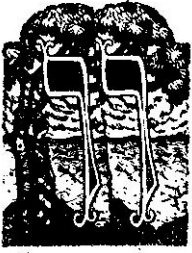


## 8



When the German military entered Warsaw, the Russian soldiers were already no longer in the city. They had fled a couple of days earlier. And the Germans took Warta without any resistance. The tsarist regime only managed, in those first, frenzied days of the [First World] War, to mobilise hundreds of young men from the town, also among them many Jews.

In the beginning, the Jews welcomed the German military in a very friendly fashion, as also did the Poles. They rejoiced, first and foremost, at the downfall of the tsarist regime. Most Jews hoped that, with the Germans, life would improve. After all, this Germany was a civilised country. German culture was no mere trifle – it was the nation of Goethe and Schiller!

To Jews, the German language sounded more familiar to their ears than did the Russian one. What Jew did not understand German? Jews were able to communicate much better with the Germans than with the tsarist officials and police, from whom a friendly word was never heard. Indeed, it was clear that the Germans of the First World War, at the very least, were completely different Germans from Hitler's murderers in the Second World War. These Germans had manners. At the beginning, one always heard from them "*Danke schön!*" [Thank you very much!] and "*Bitte sehr!*" [You're welcome!]. "Who knows?", Jews thought to themselves, "Maybe salvation will come through them, the civilised Germans, with their cleanliness and fine, courteous manners".

Josef was among the handful of people, in the city of Warta, who thought very differently of the Germans. There was a small minority of Jews, who were on the Russian side and actually opposed the Germans. Indeed, there were some at the time, who wanted the Russians to win the War, and not the Germans. Josef was hoping for a revolution in the great Russian land! And with a German victory, Josef thought, a new Prussian reactionary regime would come, from which the workers would never be able to free themselves. In the various conversations and discussions with his friends and the family, Josef expressed his opinion that he hoped the Russians would win. In a heated talk with his brother Zalman, Josef ranted and raved so much against the Germans that his brother, who was on the side of the Germans, became enraged and gave Josef a slap! Josef said nothing to his brother. But, in his heart, he remained with his ideas and opinions regarding the Germans.

A little trade with the Germans ensued. Gradually, this commerce grew. In the first years of the War, some Jews handled in goods which they smuggled from one city to another, or from the part of Poland that had been occupied by the Austrians, to that which the Germans had taken.

German functionaries, officials and generals took lodgings in the wealthy Jewish houses in town. Dressed-up Jewish girls, from the wealthier households and even from the middleclass, were often seen promenading with the German officers. Anyone with German military personnel staying in his house had a ensured income. Germans lived mostly with Jews, because with Jews they could communicate better.

Bit by bit, however, the German politeness turned into strict military force. Their force in ruling was still disguised - genteel, as it were. The Germans needed, for example, workers for the factories in Germany. Simply going and capturing people in the street, arresting them for nothing, was not in accordance with the good manners of the Germans. [So] what did they do? At the time, in the first days in Warta, they pulled a crafty piece of work in order to justify doing their heart's desire.

One fine day, the Germans shot three horses on one of the city's finest streets - on the *Aleje* [Avenues], not far from the famous Jasna Góra Catholic monastery - and the [German] municipal authorities immediately cast the blame on the civilian population. The Germans surrounded whole streets from all sides of the *Aleje* and arrested the younger, fitter men and women, Jews and non-Jews, and deported everyone to Germany for work. The Germans [also] simply arrested a couple of innocent passers-by and later shot them, in order to cast fear upon the population - that they should be obedient and comply with all the commands and decrees that the Germans, as it turned out, that had quietly been prepared for the populace in all the cities of Poland, during the years of the First World War.

Years of hunger came. Only certain individuals had an income - the wealthier families, those who conducted business on a large scale and who smuggled goods. The workers simply starved. Most factories stood closed. There was no work. Unemployment grew from day to day. The Germans systematically robbed the land. They seized foodstuffs, supposedly buying them, and paid for them with *Papiermarken*<sup>1</sup>, which had no great value. The Germans did not only seize food and send it home to Germany, [but] also machinery, iron, copper, brass and other materials which they required for their war production. One day, the Germans raided all the houses in town and took off brass doorknobs from doors, paying for them with paper money, according to their own estimate.

In short, the German military brutally ruled over Poland, and more stringently with each year. With the downfall they had, their rule became all the more brutal. The dearth in the working [class] homes grew. The Polish and Jewish populace, the workers and the middle-class, would gather frequently - especially the Poles, on the days of the Polish holidays. The Polish patriotism of every Pole intensified. Speakers travelled around the larger cities, agitating and speaking against the Germans - the hateful "*Niemcy*" [Pol., Germans], who were pillaging the land and sucking the lifeblood out of the Polish citizens. The Polish patriots reassured that the day was near, when Poland would once more be free and the Polish state would once more be established.

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In the last months and weeks of the War, more and more good news arrived, to the effect that the Germans were retreating from the Russian front, and that they were also being beaten in France. The courage of the Poles increased, and they spoke openly against the "*Niemcy*", viz. the Germans, that needed to be driven out of Poland. The patriotism of the Poles intensified. The song *Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła*<sup>2</sup> was heard being sung more and more.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Ger., lit. "paper Marks"; the *Papiermark* was the German currency from 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, when the link between the Goldmark and gold was abandoned, due to the outbreak of World War I.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: "Poland has not yet perished"; this same song was officially adopted as the national anthem of Poland in 1926.]

Also, the Jews - especially the youth and the students at the Polish universities and *gimnazja* - joined in the fight for a free Poland!

In Warta, in those spring days of 1918, there were frequent demonstrations against the Germans. The German police would very frequently raid such Polish patriotic meetings. The Germans, particularly, displayed their cruelty against the workers' demonstrations. At one such workers' demonstration, Romuald Jarmułowicz, the town *felczer* [barber-surgeon/paramedic], was arrested while speaking in front a large crowd at Jasna Góra. Jarmułowicz, a member of the PPS [Polish Socialist Party], was sentenced to death following his arrest. However, the Germans did not dare carry out the verdict. Obviously, their skin was already trembling then, from the frequent defeats in the War and from the workers' demonstrations within Germany itself. They commuted his sentence to life in prison. Jarmułowicz was sent to Germany, to a prison camp. The contemporary revolutionary, socialist and Polish patriot Józef Piłsudski was also imprisoned in that same camp.

Following the revolution in Germany, when Kaiser Wilhelm was deposed from the throne, and immediately after the War ended and Poland became an independent state, Jarmułowicz was appointed, by the new Polish government, to be the mayor of the city of Warta<sup>3</sup>.

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Josef and his brother Zalman retained their workplaces throughout the duration of the War. Their sister Cirla kept house. Life became consistently harder. The city's workers began to organise and professional unions were established. Even the feeble trade unions, which had barely existed in tsarist times, also began to display lively activity. Some level of aid work was organised around these unions, such as a tea-hall for workers, a kitchen with meals for a small payment and so on. Concurrently, the political parties began to be revived. Josef took part in organising this work. Even though separated from the rest of the world, they nevertheless hoped for the revolution that was to come following the downfall of tsarism.

A library and an educational union for Jewish workers were established in town. The former SS [party] members got together, and the organisation was revived. Once Warsaw had been already taken by the Germans, Josef, as an important activist in the SS Party, made efforts to obtain a *Passierschein* [entry/transit permit], in order to be able to travel Warsaw. As soon as Josef received the *Passierschein*, he immediately travelled to Warsaw. He immediately established contact with Szlojme Zusman, who was then heading the SS Party in Warsaw.

During the time of the German occupation, an entire array of cultural and economic institutions and drama circles arose, in which Josef played a dominant role. Josef grew spiritually during the years of the War. The Labour movement became stronger from day to day. Hundreds of young male and female workers, common folk, grouped around the workers' institutions in town.

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<sup>3</sup> [TN: Romuald Jarmułowicz (1877-1944) was the mayor of Częstochowa (called "Warta" in this book) from November 1927, until his retirement in 1931.]

At the end of the War, when the news came that Wilhelm II had abdicated, Josef quickly called a meeting of the most active members of the SS organisation and, also, invited representatives of all the other existing [Labour] organisations, such as the Bund and *Poalei Zion*. Josef proposed to make a joint demonstration across town. This proposal was adopted. It was in the evening. The Jewish workers were the first to go out onto the streets with red flags and demonstrate for the triumph of the German revolution and for an autonomous, free and independent Poland!

The German patrols, which were still walking about in the streets, were so stunned that, for the time being, they did not react. On the contrary, they saluted very respectfully and honoured the demonstration. But to compensate, the hooligan [element among the] young Polish students could not bear it, and they set upon the Jewish demonstrators with great rage and dispersed them. The red flags were rescued at great risk - several comrades of both genders were badly beaten in the process. The following day, the leaders of the organisations were sought after by the German secret police.

When the Germans left the city of Warta on the following day, the SS members actively participated in the disarming of the small remnants of the German army, and gathered the weapons in the Workers' Club. Jewish workers took a great part in establishing the workers' councils and the people's militia. There was a moment when the Polish "White Militia", as they were called, was unable to bear the fact that Jewish workers were armed. They encircled the club. Along with other members, Josef remained inside the club, locked the doors and did not allow the militia to disarm them. As chairman of the organisation, Josef went down to the club's door, and told them they would only enter the club over his dead body. Meanwhile, two of the comrades - Szyja Nirenberg and Dudek Szlezinger - contacted the people's militia and fetched one of their divisions to help, and the White Militia was arrested.

Being committed to the communal work and knowing that, with his experience, he was needed by the party, Josef resigned his position at the pharmaceutical warehouse, and took over the leadership of the SS movement's widespread activity. The communal work became the content of his life. Josef completely discarded the idea of a family life. The parents of his fiancée, Hela, were not pleased with his new employment anyway. Josef also feared the obligations of a family man.

One fine, bright day, Josef sent the *tnuyim* back. Shortly afterwards, Josef's bride-to-be was wed and moved away to Piotrków. On her wedding day, she came to Josef to say farewell. They parted company in a very friendly manner - he accompanied her out the house with [a bouquet of] flowers and they remained good friends.

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During those last years of the First World War, word spread to the effect that the well-known member, Alkona Chrobołowski<sup>4</sup>, was about to be released from a German internment camp and would soon come back home in Warta.

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: Later spelt Chrobolovsky.]

Since his youth, Josef had already maintained a profound friendship with Alkona. Alkona came from some *shtetl*<sup>5</sup> in Lithuania - they called him "the *Litvak*". Alkona soon became familiar in town in the ethnic Jewish workers' circles. They worked as close friends in the Lira Society and, later, in the [Jewish] Literary Society. They were always seen together. In the period of the First World War, Alkona was mobilised as a soldier in the tsarist army. He was at the front and was taken prisoner by the Germans.

In the years of the War, when the city was occupied by the Germans, and when Jewish life had taken on a living and pulsing character and young, capable people were sorely needed in town, Comrade Alkona's release was awaited with impatience.

Josef well remembers his first meeting with Alkona. Josef met Alkona in the street, on the bridge and in the midst of a throng of bachelors and young ladies. They became trusted and devoted friends and, for many years, worked together in the SS [Party], a short time in the *Vereinigte* [United] Party, and later also in the Independent Socialist Party.

This "*Litvak*" possessed a sea of energy. He had ties to all the branches of Jewish working life in town. He was the theorist and explainer of the ideas which the United SS Party later preached. He and Josef always worked hand in hand - Alkona was the theorist, and Josef the practical man.

When Alkona made it known that, in a short time, he was travelling to America, it was a great blow for all his close friends. They knew how much he would be missed in the circles of the organised Jewish workers.

It was precisely then that Josef left the SS Party and switched to the Bund. Alkona could not forgive Josef for this, and he led a bitter fight against him. Once already in America, Alkona did not sever his ties with his party and the members, and he supported and, from afar, helped the Jewish workers' circles in town.

After the First World War, Josef's mother and Uncle Duwid Szalit, who had accompanied the Russian army into deepest Russia, returned to Poland. They had been through the Russian Revolution and had suffered extensively, but had finally come back to the *shtetl* Augustów in independent Poland.

Josef was caught up in the hubbub of Jewish communal life in newly-independent Poland. He carried out his duties with intensified energy. The SS organisation in Warta, with its multi-branched institutions, grew vigorously. It fell to him to be the chairman of the organisation, representative in the Workers Council, councillor and secretary in the City Council and representative on the town hall's main committees. Josef made appearances at many gatherings and also participated in various functions. These were the happiest years of his life. He found complete fulfilment in his communal work, in the worthy fight for his people's human rights.

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<sup>5</sup> [TN: Janczewo, in the Łomża gubernia, according to the memorial section of "Czenstochover Yidn" (p. XLIX). Although Łomża is in Poland and not Lithuania, most of the Jews living there followed the Lithuanian Jewish traditions, such as a specific pronunciation in Yiddish etc.]

The SS organisation in Warta - or "*Vereinigte*" [United<sup>6</sup>], as it was later called - was among the country's liveliest organisations. The representatives of the Central Committee would very willingly come to Warta, and almost all the main leaders in Warsaw would frequently come visit the SS members in Warta. Among those who visited were Mbrs. Szlojme Zusman, Sz. Giliński, Jakow Pat, Icek Gordyn, Berl Gutman, Leon Fajgenbaum, Dr Józef Kruk, Pinie Bukshorn, Majer Mendelsberg, Wiktor Fizman, Guta Margulis, Dr Ajger, Isser Goldberg, Sz. Bastomski, Janke'le Dancyger, Halpern, Chaim Rozenbest and Gajst.

In the party's crisis years, the SS in Warta remained the only strongly organised organisation. This was thanks to the personality of Dr Józef Kruk.

The city of Warta needed new, young people. It needed teachers for the Jewish schools and professional activists in the professional unions. These people were sought from everywhere - amongst the student youth, and even amongst the workers at the machines. Many of them were drawn into the work. One of them was a charming, nimble young lady, who possessed a sea of energy. Her name was Mirl Epszajn<sup>7</sup>.

To the children, Mirl was the "Teacher Mire'le". If music was needed to be played to accompany the children in their rhythmic dancing and to sing with them, Mirl both played the piano and taught the children to sing. If the organisation needed a female speaker for a women's meeting, she became an orator. When the organisation arranges a masquerade ball for financial purposes, she is there at the masquerade ball wearing a mask and helping along the evening's success. When an opponent is speaking and she disagrees, she does not hold back an interjection and, when it is necessary to go to a demonstration, Mirl is the first to call on everyone [to do so], and she is in the foremost rows herself.

Mirl gained the trust of both the little ones and the adults. Everyone loved her. Everyone knew that she was honest and true to anyone with whom she had a friendship. She was never ambiguous. If someone praised Mirl, she accepted it with joy, but she would blush and cast down her eyes. If someone wronged her, she went aside and more than once wept. Mirl would perform all work with heart and soul.

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<sup>6</sup> [TN: To be found in various sources as "*The Jewish Socialist Workers Party 'Ferajnite' (United)*".]

<sup>7</sup> [TN: *Chaja Waga*, in *Federman's earlier memoirs in "Czenstochover Yidn"*.]