

Dawid Koniecpoler z''l

Tearful Dates

1st September 1939

The Polish army and police force have left the city. Panic reigns. Thousands of Jews have abandoned their homes and possessions and, taking only the bare necessities, began wandering. Hundreds of other Jews from the surrounding area have come to the city. Many people, young and old, are fleeing before the arrival of Hitler's murderers.

3rd September 1939

Yesterday, on *Shabbos*, the first German military presence appeared in town. Today, larger groups of soldiers are already marching through. The Jewish population shows itself on the streets - naturally, [they are] very shocked.

4th September 1939

First thing in the morning, the word has spread that the Gestapo had arrived. Around eleven o'clock before noon, prolonged, violent shooting was heard throughout the city. It turns out that the Gestapo was shooting at the houses in different parts of town, driving the men out of their dwellings. Whoever is found on the streets is either shot, or taken to various assembly areas - in cloisters, factory premises or free spaces. Those concealing themselves must lie face down on the ground, with the shots whizzing above them. This continued until Wednesday, 6th September. In the afternoon, the first beaten and tortured people began to show up. This time, the Jews were equal in number to the non-Jews. Of the 400 victims, almost half were Jewish. Consequently, no Jews dared go out into the street anymore. If someone fell ill, they could not receive any medical assistance. If someone died, they were buried in their own yard. All the defensive trenches in town were full of dead Jews, Poles, horses and cattle. Many Jews were held under arrest and tortured at the former military barracks.

The Polish plebeians have immediately started looting Jewish property - shops are being ransacked and nor are Jewish dwellings spared.

They started at once dragging Jews from their homes to go work. Sadly, many never returned.

Erev Rosh Hashanah 1939

Mojsze Asz comes to my lodgings with a list in his hand. He tells me that, yesterday, the two Halachic authorities, Klajnplac and Grinfeld, as well as himself - Asz - as the rabbinate's secretary, have been arrested. They are being held in the cellars of Bank Handlowy [Commercial Bank], together with priests and others. Before daybreak, he had been summoned and given a list of six Jews which, by 3:00pm, he must bring to the Gestapo. These men were Leon Kopiński, Leib Bromberg, Natan Dawid Berliner, Dawid Koniecpoler, Józef Krauze and Juda Engel.

The first four are members of the *Kehilla* board of management. Krauze is a proprietor and Engel is an industrialist. He then added that, apart from Engel who had already been arrested, the other four had arranged to gather at the house of the *Kehilla* Secretary, Mr Wein.

At two o'clock sharp, we meet at Mr Wein's home. After brief deliberations, we decided that we do not have the right, at such a bitter period for the Jewish population, to refuse to come into contact

with the authorities. With the question whether we would return alive tormenting each one of us, we all shook Mr Wein's hand who, mournfully weeping, accompanied us with his eyes from his wheelchair.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, we opened the door of the Bank Handlowy. The heavily-armed guard welcomed us with the words, "The dogs are here already", and conducted us to a side-room, where three Gestapo officers sat at a table.

After certain formalities, one of them declared, "After what the Jews did to the German army in Częstochowa, we should really shoot you right now. But for that, we still have time".

Instead, we are arrested. But, we are freed for two days, at the end of which we must present ourselves again. We were then given two minutes to decide among us who would be Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Treasurer.

At the end, the Gestapo officer said, "The Zionists will no longer need to apply for certificates to go to Palestine. In the Lublin region, the Germans will create a National Homeland where the Jews can devour each other."

Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 1939

It becomes known that detained foreign Jews have been brought to the barracks in Zacisze. Through various channels, we have been able to put ourselves in contact with them. As it turns out, hundreds of Jews were captured on the roads. Among them are many Jews from Łódź, who were making their way to Warsaw on foot. Almost all were men. We provided them immediately, on Rosh Hashanah, with medical aid, which we acquired from Mr Neufeld. Later, we also assisted them with necessities. In this operation, Ms Cesza Kozak distinguished herself in particular.

For us Jews, unbearable times have come. We have been placed outside the law. Every German satrap has shot and tortured.

The six Jews, who were required to present themselves to the Gestapo at first every two and later every three days, have scrambled to establish free kitchens for the Jewish population.

The Old Synagogue, in which the renowned Częstochowa painter Professor Willenberg created his "Jewish style", was barbarically destroyed by Polish hooligans right at the beginning, during the Ten Days of Repentance¹.

30th September 1939

Each day brings new evil decrees. Jews are not permitted to possess more than 100 *złoty*. All valuables, such as gold, jewellery, precious stones and the rest of the money, must be held in the specified banks. At the municipal offices, a temporary mayor has already been appointed. He is Częstochowa resident H. Belcke, a *Volksdeutsch* [ethnic German]. His attitude towards Jews has been arrogant and brutal.

Due to the persecution which the Jews have been subjected to by the Polish population, it was decided to send a delegation to Bishop Kubina.

Members of this delegation were Neufeld, Zeryker, Eng. Lewkowicz and Dr Szafier. During this visit, it emerged that Dr Kubina, himself, is also under house arrest.

¹ [TN: The first ten days of the Hebrew month of Tishrei, beginning on Rosh Hashanah and culminating on Yom Kippur.]

A *Judenrat* is Elected

On the first weekday of the *Sukkos* festival [also on 30th September], Mr Kopiński was summoned to the Gestapo who notified him that a Council of Elders [*Judenrat*] with 24 members and himself as Chairman, was to be appointed immediately. That same day, a meeting was called at the offices of the Jewish Proprietors' Union, at Aleja 6, in which over 60 Jews participated - representatives of commercial and political organisations. The *Judenrat*, with 24 members, was then elected then.

15th December 1939

All Jews must wear a white arm-band, with a blue Star of David, on their left arm. No Jew is allowed to travel on the train or [use] any other means of communication.

24th December 1939

At seven o'clock in the evening, a fire breaks out in the New Synagogue's lovely building. Everything went up in smoke - all the Torah scrolls [and] the Judaic Institute's rich library next to the synagogue, which was founded by the synagogue's spiritual leader, Dr Ch.Z. Hirsberg. Simultaneously, a pogrom ensued on the Jewish streets, where Poles robbed Jewish belongings, smashed window-panes, etc.

January 1940

An inhuman night-raid - men and women were taken out and made to stand for some hours in the frost of the marketplace, after which they were conducted to the premises of a school in Zawodzie, where they were shamefully and barbarically tortured. The women were searched, in a "gynaecological manner", for gold. This operation was carried out by Ambaras, an officer of the gendarmerie, and his helpers. This same month, orders regarding forced labour for Jews were issued. Men between the ages of fourteen and sixty were enlisted. Jews, who had converted to Christianity, were considered as Jews. The *Judenrat* was required to present a certain quota of Jews for work every day, but this did not halt the capture of people for labour. Most times, the raids were conducted during the holidays, when Jews gathered together to pray.

The Year 1940

The Jews are robbed of their factories, shops and houses, which are placed into the hands of German "trustees". Many Jews are taken to carry out difficult fortification works in the Lublin region. A great many of them die of hunger, typhus and the inhumane conditions.

The impoverishment of the Jewish population is on an unprecedented scale. The *Judenrat*'s social welfare division gives out 10,000 free lunches daily.

The [now] homeless Jews, who had been driven out of Kraków, Płock, Bodzanów, etc., suffer the most horrifying conditions.

A certain number of Jews, from the Łódź ghetto, also came to Częstochowa. The homeless shelters, which were arranged in the houses of prayer and other large premises, presented a heartrending picture. In due course, a "Jewish Self-Government" was instituted - an independent civilian registry-office, Jewish police, services for the maintenance of public order, Jewish courts of law, health services, victualling services, Jewish bread-ration cards, etc., etc.

The Scholastic System

The scholastic system for Jewish children is a chapter all on its own. Jews have their own schools, but these are clandestine. They were run at the beginning by Dr Mering and other teachers. With the return of Mr Anisfeld, the high school's headmaster, and some of the teachers, even high school courses are conducted.

In the area of medical care, wonders are truly being worked. In these difficult conditions, a great deal was done by "TAZ's" Mr Rozener and Dr Walberg, who was shot in June 1943 on the orders of the murderer Degenhardt.

The specially-created "Jewish Workers' Bureau" constituted a self-governing institution, whose aim was to regulate, in an organised manner, the dark law regarding forced labour.

9th April 1941 - the Ghetto is Instituted

On this day, the "Big Ghetto" was created. In theory, the ghetto encompassed all the territory from the railway bridge to the bridge over the Warta River. In reality, only the left side, which ended at ul. Kawia, the building at Aleja 14, ul. Wilsona, ul. Piłsudskiego and a part of ul. Strażacka St. remained outside the ghetto.

Jewish policeman were stationed at the various border-points. On the Aryan side, there were special signs in Polish and German, which read "Due to Contagious Diseases, Entry is Forbidden." On the ghetto side, it read in German, Polish and Hebrew "For Leaving the Ghetto - the Death Penalty!"

It appeared as if the ghetto would be a Jewish self-government. But, in fact, it was the concentration of the Jewish population into one area, guarded by the Nazi bands of murderers, to facilitate bringing the plan of complete extermination to fruition.

24th December 24, 1941 – The Furs *Akcja* [Operation]

At the end of 1941, it was decreed that Jews were not allowed - on pain of death - to own or use fur garments, including children's clothing. Over the course of 48 hours, the Jews yielded up five wagonloads [of furs].

The Year 1942 - "Workshops" are Organised

With the assistance of Dr Michał Wajchert, Chairman of the Jewish Communal Self-Help [Żydowska Samopomoc Społeczna], the *Judenrat* set out to establish workshops, following the example of other cities. This was to enable Jews to work for the German military and, as a result, remain alive. In addition to the already existing fur workshops, mechanised workshops were created for carpenters, tailors, brush-makers, locksmiths, etc. The Jews were forced to pay the German authorities hefty sums of money for the workshops, which were concentrated in the former "Metalurgia" foundry, both for the permission to work and for the locales themselves.

Thus, several large factories were created in Częstochowa, in which hundreds of Jews toiled - as slaves, obviously. These were the Pelcery, Warta, Częstochowianka and Raków factories, which operated for the Hugo Schneider Leipzig-based munitions factory - "HASAG".

22nd September 1942

The day after Yom Kippur, at three o'clock before dawn, the disaster began. All the street-lamps were lit, as the Nazis wished to carry out their mass murder in a festive manner.

Chief of the *Schutzpolizei* [Ger.; uniformed police force], the arch-murderer Degenhardt, killed forty thousand Jews in the first three weeks of this extermination campaign. The SS and the police leader of the Radom district, General [Dr Herbert] Böttcher and his aides, *Obersturmführer* [senior assault leader] [Hermann] Weinrich, Bornemann, [Walter] Blume and others, presided over the Nazi celebration.

During the Operation, Szmul Goldsztajn, who was *Prezes* of the Częstochowa Jewish *Kehilla* for eighteen years, an acclaimed *Mizrachi* activist who was involved with various Jewish institutions in

Poland, in his prayer-shawl and phylacteries, attempted to throw himself from the second floor. But the killers noticed this and beat him in such a murderous fashion, that he surely did not make it to Treblinka alive.

The Jews were conducted to the train, driven with whips and gunstocks. Among them was also the elderly orthodox activist, Reb Icze Majer Krel. He walked barefoot but proud, with his head held high. He called out to the Jews, who had not yet been "selected", who were standing facing the wall with their hands up, "Brothers and sisters! In the other world, I shall intercede for you before the Master of the Universe!"

Writers J.Ch. Zytnicki, A. Chaim Sziper, Zeligfeld and Blumenkranc were also killed in this period.

The Jewish Work Camp

In the city's oldest and filthiest quarter, by the river Warta, three streets were fenced in with barbed wire and, there, the work camp was established - the so-called "Small Ghetto" - for the officially remaining 5,000 Jews who were, in reality, 7,000.

Each and every resident of the camp was required, under pain of death, to work. At five in the morning, the camp was awoken and, at six, the columns of dismal Jews already stretched to their work places, escorted by special German work-guards. After twelve hours of work, often accompanied with whippings and beatings, they returned to their burrows.

20th March 1943

On *Shabbes*, the eve of Purim, 20th March 1943, Degenhardt - the arch-murderer of the Częstochowa Jewry - organised the infamous "Journey to Palestine". The *Judenrat*, all the doctors and the rest of the intellectuals with their families gathered in a nearby house, outside the camp.

After marching a few minutes, they saw heavily-guarded vehicles already waiting for them. They were all taken out to the Jewish cemetery and, there, were shot. One-hundred-and-twenty-seven individuals perished then, including ten small children. The executions were carried out by the local *Schutzpolizei* men - Schott, Kulfisch, Passow, Schimmel, Onkelbach, Hantke and others.

25th June 1943 - the Work Camp is Liquidated

On Friday, 25th June 1943, at 4pm, police vans carrying the murderers drove up to the camp with lightning speed and surrounded it, terrorising all those remaining there with heavy shooting. A group of German policemen, led by their chief Degenhardt, immediately went to the underground tunnel into which they hurled a hail of grenades.

The fusillade continued for some hours and, as a result, dozens of Jewish victims fell. Jam-packed vehicles full of battered Jews drove away to execution. The Germans took weapons, money, uniforms of German units - everything that was there.

This attack was carried out with such surprising speed that the entire camp was paralysed and the killers freely ran amok.

26th June 1943

At seven in the morning, all men and women were forced to gather outside the camp. The murderer Degenhardt was already standing there, with his officers [Felix] Rohn, Werner, Sapport and others. He conducted a selection and hundreds of Jews were taken to the cemetery, where they were shot. Those remaining were rounded up by the work-guards and conveyed to the local munitions factories. Over the course of those two days, over 800 Jews were murdered in Częstochowa.

28th June 1943

It appeared that with this, the liquidation was complete. But the Germans had not yet satiated themselves with Jewish blood. They surmised that there were surely more Jews hiding in the camp and, therefore, issued an “amnesty” proclamation for all who presented themselves on Monday, 28th June.

The result was a new mass burial of 200 women, children and elderly - those who would turn themselves in on Tuesday, 29th June. At five in the morning, they were shot in the cemetery.

Moving Graves

At the mass executions, the Jews were forced to strip naked and go to the open grave in pairs. There, they would be shot and would fall into the pit. Once the grave was full with martyrs and drenched in a stream of blood, the overlying layer of soil would swell up for a certain time, until all the blood had clotted.

20th July 1943

Once the demolition of all the houses in the camp was completed, the murderers conducted a new selection of Jews for the workplaces and, on that day, killed another 70 fresh victims, among whom were the Jewish policemen and their families.