

The Last Night

(Memories)

On the night of Sunday, 28th September 1942, the Jewish population in Częstochowa experienced one of the most horrific tragedies. The darkness of the night made it even gloomier and destroyed any hope of the Jews condemned to death.

The prelude to this night had been the day, which had been a clear harbinger of the tragedy that was to be played out.

On that day, the *Judenrat* members Moryc Kopiński and Adv. Jeremiasz Gitler, went about with two Gestapo men and collected money and valuables (foreign currency, gold and diamonds), for the price of being admitted to *Metalurgia*, to temporarily save one's life in this manner.

The Jewish police ran about throughout the houses, telling [the people] to "prepare themselves" for tomorrow, and to go receive the portion of bread and tea as "provisions for the journey".

From all the houses, the masses of those condemned to death, gone wild from hunger and thirst, ran to the provisions point at the Old Market [Stary Rynek]. [Some,] weakened by hunger, collapsed on the way - but no one was concerned about them. The others ran over the top of their bodies with dishevelled hair and wild, frightened eyes, swollen and reddened from sleepless nights. Painful groans were heard from the half-unconscious Jews lying on the ground, but no one paid them any heed.

Jews ran from the alleyways Garncarska, Nadrzeczna, Targowa and the Old Market. An elderly Jew called out, "Jews, why are you running like that? We are going to die tomorrow anyway!" It became still for a while, and [then] the reply came, "We cannot see the agony of our starving children - the sword of hunger is worse than the sword of death".

From the surrounding streets, from where the Jews had been resettled a day earlier, an emptiness blew, rousing thoughts of mortal fear. These questions drilled into our minds - Where are the Jews of these streets, who were here yesterday, and where will we, the Jews who are now running, be tomorrow? A Ukrainian murderer, in the service of the SS, shot at the running mass and, with that, all the questions were answered.

A small part [of the crowd] swarmed with superhuman efforts to the platform containing bread and pots of tea, which stood next to the church at the Old Market [square], where several

Judenrat functionaries were distributing the one-pound portions of bread and cups of tea.

Overfed Gestapo people stood to the side, taking photographs with magnesium lights [viz. flash-lamps].

Savage shouting is heard, accompanied by gunshots. The mass of starving Jews is driven back into the houses. Once more, there is a frenzied rush as they return. Once more, the streets are emptied, and the gates of the houses are closed. No one is able to stay tranquilly at home. People go to neighbours to deliberate.

A deep, agonised groan is heard from a mother, from whose mouth the words tear out, "What am I to do? My Manie'le is running a temperature of forty degrees - how shall I be able to go with her?" Other questions are heard from women: "What are we to do with our suckling babies and elderly parents? Where will we hide them? The bunker built in the attic can be easily discovered, and they have also already been fasting for several days. How, and for how long, can we endure such pain?"

More shots are heard from Ukrainians patrolling the streets. Fear seizes everyone and they stop talking; terror freezes their limbs.

A mother takes a piece of linen and embroiders the name of her child - "Awreme'le Zilberminc, Częstochowa, Garncarska 17" - which she hangs around her infant's little neck. Other mothers see this and follow her example.

A couple cling to their only, adorable, five-year-old little son, Szlojme'le and, taking the people present as witnesses, they swear they will not let themselves be separated.

The shrieking of the alarm sirens is heard. The streetlamps, which were lit for the extermination *akcja*, are turned off. A ray of hope dawns within the embittered hearts and half-extinguished eyes - could a miracle still happen at the last moment? Could the world have found out about our misfortune and come to our aid? Might the Nazi tyrants not be able to carry out their criminal plans?

The [air-raid] alarm was called off shortly afterwards and, once more, shooting was heard from the Ukrainians, shattering the fantasies that were being woven in Jewish minds. More than one had expressed the desire to fall to a bomb, rather than being dragged away to the Treblinka gas chambers.

Jews, from other courtyards, arrived through the roofs and told

¹ [TN: Pseudonym of Cwi Rozenwajn, aka Zvi Rosenvein.]

that, during the alarm, Jews had taken advantage of the darkness and fled across the rooftops to the "Aryan side". The Ukrainians shot at them and some fell dead, but others still managed to disappear.

A mother takes her best things out of the cupboard and packs them in rucksacks for her children. As she does so, she is unable to control herself and breaks out in bitter tears, "What do the murderers want with us? What is it they wish to do to us?"

A father implores his son not to leave the house, because he wants to be together with him on the last night.

A son begs his elderly father, who stands gazing through teary eyes into the starry, moonlit night, in a bid to glimpse

the terrible secret of annihilation, to lie down and sleep for a couple of hours. Can anyone then comprehend the deep-reaching thoughts in which that old Chassidic Jew and father was immersed at the time?

The cruel, ghastly night, filled with nightmare images, came to its end. The dawn of the even more gruesome day, that was rising, arrived. This day was marked with the date Monday, 29th September 1942.

That day saw off thousands of holy souls to their eternal repose, to be annihilated in Treblinka. The lips of those marching on their last road uttered a curse on the barbaric world and murderous humanity, and on the sun that was shining, at that time, in all its splendour.