



One of Josef's numerous friends from his youth, back from the times when the Tsarist regime ruled over Poland, was the energetic, devoted Jewish Socialist and cultural activist, Lajbisz. Josef had become friends with Lajbisz back in those years at the "*chaynaya*" [чайная; Rus., tea-room], and had met with him at the "labour exchange" in certain streets and alleyways of the city.

During the First World War, Comrade Lajbisz was one of the first who began organising the trade unions of the leather workers. He was also, in fact, one of the founders of the I.L. Peretz secular Yiddish schools in Warta. Lajbisz also helped create the Educational Union for Jewish Labourers, where Jewish workers would come, in the evenings after work, to hear a lecture, learn to write and read, and so on.

Josef was bound by a comradely affection to Lajbisz and his family. He liked spending time in Lajbisz's house and became close with the whole family. He was fond of this working family, as of dozens of other labourers' households, and marvelled at their honest life, and the love and sincerity which they had for one another here. He had never seen such a thing in the more middleclass houses, not to mention those in the affluent ones.

In his loneliness, more than once, Josef now thought about this same Comrade Lajbisz and that familiar, warm environment - the comradely atmosphere of his old friend's home. Oh, if only he had such a close friend as Lajbisz, now in the big New York! A home like that to come to sometimes of an evening, when the dreadful lonesomeness did not let him sit in his furnished room and drove him out into the street, wandering thus in the streets of New York aimlessly and senselessly, as now Josef had more time than previously - the work for the refugees had abated to some extent. Josef did not stop thinking of his friend Lajbisz, Lajbisz's wife Jentla and their children. Comrade Lajbisz would arise before him with his simple, honest appearance and his innocent eyes, in which a world of belief in a better world was always glowing. When he thought of his old, loyal friend Lajbisz, Josef also saw the years of his own youth surging up before him.

When Lajbisz married Jentla, he already had a child from his first wife, from whom he had divorced. Josef remembered this little girl when she was still in infancy. Her name was Różka. Afterwards, two boys and two girls were born to Comrade Lajbisz. All of them received a secular Yiddish education - they studied at the Peretz Schools. Comrade Jentla brought up Różka as her own child.

Later, a tragedy struck one the children. Their little daughter Dalia fell ill and died. Josef called to mind the funeral of this young Dalia. A sizable crowd of hundreds of workers attended. The children of the Peretz School accompanied her to the cemetery, and Josef spoke beside Dalia's little grave, eliciting tears from all the assembled. On that occasion, he spoke of the capitalist order, the bad, crowded dwellings in which the Jewish labourers were forced to live and in

which the murderous typhus disease had its nest. Old and young were dying of the disease, and the accursed system of rich and poor was to blame for this.

Comrade Lajbisz lived in an old house on the outskirts of town. Despite the great poverty in this working-class home, it was neat and clean in every little corner. Josef enjoyed coming to his friend Lajbisz's home. He felt the harmonious, joyous coexistence which reigned there. For the parents, nothing was too hard for the children in order to receive the best education. Lajbisz did everything for his children to follow his ways - to fight for a better world, for a world of socialism.

Certainly, the children often lacked the bare essentials. They would frequently go off to school almost hungry. But no one knew about it. The tidy clothes they wore told nothing of this. And the affection, joy and mirth all around them showed every individual how happily this family lived with each other. The parents' primary concern was to give their children an education.

"Knowledge! The more knowledge", Lajbisz would say, "the more happiness in life a person will have in his future".

The parents even managed to send their youngest daughter, Gołda, to the city *gimnazjum* - and how happy they were, that they were able to send their fine daughter there alongside the best and most intelligent of the city's youth.

However, the happy and peaceful life together of Lajbisz's family was suddenly interrupted - just as the quiet, peaceful coexistence of thousands upon thousands of [other] Jews in the towns and *shtetls* of Poland was interrupted and destroyed.

The Nazis attacked Poland in 1939. Cities fell without resistance one after the other, and Warta, too, was attacked by the German armies. For absolutely no reason, buildings were suddenly stormed from the air - bombs fell, and the city was ablaze. Houses were wiped out in the blink of an eye, as well as the old building on the outskirts of town, where Lajbisz lived with his family, was not spared the destruction. Miraculously, the only part of the house that was left intact was the *oficyna* [Pol., outbuilding] - the part where Lajbisz lived.

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A bitter life ensued for all the Jews in the city. Hunger, disease and death rampaged in every little corner. On a daily basis, groups of Jews were driven to slave labour under a hail of blows and sadistic tortures. Even women and children were forced to fill in the city's defence trenches, which the city's population had dug earlier, when the news of war had been carried in the air. Every individual was made to carry bricks with bare hands, senselessly, from one place to another. Lajbisz, his wife Jentla, and all the children, [including] their delicate and gentle daughters, were no exception. They went through the *Seven Lairs of Hell* and were tortured by the Germans along with all the Jews in Warta.

During this period - a week or two after the Germans' bloodied march into the city - Gołda, Lajbisz's fine youngest daughter, made the acquaintance of a student, Ludwik Aronson. Ludwik was studying to become an engineer. His parents were among the city's wealthy,

assimilated Jews. Ludwik would stroll about with Gołda along the Jewish streets when the Germans did not show themselves.

But one's life was safer indoors. Jews would show themselves in the streets as little as possible. Gołda invited Ludwik to her house. Even though it was poor, and not [finely] decorated, like the one he and his parents inhabited in one of the city's finest streets. Nevertheless, Ludwik was fond of Golda's house. He felt at home wherever Gołda was, and Gołda also loved him. He was prepared to marry her, despite the evil times everyone foresaw with the occupation of the German destroyers.

Ludwik's parents, however, opposed the match. It is not that they disliked Gołda. She was a fine, pleasant girl and, as Ludwik told them, a diligent student. But it was from their own class that they wished to take a bride for their son - from the more aristocratic, affluent households, from the circle who attended the *German Temple*, those who considered themselves "Germans of the faith of Moses".

True, Ludwik's parents were aware that Hitler, may his name be obliterated, treated the German Jews exactly like all other Jews, but the Aronson family, as many of their kind, were still secretly hoping that the Germans would afford them preferential treatment. The Aronsons did not wish to have too many dealings with the Jews from the poor alleyways.

Ludwik, however, paid no heed to his parents' words. He even quarrelled with his father. He did not fail to see Gołda almost on a daily basis. At home, they began to seriously discuss Gołda and Ludwik raising a *chuppah* [Heb., wedding canopy].

The *chuppah* was erected a couple of days after *Sukkos* [Feast of Tabernacles]. The force of life is stronger than all suffering. Many such quiet marriages were held in town. The joy was subdued, of course. There was no clamour and instruments were not played in the streets. Quietly, behind closed doors, *chuppas* were erected and there were young, newly-wed couples.

Gołda and Ludwik's wedding was also a quiet one. Even Ludwik's parents did not know that he was raising a *chuppah* in the house of his girlfriend Gołda. It was only after the *chuppah* that the two of them went to Ludwik's parents. The father, Ignac Aronson, and the mother, Helena Aronson, wished them happiness, kissed Gołda and took her into their family as their own child.

Meanwhile, the situation of the Jews in the city was worsening. The infamous "resettlements"<sup>1</sup> began - each day a couple of streets. No one was sure if tomorrow he would find himself in the same house where he was today. At every "resettlement", the Germans looted, carrying off Jewish possessions and goods for the German treasury. The Nazis confiscated Jewish property, and the Jews in town became poorer by the day. The dearth grew in Jewish homes.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Euphemistic term used by the Nazis in ref. to the deportation en masse to the death camps.]

In addition, the Jewish population in the city became larger by the day. Masses of Jews arrived from the surrounding *shtetls*. Everyone wished to flee to Warta because, in Warta, there was no ghetto wall, as in Warsaw or Łódź. They had only designated a specific district in town, where the Jews were required to live. But, in the meantime, Jews could move about freely everywhere, as long as they had an employment somewhere, which could bring benefit to the Nazi Reich.

At first, the Germans gave the Jews in Warta work within the city, and Jews wished to save themselves and came to Warta. The Jewish population had now increased to approximately fifty thousand. Diseases spread due to the dreadful crowdedness. Typhus ran wild in the city.

Despite all this, and even though every minute was so bitter under the dominion of the Nazi rulers, a few cultural and relief institutions sprung up in the Jewish streets, which alleviated a little the need of the city's hungry Jews. Besides feeding the stomach to keep alive the thousands of Jews in need, the cultural organisations also tended to the spiritual maintenance of the tormented and battered Jewish populace. Choirs, drama groups and reading circles were organised. The Bund was particularly active in the cultural arena. It was a bit of a consolation, when in the evenings most of the city's Jews would come together for a lecture, a theatrical piece or a concert of Yiddish music. These evenings gave them the strengths to endure the severe tortures of the daytime hours.

By an order, the Judenrat was formed, whose duty was to provide workers to the various German workplaces. Thousands of Jews stood in the queues at the Employment Bureau, where the Judenrat issued a legitimation to the effect that so-and-so was a useful worker – a cobbler, a tailor, and the like. In this manner, one was ensured not to be sent out from the city somewhere to the German concentration camps, from whence very few ever returned.

From day to day, the queues at the Judenrat grew. One now saw former doctors and lawyers standing all torn and tattered, with hungry eyes, requesting a "note" that they were actually cobblers or tailors. It was truly frightening to look at the Jews in the lines. They were literally living corpses, skeletons – not people of flesh and blood. They stood in their hundreds – Jews with an indescribable fear in their eyes, draped in rags that barely covered their limbs.

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On 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1942, at five o'clock in the morning, thousands of Jews are once again taken through the city's streets. Jews are driven out of their homes, and are not even given enough time to dress properly. Like hunting dogs, the Gestapo men, armed from head to toe and escorted by Ukrainian auxiliary policemen, beat the Jews and herded them to the [HASAG] metal factory, where the "workshops" are located.

Wives are separated from their husbands and children from their fathers. Terrible shootings ring out in the air. Those who fall are the ones attempting to say goodbye to their closest ones.

The streets are filled with mayhem, fear and death.

The herded Jews stand in front of the gates of the metal factory. Some are holding little red books certifying that they are useful workers - and some are not. Fear and desperation stare out from the eyes of those, who do not possess these red booklets. Standing [there] is the cruel chief of police, the bloodhound and assassin Degenhardt. He holds a rod in his hand and scrutinises the Jews in the columns passing in front of him, driven by his henchmen with whips in their hands - "You, Jew - to the right! You, Jewish swine - to the left!"

The fate of thousands of Jews to the slaughter is sealed! The Jews on the left are taken to the cattle wagons. Their shoes are taken away from them. One hundred and twenty people are pushed into each wagon.

On that day, only a small number of Jews managed to gain admission to the metal factory's workshops. Among them were Ludwik, Gołda, and her two brothers, Szymson<sup>2</sup> and Mordche.

The day ended with eight thousand deported and hundreds murdered on the spot!

Weeks and months of murders in the streets pass by and seeking hidden Jews, who had not reported for the first *akcja* [Pol., operation]. The "Small Ghetto" is created, which consists of three small alleyways. Filth and disease claim lives daily. The little food distributed at the kitchen by the *Judenrat* is not enough to maintain one's soul.

Everyone is forced to work. The Jews are taken at five o'clock in the morning to the appointed workplaces outside the ghetto. At nine o'clock at night, they hear the dismal melody of the trumpet calling them to bed. A heavy cloud filled with hopelessness and despondency hangs over the ghetto. There is no household that has not lost a brother, sister, father or child, who perished of hunger and were left lying lifeless.

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The Jews of Warta - about four thousand, who still remain alive after the numerous *akcje* in the city - are enslaved in the HASAG munitions factory.

On 19<sup>th</sup> July 1943, at eleven o'clock at night, there is another selection. People are taken out into the street. The murderers look into each individual's face and evaluate who is sick or too old to work, and who has the "luck" to stay alive and continue slaving, drudging and starving.

The munitions factory becomes the enormous grave of the survivors, the hell in which they are tortured, until they are all gradually sent to Treblinka - the place of death already known to everyone. Some put up a resistance against the foremen of the factory. Not all let themselves go like sheep to the slaughter. Their end is a tragic one. They fall on the spot.

Between July 1943 and January 1945, there were still thousands of Jews in the HASAG slave factory. There are no words to [describe] the severe tortures and the suffering of the

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: Besides this and one other place further down this chapter, the author invariably refers to this brother as "Szymon".]

survivors. More than one of them envied those who were redeemed from their torments through demise in Treblinka and other chambers of death, by way of all the unnatural deaths conceived by the Devil in the shape of the German beasts. Gołda, Ludwik, and [her] two brothers Szymon and Mordche manage to stick together in the HASAG death camp. They live through everything. They witness what the murderers do to small children - they are shot by the hundreds, in front of their mothers' eyes.

At school, Gołda had learned the stories of the destruction of Jerusalem. The teachers would recount what the Romans had done to the Jews. Particularly etched in her memory was the story with Rabbi Akiwa, whose flesh the Romans had combed with iron combs, until he expired with a "*Sh'ma Yisroel*" on his lips.

[But] what her eyes had witnessed the Nazis doing to small, innocent children was a thousand times more horrific. The dreadful, horrifying images of the dozens and dozens of graves would always remain standing before her eyes. [People were] forced to dig their own graves and to then be thrown into them alive. She would always hear the gunfire [directed] at the Jews who were still barely alive, laid out in the mass graves, and [see] the picture of the hundreds of shot children in the field next to the city's [Jewish] cemetery.

After years of suffering, the small number of surviving Jews in the HASAG factory knew that the day of reckoning was approaching! The Red Army was marching forward and was already near the city. Nevertheless, the evil of Hitler's murderers did not relent. And here a new selection [took place] - the last one before liberation, among the thousands of Jews enslaved in the HASAG factory camps.

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Gołda's husband Ludwik and her two brothers, Szymson and Mordche, were also in this "selection". Golda saw how he closest ones, her own flesh and blood, were taken away to be annihilated somewhere – who knew in what death chamber? She stood frozen.

"For so many years we were destined to survive together – and we endured, even after seeing so much suffering and so many killings. And now", Gołda thought, "I am left alone - alone among the weakened slaves in the HASAG factory."

Something came apart inside her. She felt that, all on her own, without Ludwik and her brothers, she would have no more strength to endure the numbered days or maybe even just hours, until the Red Army broke through and put an end to the sanguinary hangmen and world-murderers. Gołda stood by the tall fence and saw her Ludwik at a distance. He was standing with his head bowed, as if ashamed of his grim fortune, to be torn away from her forever. She wanted to weep, but could not. Everything in her was frozen. She felt the last looks at her from her two brothers, as if they were saying, "Do not be afraid, Gołda. If we've had the strength to endure until now, we will also be destined to see each other again soon, freed from the hands of the killers. Their end is near!"

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On that day, 16<sup>th</sup> February 1945, the glad tidings were carried throughout the camp - "The Red Army is outside the city! They have already passed Kielce and Włoszczowa!"

This could really be seen in the faces of the Germans. They were wild and agitated, giving orders and immediately regretting it. Their forlornness and uncertainty were apparent in their commands. All of a sudden, their firm tone disappeared. Instead of giving orders, their voices were full of "please" – "Please come here; please go there..." – they were truly not to be recognised!

Even so, the mood was still an oppressive one. There was no food. Today, no bread had been distributed. This was also a good sign - the roads surrounding the city were most likely already blocked to the Germans. To make amends, they did give out lunch. The wooden pots were carried all over the factory. The enslaved workers, famished, sleep-deprived and exhausted, gulp down the soup, barely holding the spoons in their sickness-weakened, weary hands. They feel no taste in the watery soup, but still swallow it eagerly, warming themselves with every mouthful.

All of a sudden, like a thunderclap from the heavens, a terrible crash is heard, followed immediately by second and a third, each more terrifying than the last, as if the world were being destroyed. People throw themselves on the ground. The German guards also lie stretched out on the floor, trembling with fear. The Soviet army already has to be very close by. The deafening flashes and thunder continue incessantly. They also hear the booming of cannon, which are apparently very close to the camp. A commotion ensues.

"Freedom is coming - the long-yearned-for freedom! Oh, God – we're saved!" People whisper this and similar phrases to each other.

The enslaved Jews now lay on the ground, silent, tired, facing down. They whisper to one another, with little fires of joy and victory burning in their eyes. Every boom and every ground-shaking thunderclap cheerfully augurs imminent liberation from the Nazi yoke! They look on joyously as the German guards scramble about in distress, like poisoned mice. They, those murderous youths, turn one to the other, mutely asking, just with hand movements, what are they to do. But, on that day, there was already nothing the murderers could do.

In the evening, the bombardment relents to some extent, as if the cannons wish to repose, to catch their breath, in order to start thundering anew. And, then, everyone in the camp hears the command to line up in columns, taking along their packs. An authoritative voice shouts out, "*March!*" They march up to the exit gate. And then another order – "*Back to the barracks!*"

Rumours go about that street battles with the Red Army are taking place in the city. A Jewish coachman, whom nobody knows from where he came, says he saw Russian tanks in town. He travelled with German soldiers over dead Nazis, who are lying in the street in their hundreds. In the meantime, however, the Jewish camp internees find themselves behind barbed-wire fences at the very edge of the city, guarded by the killers.

In the middle of the night, flashes of fire and explosions tear across the dark horizon, making the air shake. Artillery fire thunders incessantly. Before the echo of the first explosion dies away, there is a second and a third. In the darkness, the Jews are now seeking their German guards, but they are neither to be seen nor heard! There are no more Germans!

Joy and fear seize the giant camp. They are afraid to free themselves, in case the murderers are still to return. The bombarding does not stop. Victims fall. They can already make out distinct artillery shots. Intense flames appear from the city district, like beacons for the unfortunates in the camp, as if the flames were calling out, "Cut the barbed wire! Go out to freedom! Save yourselves!"

As if pushed by this mute, wordless call, the weary, weakened Jewish slaves, in their hundreds, break out of the barracks in the HASAG camp to liberty!

Among the liberated Jews is Gołda. Tonight, she tears off the clothes/rags which she is wearing as an enslaved Jew. In the dark, she searches the houses in a bid to find some item of clothing, a garment with which to cover her body. She finds an overcoat and puts it on in the dark. She straightens her hair. She smooths the part of her head that was injured by the machine, tearing out tufts of hair. Tears come to her eyes - tears of joy, that she has lived to see the moments of liberation. She does not believe herself. Is she really alive? Is this real? It all seems to her like a dream.

With all her strength, Gołda runs out of the camp. She follows the liberated masses surging in the darkness. Where to? She, herself, does not know where her exhausted feet are taking themselves. And now she is already in town. She sees the destroyed streets. She observes the Soviet soldiers, very busy and jubilant. She hears their shouts in Russian, their songs, their joyous singing. And she wanders about in the empty streets as if in a dream. Here and there, she catches a glimpse of a blown-up Russian tank.

Wearily, with her feet barely carrying her, she makes her way to the alleyways, where she once lived with her family... once... once. God! How long has it been already? And thus, she reaches, in the dark, her little street. She remains standing in front of the house - in front of her home, which is now destroyed. The tears choke her. She wishes to weep, but cannot. Joy and angst intertwine - a [tangled] ball of wool of emotions. Should she laugh? Should she cry? A neighbour emerges from the building that has been left in ruins. She recognises her, but the neighbour stares at Golda wordlessly. Is this Golda? By the dim light of a little night lamp, the Christian woman barely recognised Golda. She crossed herself, the good Christian lady - "*Boże mój!* [Pol., My God!] Is that you? Gołda? What have they done to you?"

Gołda cannot forget the kindness of that Polish neighbour at that late hour of the night, on the first night of her liberation. Anna was the first to warm Gołda with a little warm food. She did not let her out of the house. There, Gołda felt as if she had been reborn. She bathed thoroughly. Anna warmed her heart with her humane treatment. Gołda stayed at Anna's for a few days, until a few Jews turned up in town, and she left Anna to be among Jews.

