inhabitants had been permitted to visit a theatre, a cinema or to hear a radio. The room was therefore jam-packed each time a performance took place and each programme had to be repeated countless times.

Whilst there was need and want in the ghetto, a restaurant was set up in the first house near the ghetto border, where one could obtain all the delicious foods of pre-War times. Nobody knew how

the owners were able to prepare such tasty dishes with products that were nowhere to be found. The prices were high and only wealthy Jews, who were able to allow themselves to spend large sums of money, ate there.

Over the course of time, Poles, wishing to meet their acquaintances to set various things in order, also began coming in. The Jewish policemen also used to come to the restaurant and pass time in the side-rooms, but only after eight o'clock in the evening, when all the Jews had to sit at home and when they alone had permission to roam about freely.

There were also other Jews who had night passes - members of the *Judenrat*, several higher officials of the *Judenrat*, as well as young people with "privileges" which no one knew how they had been acquired. All of these people would spend huge sums at the restaurant and the owner's business flourished. In time, the premises also became known on the "Aryan" side - that one received such meals at the ghetto restaurant that were not even available on the "Aryan" side. Polish guests, therefore, also began to come. They sneaked in at night through a back door and ate there and caroused as in pre-War days.

A café opened opposite the restaurant, where one could find fine pastries, cakes, and good coffee. The café was also very successful. It was always full.

The gendarmerie would also occasionally come into these Jewish locales and take away roasted chickens and ducks<sup>1</sup>, various foodstuffs and alcoholic drinks, as they rained their blows and curses upon the owners.

The Germans could not fully comprehend where the Jews were getting all these delicacies. They therefore, once, imprisoned one of the owners and, only after many intercessions and efforts from his partners, were they able to have him set free. But even after this arrest, the restaurant continued operating. The police would also seize people for forced labour from these locales. However, this did not lead to far-reaching conclusions, for immediately after the people were taken away to work, others would come, as if nothing had happened.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Geese and hens, in Waga's Yiddish original.]