

## From the Dreary Past

I am one of the few who managed to leave Poland mere months before the outbreak of the Second World War. My heart grieves when I call to mind all those who remained in our town - innocent and good people, who committed no sins or crimes, and the majority of whom were immersed day-by-day in arduous labour, by which to acquire their meagre livelihood. Despite all the hatred swirling around them, they could not imagine what they would face in the near future.

Our *shtetl* Żarki, completely surrounded as it was by Polish villages and [their] inhabitants, was, in a way, similar to a ghetto. The farmers came on Market Day to sell their produce and, having done their shopping at the Jewish shops, they went to spend their time in the pubs. And, when their hearts were merry with drunkenness, they did not deny themselves the pleasure of cavorting, which sometimes entailed smashing utensils and furniture. Once they left town, the habitual peace would return.

The Nazi Holocaust on Polish soil was preceded, as is known, by continuous deeds of enmity on the part of the Polish masses and this was, sometimes, under the authorities' silent auspices. These assaults were sometimes severe, such as the rioting in the different localities in 1937-38, for instance. One typical incident comes to mind in which our *shtetl* Żarki, too, was hard hit. This is what happened - one day in 1938, a group of *Endecja* (a right-wing antisemitic party) supporters, who were returning from a convention in Zawiercie, passed through Żarki. This was on a Sunday, on which the Jews were also forced to refrain from doing any type of work. Among the crowd watching them were also many Jews. Sometime later, four buses arrived from Częstochowa - also full of *Endecja* people - and, as soon as they had alighted from the vehicles, they began to rain down blows left and right on the Jews present.

Szyja Weintraub (*Skłuz*<sup>1</sup>), owner of a nearby farming equipment shop, addressed the Jewish youths in these words, "Take up tools and shafts, boys, and show these ruffians the might of your arms!" A fierce melee ensued, in which the ND retreated - after taking a grievous beating - and left town in great disgrace. Several days passed and, suddenly, orders came to arrest fifty-five Jews in Żarki, on charges of having attacked "peaceful" Poles. The majority of the detainees had not been present during the scuffle. One of them - Pinches Fajner - was even accused of causing harm by firing a pistol, an allegation which was [later] proven to be untrue. All the rightful claims of the Jews were to no avail and matters came to a point where one of the representatives of the local government said, "We know that the accused are not guilty, but we are unable to change a thing, because the order has come from above..."

The Jewish representatives in the Polish Sejm advised the Żarki Jews not to blow the matter up too much and that is why the incident was not highly publicised. In the end, most of them were given prison terms of one to two years - and, only when the Second World War was approaching, were they all pardoned and released, in order to be sent to the front to defend their "homeland".

**Sz. Korcfeld**

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: סקלז in the Hebrew original; possibly misprint of "Siodlarz," or saddler, the profession under which the same S. Weintraub is listed in the 1929 Polish Business Directory.]