



*Jews stand at the camp wall before being executed*

# The Matter of the Holocaust<sup>\*)</sup>

Your hand trembles and the blood freezes in your veins, when you attempt to take up the pen in order to set down, on paper, the horrors of that dreadful period - the period of destruction – 1939 to 1945.

Hundreds of books, describing the events of those days, have been written and many more will be written! And every one of them attempts to extract an accurate and complete description of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's acts of modern cannibalism. However, it is doubtful whether a language has already been created, which has the power to convey a loyal description, not only of the things that happened in those days and years, but also of what lay in the hearts of those who were led to annihilation and, maybe even more so, in the hearts of those who had the fortune to be among the scanty survivors. Every single one of the latter carries with him a tragic story of blood and tears, suffering and torture, humiliation and bitterness, without the practical ability to articulate them fully and in all their force.

Perhaps only by integrating all the descriptions of the many individuals will a monumental work someday be consolidated, to serve as a reminder and a warning for the generations to come - a work which will tell of the betrayal of the culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which emerges as the century of immense progress of science, civilisation and human ingenuity on the one hand and, on the other, as a period of the strange and tragic combination of aspiring to the heavens and descending into the abyss of no few among the nations - a horrific combination unknown to the previous generations. And it is as if the shout was crying out of its own accord:

*Where are you - the men of science, poets, moralists and thinkers of all the times? Rise from your graves Schiller and Goethe, Kant and Hegel, Beethoven and Schumann – and see what many of your people, whom you raised, educated and elevated, have done! Yet you shall not rise, as shall not rise all those victims, who fell at the hands of savages - and who knows how many of your descendants were among them?*

In the horrific Holocaust, which passed over most European countries, we, the Jews, were among those who suffered the most - both due to the fact that we were Jewish and also because we were so widely dispersed in all the countries where Hitler's legions marched. The fire of annihilation and destruction reached us, not only where we were scattered in Europe, but also spread beyond continents and oceans. The start of the blaze, however, and the greatest destruction, took place throughout Poland – and, among the hundreds of cities and towns which were sentenced to death and doom, was also the *shtetl* named Żarki - a town with a history of some 600 years of existence which, before the Holocaust, had a population of about 5,000, of whom more than 3,000 were Jews and some 2,000 were Christians.

The makeup of Żarki's Jewish populace was typical of the majority of Diaspora *shtetls*: merchants - mainly small, among them also some who were wealthy - shopkeepers, craftsmen, coachmen, religious functionaries, etc. The majority were ultra-orthodox and gathered three times a day, in the *shtieblech* and the study-halls, for public prayer. Most of them had beards and *payes* [sidelocks] and wore long caftans. Among the youth, there was already a considerable number who wore [modern] European clothing - a phenomenon which attested to a more liberal and secular state of mind in their midst. Nevertheless, there were many very pious lads, who dedicated themselves to Torah

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<sup>\*)</sup> Translation [to Hebrew] from Yiddish by Yitzchak Lador. [TN: As there are numerous significant differences in style and, indeed, content between this article and Jakow Fiszer's original Yiddish article "The Destruction and Annihilation of Jewish Żarki" which appears in this book on pp.223-281, we have deemed it necessary to translate both texts separately, each in its own place.]

study at the Study-hall, from which one could hear their hoarse voices and their traditional melody in the street into the late hours - that same sing-song chant, which had [always] been the custom in the study-halls during Talmud study.

In 1939, the waves of antisemitism in Poland reached their peak and, as a result, the financial situation of Poland's Jews felt a depression. The economic struggle, which was led not only by the masses but also by the Polish Government, shifted mainly to the realm of commercial competition. The goal was [to put] pressure on Jews and [to provide] different concessions to Poles. This situation forced Jewish youth to harness themselves more to the yoke of providing a livelihood. However, despite being preoccupied with worries and seeking employment, the youth in Żarki did not fall behind in all the matters relating to national [viz. Zionist] education or in fulfilling their obligations and aspirations, which were expressed in intensified cultural activity, propaganda and in raising funds for *Keren Kayemeth Le'Israel* and *Keren Ha'Yesod*. It is thanks to these youths' active Zionist endeavours that a considerable section of them made *Aliyah*, thus saving them from the bitter fate of the others.

There was a library in Żarki, run by the General Zionists. It was founded by the famed publisher Abram-Josef Szybel, our townsman, in memory of his wife Zysla-Małka. This library contained a selection of literary works in its thousands of volumes, in two languages - Hebrew and Yiddish. It is here that the local youth were imbued, for the first time, with the visionary magic of Dr Herzl's *The Hebrew [sic Jewish] State*, Pinsker's *Auto-Emancipation* and many, many more. It is therefore no wonder that this library became a centre for national education and awakening in our *shtetl*.

The autumn days of 1939 arrived and it was one of Poland's most beautiful and magnificent autumns. The sun's rays still continued emitting not only abundant light, but also plenty of warmth. There was less traffic of people in the street than usual, because they sought shelter in the shade of the houses. Business was also slow. And, in this atmosphere of external peace and quiet, people - having read the papers - already felt a sense of anxiety and foreboding of something unknown.

The blue and clear skies, which spread out over the town, looked down with pity, as it were, on the wretched people, who did not yet realise the scale of the catastrophe that was already looming over their heads. In the peacefulness which reigned all around, it was nevertheless possible to sense a feeling, as if a storm was approaching - a feeling expressed in tension and irritability, whose source no one could explain.

There were many who flocked to gather around the radios to listen to the news and to the addresses of the statesmen of Europe, including Hitler's war speeches, which began to make more and more of an echo. This Asmodeus concluded his notorious speech of 1<sup>st</sup> September [1939], in which he explained his invasion of Polish soil [and] which was, in fact, a declaration of war of sorts against the whole of Europe, with these unforgettable words, "And, as for the Central European Jewry, I shall see to it that they disappear completely"<sup>214</sup>. The day on he delivered this address, after the German Army was already marching on Polish soil, will remain [evermore] in infamy within the memories of most nations - and so much more so in the memory and heart of each and every Jew, wherever he may be.

Facing the catastrophe of our horrific and terrible destruction, we, the survivors, stand today by the graves of our dear ones, which are also scattered in unknown locations, dumbfounded and not believing our eyes - for we are, as yet, unable to grasp the entire scope of the Holocaust, with all its

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<sup>214</sup> [TN: These infamous, closing words do not seem to appear in any historical sources. Hitler did, in fact, deliver an address to the Reichstag, on 1st September 1939, justifying the invasion of Poland. However, there is no mention of Jews in it at all. See the English translation here: <https://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/resource/document/HITLER1.htm> ]

horrors and consequences. Perhaps, only after a longer period of time, from a more distanced historical perspective, will the bitter and terrifying reality reveal itself before us, as it truly is. It is hard to admit that one of the things, which are now clear, is that we, too, are to blame for the dimensions of the catastrophe and the destruction - for, sadly, we had neither learned enough from the distant past, nor the one that had been close to us in 1933-1939, the years of the dreadful upheavals, which fell upon the heads of the German and Austrian Jews.

We, therefore, did not pay enough attention to the great many preparations which were being made for the annihilation of us all, without exception. It was too late, before we became aware of our short-sightedness and of how flimsy was our political orientation. We had immersed ourselves in day-to-day life, in commerce and in business - and we had prostrated ourselves before the *Golden Calf*, without looking at reality and all that awaited us in the near future – right before in the eyes. Polish Jewry, which was torn, split and divided by different orientations and ideologies, could not maintain its unity, even if only against the impending danger from the outside, which undermined its readiness to protect itself properly as an ethnic minority. It was, in this situation [of disunity], that the thunder of the cannons from the Polish-German frontier reached us, even though, from the very first moment, it carried with it not only death and destruction, but also general and complete annihilation - until we were totally wiped off from the face of the earth.

We were seized with a sudden fear and dread on that accursed Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> September, when long convoys of wagons loaded with women, children and different possessions suddenly appeared before our eyes - wagons making their way, without a clear itinerary and without a fixed location. Tremor and horror seized the townspeople. People began to run about wildly, from one place to another, without any precise information, with each person looking into the face of the other, as if expecting aid and salvation from him. This was nearing dusk - the sun was setting and only [one last] strip of red lingered in the horizon. The thunder of the approaching artillery was deafening. In the failing light of evenfall, the long convoys of refugees looked like wandering ghosts. Anyone seeing the people's panic, as they scurried about from one place to another, carrying bundles of paper and glue, could have thought that this was the regular bustle of the days preceding *Yom Kippur* in the *shtetl*. But, this time, it attested to the enormity of the bewilderment, anxiety and despair which gripped the people who, due to a lack of information about what was happening and on what could happen, were rushing to obey the orders which the Polish Government had been able to issue just in time - to paste strips of paper onto the window panes to keep them from being shattered by the shock waves of the artillery fire. So, we were still unaware of the immediate danger which was facing us all at the hands of the army of murderers, who were invading with dizzying speed. In this indelible atmosphere of panic, that night passed. It seemed as long the Exile until, at long last, a streak of gold appeared before our eyes, trying to breach its way from the east. A pale light began to pierce through the dirty windows of the houses, in which the people sat filled with fear and terror.

Once the sun had fully risen, in all its brightness, and shone upon the sad and bewildered town, it seemed as if a voice was saying from the heavens, "What is the panic? Look, I beseech you, up at me, the Sun - how beautiful I am and how beautiful is the world of the Holy One, Blessed be He!" But this voice was intermingled with weird, nonsensical thoughts, which surged forth from within oneself and which blended with the echo of the roar of the cannons that sullied and contaminated the radiance of the sky and the pureness of the autumn air. All these together received a certain hidden and mysterious significance, which no one was able to decipher for himself.

As the sun emerged from its casing, the song of the birds was also heard – and, this time, it sounded like a lament, bewailing the *shtetl's* bitter fate. Some movement began in the streets and each one looked into the other's face, as if to ask, "Well, what have you heard?" And the rumour that the Polish Army was retreating from the attacking enemy had hardly spread, when we already saw, on

the horizon, the first battalions of exhausted, despairing Poles, hastily retreating without any order and discipline. The Polish soldiers did not pass up the opportunity they chanced upon - to loot the Jewish shops along their way.

The nervousness and tension grew more and more. The pandemonium of flight seized everyone and everyone turned to packing his effects for the road. At eleven o'clock in the morning - this was on 2<sup>nd</sup> September - German aeroplanes already appeared in the skies above the town. The noise of the bombing filled the air and clouds of dust, from the destroyed houses, began to rise up and curl over the piles of rubble. In mere instants, parts of the *shtetl* became mounds of debris. One cannot describe in words the fear, the shock and the panic that dropped onto everyone's head. People began running about like madmen, to all sides, without a clear purpose. When I sprang out, a horrifying picture was revealed before me - chimneys of the fallen houses protruded from the piles of ruins. Plumes of smoke rose above the roofs of the buildings which were burning. The streets were strewn with broken glass and, around these mounds and inside them, dead and wounded people, carcasses of horses and cows, broken utensils, furniture, carts, etc. One could hear the screams and wailing of people trapped under the debris, continuing to call for help. This short visit by the German aeroplanes left after it, in just a few moments, some 200 human casualties.

A primeval fear, which is hard to describe, now gripped the people who, in their frantic flight, forgot their own selves, as it were, and forgot their family and relatives - men, women, old and young. Everyone began fleeing eastwards, mostly to the nearby town of Lelów. Tired and hungry, they did not have enough strength to carry the few possessions which they had taken with them. Along the way, they came upon weapons, rifles, machine-guns, cars, armoured vehicles, etc., which had been left behind by the retreating Polish Army. But one could also chance upon suitcases, clothing and valuable objects which were scattered like unnecessary items. Those, who were able to make it to the nearest town or village, very soon realised that it was useless to flee, as the German Army was catching up with everyone with tremendous speed. Many, therefore, began returning and only some were able to reach the districts which had, in the meantime, been conquered by the Soviet Army.

My family did not go far - on 4<sup>th</sup> September, we returned to Żarki. With a hesitant and timorous heart, filled with doleful thoughts, we wound our way through fields and woods until, broken and shattered, we eventually reached the limits of our town. We immediately encountered patrols of German soldiers who, after a light search, in fact allowed us to go to our house, which had remained standing. But we had not even caught our breath before we heard shouts accompanied by gunfire - "*Leave the houses!*" The command was given to gather in the church courtyard and everyone was ordered to stand facing the wall, with their hands up. Not everyone had enough strength to stand for a long while in this manner and anyone, whose hand dropped, was immediately treated to a vigorous beating until bleeding - and, in some cases, was also shot to death. The nightmare continued until six o'clock in the evening. Again, a command was given to run back into the houses and to shut ourselves up inside them. In another five minutes, for anyone still found in the street, his verdict would be a bullet in the head.

This was at the end of Monday - a day which, again, cost the *shtetl* dozens of casualties. The populace, bewildered and depressed by the acts of murder, remained indoors. All our building's tenants spent the night together, lying on the floors due to lack of space. Any whisper or little noise from outside brought, with it, a tremor and agitation. Any minute, it seemed like the troops would arrive to complete the act of mass murder.

In this atmosphere of inhuman terror, we spent the forthcoming days and nights, without relaxing or sleeping. No one dared to stick his head out, even though outside the sun shone in all its myriad of colours. The autumn scenery revealed the magic of its beauty [and] the fruit trees spread their

inebriating fragrance all around - while for us, those shut up indoors, these were days of darkness, terror, suffering and anxiety.

Meanwhile, military rule was implemented in the town, which was conveyed to the Jewish population via its representative - Josef Zielonka. Orders were issued that all men, aged sixteen and older, had to present themselves at the marketplace square and that, whoever stayed at home, would be executed. They made us stand in the square, arranged in rows. High officers appeared with a Pole named Kowalik, who had been appointed head of the civilian authorities. This was one of the Poles who, despite being a senior Polish official, even before the War, had been known as a spy for the Germans. The number of spies and traitors amidst the Polish population was great. This fact, once more, bears testimony to how great the demoralisation was among the Polish masses, who had hitherto aimed their poisoned arrows at their Jewish neighbours. Now, the majority of them were, with utter submissiveness, serving the German oppressors who had come to rob them of their national freedom.

Before us, the new rulers delivered several short speeches which, in format, were similar, *lehavdil*<sup>215</sup>, to the Ten Commandments and whose gist was, "You, the Jews, are the German people's sworn enemies - and now the time has come for you to settle the score. All your possessions will be confiscated, every Jewish house will be marked with the sign "Żyd"<sup>216</sup> in oil-based paint and any commercial contact between Jews and Poles is absolutely forbidden". Once these statements had been translated to Polish by Kowalik, once more we were taken to the church courtyard, where we were, again, surrounded by soldiers and machine-guns. A tremor passed through those assembled, who feared the worst and, together with the deep groans, one could hear many whispering "Sh'ma Yisrael!"<sup>217</sup>

We were in this situation all day, until we were finally taken, under heavy military escort, to the Synagogue building, which was already partly damaged, with its windows and the *shtenders*<sup>218</sup> shattered. The straw, which we were given, served us as our bedding and all of us, exhausted, humiliated and depressed, fell to the ground - each with his own doleful thoughts. And these were the days of *Selichos*. That night and on the morrow, most stood up to pray and say *Selichos*. This was a cry of misery, as in "I called upon the Lord in distress" [Psalm 118:5]. This prayer, [uttered] with subdued tears and heart-rending despair, instilled in all of us an even greater sadness. From amidst the supplications of the *Selichos*, the groans and laments of our grandfathers, parents and siblings who, for dozens of generations, had been tortured - from the Pharaohs of Egypt, the Christian inquisitors, the Slavic mass-murderers and, now, to the German Asmodeus - echoed in my ears. And the painful thought pecking at my brain was. "Now that the world has become so accustomed to our suffering, is there anyone who will notice our tears, who will hear our cries and rush to save us?"

At eight o'clock in the morning, the women were permitted to bring us food. Thirsty and hungry, we swallowed up the food, mixed with the tears that were streaming from our eyes. We went on with our lives, without knowing what tomorrow would bring, with Monday's events still standing before our eyes. Rumours went about that we would be sent away. Each time the noise of a car was heard near the Synagogue, we were sure they had come to take us away from our *shtetl* forever. During those days and weeks, many hundreds and thousands of Jews were already sent to the different concentration camps, where they were wallowing in suffering and distress, with thousands of them wasting away and dying from starvation, cold and severe illnesses. One day, our representative Josef

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<sup>215</sup> [TN: Heb, lit. "to separate/differentiate"; Jewish expression roughly meaning "different though they may otherwise be", used when mentioning two unequal or contrasting subjects in the same sentence, such as the holy and the profane or the living and the dead.]

<sup>216</sup> [TN: "Jew," in Polish. According to the Yiddish original (p.231): "'Jude, Żyd' - in German and in Polish."]

<sup>217</sup> [TN: "Hear, o Israel"; primary prayer in Judaism recited, among other instances, on one's deathbed.]

<sup>218</sup> [TN: Individual lecterns for Torah study and prayer.]

Zielonka appeared, escorted by German military personnel. They began to release the craftsmen among us to perform different jobs. They divided the rest into crews, which were sent out, under military escort, to dispose of the debris following the bombings.

*Yom Kippur* fell on 23<sup>rd</sup> September and, on that day, a disciplinary squad arrived in town. One hundred of us men were taken to the marketplace square. We were given tools and ordered to march, in orderly files, towards ul. Kozięłowska - singing a marching song. All this was done in order to humiliate us, oppress us and to make the target of mockery by the Poles, who stood in the streets and accompanied us with their derisive glances. When we reached the aforementioned street, the order was given to begin cleaning the street's gutters of the rubbish and grime, which had accumulated there.

Next to each and every one of us stood two soldiers armed with rifles, whose duty it was to urge us on with shouts of "*Faster, you layabouts!*" We worked with an immense effort and it was enough to take a moment's break or to lessen the pace to feel the blows of a rifle-butt. At twelve o'clock [noon], we reached the limits of our strength and such exhaustion that we were fainting. We thought that they would give us a break in which to rest - but how disappointed we were when, at twelve o'clock, the guard rotated and the new murderers began to urge us on with renewed vigour and cruel beatings. Standing and working next to me was Moryc Torbeczko - a tall and corpulent lad. His two guards got the urge to torment him. So, they commanded him to run back and forth across the road, carrying his shovel on his shoulder, while they increased the speed of his runs, with two soldiers beating him with their rifle-butts and, all the while, shouting, "*Faster, faster!*" Szlojme Grinwald, a tall and upright lad, also caught the attention of the sadists. Over the road, a bridge was built and, between it and the ground under it, was only a small space, where they ordered him, specifically, to crawl under the bridge and take out all the rubbish. When the poor lad was no longer able to crouch and his suffering had reached the point of overflow, he suddenly sprang up from beneath the bridge, with his shirt in tatters and his chest revealed, and shouted out as one who had lost his mind, "*Kill me, kill me!*" That very moment, once more, the soldiers forced him to crawl under the bridge - where he remained lying in a state of unconsciousness.

It is, in this torturous enslavement, that we passed the day of *Yom Kippur* which, for us, seemed to last an eternity and, only once night had fallen, was the command given to run to our sleeping quarters - to run and not to walk - while our running was accompanied by shots from behind us. At the end of the day of horrors, the murderers wished to amuse themselves at the expense of our tattered nerves!

It is generally believed that the role the *Judenräte* played, during the Nazi occupation, was mostly a negative one due, in itself, to the very cooperation with the Nazis - as whether they wished to do so or not, they were forced to carry out their masters' will. Yet, one must admit that there were obvious differences between the comportment of the people who headed the *Judenräte* in the different localities. If, for instance, we attempt to analyse, in an objective manner, the actions of Izrael Borensztajn, the head of our town's *Judenrat*, it may be truthfully stated that his Zionist education and spirit helped him maintain a long-term ethical level in his behaviour and activity. Each time, he displayed a great selflessness in trying to save Jewish lives. Over the course of time, as the situation deteriorated and Nazi depravity increased, his own plight also worsened. It is only natural that the Jewish officials, in all localities under Nazi occupation, sought first and foremost to save their own lives and those of their families. Borensztajn, too, acted in this manner. That said, we must stress that, if in Żarki it did not happen that a Jewish policeman should raise his hand against another Jew, it is only thanks to the fact that his commander was Izrael Borensztajn.

His intercessions with the authorities usually had positive results and more than one of those, who had been sentenced to death, may thank him for remaining alive.

The *Judenrat* was comprised of representatives of various factions. The most important of its departments was the Labour Department and Mojsze Rotsztajn, the long-standing member of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*, was part of it. The *Judenrat* established a fund for the support of the *shtetl's* poorer residents. Many were the craftsmen who, instead of continuing with their work, were forced to engage in unpaid forced labour, so that they were unable to maintain their families - and these required financial aid. The money was collected from the town's wealthier residents. One of the harsh blows, which landed upon the Jewish populace, was the Contribution Tax (the imposition of a monetary penalty), whose sums sometimes reached the tens of thousands of *złoty*. It was also necessary to procure funds for unofficial expenses - freeing captives, averting decrees, etc. In the special conditions that had been created, it was necessary to operate both openly and also covertly.

The *Judenrat* in Żarki was only officially instituted on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1940. Thanks to the bribery system, the conditions in our *shtetl* were relatively easier than in other cities and towns. More or less, six "peaceful" months passed, during which extremely saddening news reached us of the plight of the Jews in other localities. The blood and tears of our brethren were being spilt throughout the whole of Poland. Tens of thousands of Jews already sat, locked up and suffocating, in detention camps. When you try to focus on the events and the terrors of those days and on the deeds of the Nazi foes, you think your brain cannot grasp and your heart cannot bear all the horrors and only one vigorous demand is self-evident, which is – *Revenge! Revenge!!!* Our long two-thousand-year exile has known a horrific martyrdom. Many are its "heroes", the enemies of Our People - and yet they pale in comparison with the "heroics" of the barbarians and cannibals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century!

For as long as it belonged to the Zawiercie district, our *shtetl's* internal affairs were not subject to excessive interference on the part of the district authorities. These were all in the hands of the mayor, Kowalik, who was like a sole ruler - in whose hands the fate of the Jewish populace was effectively placed. This antisemitic Pole could serve as the symbol of a lowly individual, devoid of any personal human value - a man with a boorish and crude character, foul-mouthed, greedy and filled with base passions. And the *Judenrat* was forced to be in constant contact with this villain, to negotiate with him, to know [when] to give in to him and, at the same time, to restrain his vile schemes regarding the Jewish populace.

The turn for the worse began when Żarki was adjoined to a different district - Radomsko. The rulers of Radomsko were known as true haters of Jews. And, indeed, it was not long before decrees and regulations poured down upon our heads, one of the worst being the seizure of the Jewish workshops. With great efforts and by giving vast sums, the *Judenrat* was able to annul this decree in Radomsko. Many days did not pass before a new calamity fell upon our heads. A group, comprising German and Polish officials, came to our town. The majority of these individuals were base and frivolous individuals – who, from the outset, had come with the intention of taking advantage of their unlimited authority for foul purposes. Affairs reached such a state, that it was impossible to cross the street without receiving a murderous beating. The situation was unbearable. Even in this case, the *Judenrat* was still able to act in accordance with the rule "*Money answereth all things*" [Ecclesiastes 19:10] – and, by orders from above, this group was removed from Żarki.

In the second half of 1940, a gendarmerie made up of 22 men was established in Żarki. They strove to infiltrate everything in connection with the organisation of the internal life of the citizens. They were also aided by agents/snoops - shamefully, including some of our own. Ceaseless searches and confiscation of property were the daily lot of the Jewish inhabitants. We especially suffered due to the prohibition on ritual slaughter and the butchers, who broke this law, were sentenced to death. It



[also] happened that, in Tomaszów, that locality's *shochets* and butchers were shot in one day - thirty men. In Żarki, too, the butcher Korcfeld - a young man of twenty-odd years - was shot. And, if on that day all the butchers of Żarki were not shot, this is thanks to Izrael Borensztajn's efforts.

Following the invasion of Poland, the country was divided into two parts - one was annexed to the German Reich and the other became the "*Generalgouvernement*" [General Government]. Żarki belonged to the latter area, to which also belonged the cities of Warsaw and Kraków. Kraków was the seat of the government, which was headed by the infamous General [Hans] Frank, may his name be obliterated. It was from his mouth that all the harsh decrees came - including forced labour. Its main objective was not just to provide the occupying government with a workforce, but was also a means of annihilating Jewish youth through back-breaking toil in inhuman conditions and without sufficient food. To this end, gigantic labour camps were established where tens of thousands of young people were concentrated without basic living and sustenance conditions. The working hours were eleven hours a day. The work was carried out under the surveillance of sadistic soldiers, who were specially trained for this purpose. Their task was to intensify the suffering and torture and, above all, the unceasing murderous blows, until loss of consciousness and sometimes also death. It is therefore no wonder that not many survived these labour camps. And if from Żarki only a not very large transport was sent to these death camps, this is once more thanks to the local *Judenrat*, which was able to persuade the local authorities, in different ways, to establish working brigades within [our own] locality. One member of the *Judenrat*, who was active in this arena, was Kalman Kalkopf, who displayed great initiative, understanding and swiftness to save the youth of Żarki from the bitter fate of their brethren elsewhere.

It is [only] natural that all the decrees, restrictions and forced labour eventually also brought about a terrible decline of the Jewish population. Hunger - quite literally - began to show its signs more and more in the Jewish street. A soup-kitchen was then established, where free meals were distributed to the local poor. At first, many avoided coming to the kitchen, because they were ashamed. But, over the course of time, the situation worsened to such an extent, that the majority of the residents took their meals at this public kitchen.

Weeks and months went by. Summer and autumn passed and then the winter days arrived. It was as if Nature, too, was trying to be cruel to us - that year's winter, with its copious snowfall, was too harsh to bear. Żarki, which, to a certain extent, served as a crossroads and therefore as a strategic point also, was tasked with keeping clean the roads leading to it. Every morning, brigades went out to perform this work and, more than once, it happened that the authorities also sent them out at night. Things in Żarki did not change much with the arrival of the summer and [then the] winter of 1941, [with] that same pure air and that same white snow - like Scripture says, "*white and red*"<sup>219</sup> - white with the snow covering the ground, and red with the innocent blood spilt by those lusting for pillage and murder.

One day, in that of winter of 1941, a message came over the telephone that part of the Płock Jewry was being sent to Żarki and that we had to provide accommodation for them in our town. A few members of the Council [viz. the *Judenrat*], among them Dr Margulies [from Częstochowa], went out to Złoty Potok - 18 km from Żarki - to meet them on their way. In this instance, there are not enough words or colours to describe in what situation these poor refugees came to us, after a long and arduous journey - exhausted and ravenous, mentally broken, weakened and faint [and] without sufficient clothing to cover their bodies. Among them were dozens of men and women, who had not been able to withstand all this and who had perished along the way. Dr Margulies administered first aid to the sick. The Jews of Żarki, who were already in the worst of states themselves, did anything they could to cheer them up. A special committee was appointed to house them among the Jews.

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<sup>219</sup> [TN: Reference to Song of Solomon 5:10: "My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand."]

Some of them were put up in private dwellings and others in public accommodation. For the latter, the most essential garments and personal effects were collected. The number of refugees reached 250 souls. This was a minute part of Płock Jewry which, back in the day, numbered many thousands. Those who came to us were not only wretchedly poor, weakened and lacking in everything, but also embittered [and] filled with sorrow, despair and agony. It was not hard to understand them, but it was hard to console them.

Days and nights passed. Each day had its worries, preoccupations and victims. In the middle of 1941, there were rumours of the war that was about to break out between Germany and Russia - rumours which seemed to be substantiated by the continuous movement of troops eastwards and which kindled a spark of hope for a turn for the better in the hearts of many. The day of 22<sup>nd</sup> July [sic June<sup>220</sup>] arrived and our town was suddenly flooded by thousands of tanks, cannons, vehicles and regiments of soldiers - all hurrying eastwards. And, indeed, the Germans did infiltrate Russian soil, and our hopes for a turn for the better were dashed. With overwhelming force, Hitler's armies invaded Ukraine, bringing with them death and doom to its population in general - and to the Jews in particular - as they advanced in pursuit of the retreating Russian Army. [But] it was quite the opposite. As the fanfares of victory of Hitler's legions intensified, thus grew their lust for murder and pillage - and this made its mark on us, also.

Żarki was now just one kilometre from the Reich's border. There were some Jews who, risking their lives, continued in the smuggling business together with Poles. This brought about raids in the ghetto, the results of which were sometimes not only fines and the impoundment of goods, but also deportation to Auschwitz.

Even though the ghetto area in Żarki was not fenced off, orders were issued prohibiting leaving it without a permit. This was a hard blow for the ghetto's inhabitants, whose free movement had hitherto enabled them to make a living from illegal trade with the Poles. Now, many of those who, under the pressure of the scarcity and the difficult times, attempted to breach the ghetto limits, paid for it with their lives. The number of people with permits to exit the ghetto was very small.

That same June of 1941 a typhus epidemic broke out in town. Naturally, among the Jews, who had been weakened by so many tribulations and starvation, the disease claimed many victims. The enemies of the Jews immediately took advantage of this opportunity also, stressing before the authorities that, seeing as how the Jews were the main spreaders of the disease, they should be isolated even more than they had been until then. The results were quick [to arrive] - orders [came] from Radomsko to fence off the ghetto and to isolate it completely.

And, once again, thanks to the *Judenrat's* effective actions, it was possible to annul this decree as well. To this purpose, an investigatory committee was established which, besides Dr Margulies and two other Jewish doctors – Wolberg and Warhaftig, included also two Christian doctors - Secomski from Częstochowa and the local physician, Gawędzki. This committee determined that it was not the Jews who were the source of the contagion.

The ghetto camps completely subverted Jewish life in every realm - the physical and spiritual, and in morality and virtues. Being cut off from the normal conditions of life, being constantly moved from street to street, from house to house [and] camp to camp, living in cramped conditions and pernicious indigence, torments of hunger, humiliation and continuous fear – in many cases, all these brought with them diseases, atrophy and doom. The scarcity increased from day to day. Even those who were able to hoard expensive goods and valuables in all sorts of hiding places, also ended up suffering and in dire necessity when they [were forced] to leave the place.

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<sup>220</sup> [TN: Operation Barbarossa.]

Meanwhile, the flame spread further and further – and, now, not only throughout Poland, but throughout Europe also. At the end of 1941, a typhus epidemic broke out in Poland for a second time, without avoiding Żarki and, once again, it struck predominately the Jews, for reasons we need not repeat. The suffering of the afflicted and of the poor was great. Dr Margulies, beloved by all, exerted himself beyond his powers to administer, to everyone, the aid they required. To our good fortune, two doctors - Dr Feldman and his wife, a dentist - arrived in Żarki. They immediately dedicated themselves, with heart and soul, to the work of helping others. Dr Feldman, himself, also fell ill and, for a long time, was bedridden. However, he and Dr Margulies both displayed exemplary selflessness in their work together. If truth be told, *all* the Jews - particularly those of meagre means - showed [such] readiness, devotion and goodwill, that they set up a special hospital for those who had succumbed to the disease. Once the epidemic was already in its decline, Dr Margulies himself experienced the torments of typhus and was treated in the same hospital that he had established.

At the end of 1942, orders came from Radomsko to set up a modern bathhouse in Żarki. This was taken, by the Jews, as a harsh decree, as the project entailed spending vast sums of money, which [by then] was already hard to come by. Intercessions were, this time, to no avail and the Jews were not only required to collect the money, but to also provide the workforce needed to erect the building. Once it had been built with their money, their strength and their sweat, the Jews were not permitted to use the bathhouse to their own benefit and they were forced to give up the use of it.

In the second half of 1942, the financial situation worsened to such a degree that, in the streets of Żarki, naked, barefoot and starving children began to appear. At this point, a children's home was established into which all the destitute children were placed and the Council [*Judenrat*] provided not only for their earthly needs, but also for their educational ones, as far as possible. However, these poor Jewish children were not able to enjoy, for long, the institution that had been set up for them. The barbaric hand, which not only continued but also increased its savage rampage, eventually reached out for them also and their bitter destiny - like that of their fathers - brought them, too, to their doom in the chambers of gas and annihilation.

The horrific rumours and news that reached us from other localities, about our brethren's great suffering in camps and in ghettos, rang in our ears as a warning that the poisoned cup would, in due turn, be passed to us also. By the end of 1942, there were only some 130 families left of the 600 or so that had been in Żarki who, in practice, shouldered the entire burden of the *Judenrat's* expenditures. The poverty grew, as did the restrictions and decrees. The number of destitute increased from day to day and that, of those who could still bear the burden of aid and relief, steadily decreased. The distress intensified to such an extent that, despite the severe prohibition against leaving the ghetto, starving people would escape to the villages in order to exchange their few remaining possessions for food. They were sometimes murdered there by the Germans, who would immediately notify the *Judenrat* that they were to receive their bodies.

Two kilometres from Żarki was a stone quarry which, during the occupation, belonged to the German firm "*Chemische Werke*" [Chemical Works]. In this quarry, one hundred Jews performed forced-labour under inhuman conditions. It is therefore no wonder that people avoided going to this work, which caused great troubles with the authorities and also serious internal strife - for those with the means would free themselves through bribery, so that it was predominantly the poor who ended up bearing the brunt. Here, too, the *Judenrat* came up with a solution. They imposed various taxes on the wealthy, with which to provide, those working at the quarries, with better food and also to aid their families. From this, we may perceive how complicated the problems facing the *Judenrat* sometimes were.

As I attempt, in these pages, to set down more and more facts, I feel an abundance of memories and impressions bursting from a heart, quivering with so much sorrow and agony yet, at the same time, I also sense that, no matter how much ink I am able to pour onto these mute pages, it is not within their power to convey the entire depth of the suffering and torture which it befell upon me to personally witness. To do this, perhaps the genius of our national poet Ch.N. Bialik is required who, back in the day, expressed this cuttingly in his *In the City of Slaughter*. Yet I am convinced that no matter what is written - for future generations, a great part of the circumstances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's [worst] tragedy will forever and ever remain a terrible and well-kept secret.

At the end of 1942, the enemies of the Jews reached new peaks in their deeds of abuse, rampage and mass murder. Entire communities were wiped from the face of the earth. Jewish lives were for everybody's taking and the murder of Jews became an everyday phenomenon. A wave of satanical murderous psychosis swept over Europe and flooded it. These were raging days for us, too, and we were drowning in a sea of hatred, flaring passions and dripping venom – and here is an example: orders were issued to turn over all furs to the authorities, whereupon it sufficed for them to find any fur garment at all with a Jew, to kill him on the spot.

Transfers from place to place ceased. Now, entire communities were being sent straight to the extermination camps. The people were loaded like cattle - although even animals are not treated in this manner – onto freight carriages, where they were forced to lay one on top of the other for lack of space. The carriages were bolted shut and they were taken directly to Treblinka and Auschwitz. The convoys of trains, with their hapless cargo, proceeded in the direction of Radom, Kielce [Province], and we sensed that the waves of the final extermination were drawing nearer and nearer to our *shtetl*. In the emptied cities and towns, they left only a few individual Jews, who were the policemen and the members of the *Judenrat*, upon whom it fell to liquidate the Jewish property still remaining in the ghettos. To this end, huge warehouses of clothing, footwear, furniture, etc. were set up, to which everything from the Jewish houses was brought. Here, everything was sorted. Anything of value was shipped to Germany and the rest was sold to Poles on the spot. Once the ghettos were liquidated - [a process] which sometimes took months - the liquidators of the Jewish property, whose assistance they had hitherto availed themselves, were also finally put to death.

The process of liquidating the Jewish communities in totality proceeded at an increasingly stronger pace. Its occasional decelerations were solely down to technical reasons. Żarki was [by then] already completely cut off from any telephone contact with neighbouring localities, including Radomsko. In this atmosphere of trembling, despair, horror and lack of any information regarding what was to happen in the next minute, it is only natural that people paid great attention to any bit of news - be it distressing or the harbinger of a ray of light and hope. One day, rumours came that orders had been issued from Berlin to stop the exterminatory operations and, as a proof of this, the Jews of Włoszczowa had returned home. It later emerged that they had indeed returned, but the reason was quite simply due to a shortage in freight carriages. The work of annihilation had not stopped. Quite the contrary - transports of Jews began to arrive from France, Belgium, Holland and Czechoslovakia. These poor people had no notion of what awaited them and they were sure that they were being sent to labour camps. They constantly asked, "Where is Treblinka?" We already knew what Treblinka meant. We took pity on them but, at the same time, we realised that unless some extraordinary shift took place, we, too, were facing the very same fate.

Our *Judenrat* worked with the utmost vigour. Despite the whole scarcity of funds, once again vast sums were raised for bribes - in the hope that, after all, the *shtetl* might be saved from its bitter fate. Everyone now sought the option of being sent to forced labour, onto which they clung as a safe mooring anchor - women also worked. New labour projects were set up, including a large, incredibly well-kept vegetable farm, which was established by Cwi Brandes z"l. Mostly the youth, members of

*Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* worked in it. They were about to set up a huge co-op shop in order to employ the elderly there as well, but this did not come to fruition, as events meanwhile had developed at a staggering pace.

[By then,] the extermination operation had already reached the cities of Wolbrom and Pilica, from which refugees came to us. They had managed to escape before being loaded onto the carriages. It is perhaps unnecessary to describe in what situation they came to us and what their appearance was. Before we had enough time to hide them, the Poles managed to report their arrival to the gendarmerie and the results were not long in coming - in the searches, seven of them were discovered and murdered on the spot. The Poles, whom the Germans also hated and who in many cases could have constituted a plank for us to grab onto, dedicated themselves with all their soul and means to aiding the Germans in the work of pillage and murder and found no task too abhorrent. Jewish refugees, upon passing through Polish villages, were robbed of everything by them and were even turned over to the Germans - if not actually murdered by them. These are the ways in which they expressed their Christian conscience!

The accounts that reached our ears from eyewitnesses - the refugees from the two aforementioned towns - regarding the extermination operations and, especially, also about the collaboration of the Poles there - were horrific. And if the Germans shot Jews with rifles, the Poles had no problem in using pitchforks also. The Jews were forced to dig their own mass graves and were usually shot next to the open pit. Whether they were killed by the shots or just injured, all of them were forced down into the grave.

In the town of Wolbrom there had been some eight thousand Jews, including the refugees who had arrived there. In this town, the Germans employed the Polish youth [group], the so-called "*Yunakes*"<sup>221</sup>, in construction work. With the onset of the liquidation of the ghettos, the *Yunakes* devoted all their energy to the task of assisting the Germans. As they were not allowed the use of firearms, they mainly utilised sharpened spades.

When the day of the liquidation came, all the Jews of Wolbrom were rounded up at a concentration point, guarded by Germans and Poles. This was also a concentration point for the Jews of the neighbouring localities. The Jews of Pilica, who were following the events in Wolbrom, congregated in the synagogue, declared a fast which even included infants<sup>222</sup>, lit candles, recited Psalms, went in their multitudes to the cemetery to prostrate themselves on the tombs of their forefathers and their supplications and wails shook the air and were heard from far off. Yet all these drowned in the expanse of space, like "*The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness*" [Isaiah 40:3]. When their turn came, they were all sent to Wolbrom, where they met their deaths together with the local Jewry.

City after city and town after town were gradually being depleted of their Jewish populations. Jewish blood was being spilt like water. In every emptied locality, a small group of Jews was left to liquidate the Jewish property, as usual. To Pilica, they even brought additional Jews, such was the scope of the task and thus the handful of Jews there increased - whose temporary existence was prolonged for the time being.

We followed what was happening in Pilica, as the bonds between Żarki and Pilica had always been very close and the events there were, for us, an indication of what lay ahead for us. When the news from Pilica reached them, the Żarki Jews knew that they could not escape their bitter fate. Without

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<sup>221</sup> [TN: In the book "*Notes From The Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal Of Emmanuel Ringelblum*," it is explained that these were "the uniformed ethnic Germans in the service of the Commissar."] ]

<sup>222</sup> [TN: Under normal circumstances, even on Yom Kippur, children under bar or bat-mitzvah age are not required to fast – and certainly not small infants.] ]

clearly evaluating the purpose for doing so, they began to sell their possessions to the Poles, who paid next to nothing for everything. Word of the opportunity to benefit from the free-for-all very quickly reached the vicinity's peasantry and they came, in great numbers, to Żarki to take part, for a loaf of bread or a few potatoes, in the robbing of the property that was still in the hands of the poor, starving Jews. There were Jews who placed valuables in the hands of their Polish friends for safekeeping and they showed great courteousness in these cases - this time not refusing to comply with their request. Some began to attend to setting up different hiding places in which to hide their valuables and perhaps conceal themselves as well, if need be. There were some who left the locality in order to go to Pilica, without thinking over to what end they were doing so.

All this happened in Żarki at the end of September and the beginning of October 1942. Once again, the days of *Selichos* and *Yom Kippur* came. Indeed, many were the changes that had transpired in the life of the Jews in Żarki over the previous three years - this was first of all noticeable in each and every person's facial expression. One could no longer encounter somebody smiling. Everyone went about with a heart filled with agony and grief, or perhaps filled with fear or despair, the likes of which logic cannot grasp. No one noticed the beauty of nature, as everyone was in a state of trembling and horror, with nightmarish darkness all around - the darkness of the shadow of death. In this atmosphere of despair, which pierced into the depths of one's soul, the Żarki Jews congregated in the Synagogue, where they spent all night reciting Psalms and, the next day, in heartrending prayer and tears. And like thunder on a bright day, news brought by a refugee who had arrived from Częstochowa fell upon our heads - that that city was already encircled on all its sides by the Gestapo men and their Polish and Lithuanian helpers. No one was allowed in or out, as the work of annihilation was underway with its full force. He, himself, had barely escaped at the last moment.

At the same time, a second report reached us - that Jews had gathered for *Yom Kippur* prayers at the house of Mojsze Fajner, the owner of a bakery in Żarki. In the middle of the service, a German gendarme, by the name of Götz, entered, began beating those present, took the Torah scroll and, after he had unrolled it onto the floor, he began stomping on it, yelling, "*Where is your God of Israel? Let him try to punish me!*"

The flight from [sic to] the neighbouring towns was at full tilt. People fled mainly to Pilica and Wolbrom. At [the offices of] our *Judenrat*, there was a feeling of panic and chaos. Some of its members and workers were missing, as they, too, were among those who escaped. The tension increased and, meanwhile, word spread that a large quantity of carts from the vicinity had been ordered to Żarki for 6<sup>th</sup> October. This information reached us from Złoty Potok, where people from Żarki were also working. The leader of the *Judenrat* called his family and relatives together and addressed them with the following words, "To my sorrow, the time has come when everyone must fend for himself as he best sees fit. I am compelled to stay here, as I have already forfeited my life anyway - and perhaps I still might be able to aid those remaining". At this point, Borensztajn burst out weeping hysterically, as did all those who were there with him.

On the last day of *Sukkos*, on the holiday of *Simchas Torah*, the panic reached its peak. The *Judenrat* leader's family left the *shtetl* on its way to Pilica. Due to this departure, the tension increased even more and a mass escape ensued. Some paid fantastic sums for a cart [ride] - about 2,000 *złoty* to Pilica. And those who could not afford it or who were unable to find a cart began running towards Pilica - a distance of 40 km from Żarki. The traffic of escapees continued all night long. The following day, when I went out onto the town's streets, I could not recognise it. The streets were deserted. Only a small section of the population - less than a third - remained. As for the rest, the majority had fled and a small number of them had hidden in the bunkers which had been prepared in advance. The very escape was, in itself, a rather incredible event, as the town was already surrounded, on all sides, by patrols of the gendarmerie. So, many of the hapless fugitives ran into the extermination

operations on the way, or when they arrived in other places, so that all that was left to do was to join with those being transported to the annihilation camps. Even those who made it to Pilica only had their sentences postponed because, after a few days, the Jews of Pilica experienced the same fate.

The language of man is too poor to describe the mood of those who remained - almost a thousand people - as they pondered the fact that this was their last day in the *shtetl* and the last day of their lives in general – for, on the morrow, they were to be taken away from the town in which they had been born, grown up, married [and] started families and where they had suffered so much in the last years. Once again, I went out into the deserted street. I had sent my wife and child to Pilica several days before and I had promised them that I would join them. What to do? I met Mojsze Zajdman, a former Jewish police officer. We looked into each other's eyes - a wordless gaze of despair! We exchanged a number of sentences and decided, there and then, that we would attempt to flee together to Pilica. We took two bicycles and, without turning back, we set out towards Pilica. However, we immediately ran into a patrol of gendarmes. We showed them permits granting us free movement, but they said that they had expired. In despair, we stood before one of them, while his companions withdrew to one side. With lightning speed, I pressed a bundle of coins into his hand and, in response, we heard, "Get out of here - Quickly!" In great haste, we set off, fearing they would chase us. Once we were away far enough, we breathed [more] freely and, as dusk fell, we arrived in Pilica.

In Pilica, we found an assortment of Jews from different locations - local residents who had been allowed to remain, people in hideouts [and] refugees from Żarki, Radomsko, Piotrków, etc. The living conditions were horrific because, following the first liquidation, most of the vacant houses were bolted –and locked with a seal on the padlock. At that time, there were around 3,000 Jews in Pilica and, in certain cases, some twenty people were crammed into one small room. They slept on the floor, on beddings of straw. It is hard to describe the mood and the thoughts of these refugees. Some were no longer able to evaluate their situation. On the one hand, they were glad that they had not been among those who had been killed but, on the other, they knew perfectly well that the postponement was [only] temporary and that a new day of liquidation would certainly come. That is what the murderers also reckoned, which is why they did not vigorously oppose the Jews gathering anew. The Jews of Pilica viewed this differently in these desperate moments, seeing the flooding of their town by people from other localities as a peril to themselves. Things got to a point where the local Jewish police began hunting for Jews and sent the younger ones among them to the labour camps in Płaszów and Prokocim.

The distress and the scarcity were great. The houses, where the refugees were crowded together, were half demolished because, after their former tenants had been liquidated, meticulous searches had been carried out in them. They sought valuables and jewellery, which the Jews might have concealed. So they tore down walls and smashed cooking ranges. As a result, even if someone found a little food, there was no way to cook it. As usual, the plight of the poorer people was the worst, as they could not extricate themselves from police persecution using money. In the end, the police rounded up all the refugees - starved, covered in rags, barefoot and fear-stricken – [and took] them all several kilometres outside the town, where they were ordered to stay out of the town's limits. Miserable and desperate, they set off, without knowing in which direction they were heading. Some later returned to Pilica, but they found the windows and doors of their dwellings padlocked and boarded up. Many of them remained outdoors under the open sky.

On Tuesday, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1942, the leaders of the Żarki *Judenrat* - Izrael Borensztajn and his two fellow members, Kalman Kalkopf and Lajzer Studenberg - were summoned before the local authorities. When they arrived, they found one of the leaders of the liquidation forces there -

[*Sturmführer*] Feucht - together with his entire entourage, all agents of the Gestapo. Feucht announced to the *Judenrat* that, on that day, the turn had come for the Jewish community of Żarki to be liquidated and that everyone would be sent to labour camps *in the Far East*! Each individual was permitted to take, with him, a few things needed for the journey, but no more than ten kilograms. Everyone was allowed to take valuables and jewellery with them, as well as food for five days. All were to assemble in one hour at the assembly point in the market square. The Jewish police was also mobilised for this operation. As usual, Poles and Ukrainians volunteered to assist in this "sacred quest". Before anything else, they began looting the houses that had been vacated. Once all were standing in rows, Feucht passed among them, counting everyone and, when he discovered that, according to the numbers, many were missing, he announced that all those shirking and in hiding would do well to present themselves of their own free will, as they would be caught anyway and severely punished. Sadly, almost everyone heeded his warning. The rows filled up more and more. Some of those, who were found in all kinds of hiding places and in the houses, were murdered on the spot. With downcast heads and depressed, the condemned stood in rows, awaiting the arrival of the rest and of those employed in forced labour outside Żarki. Local Christians showed particular diligence in seeking out the Jews who were hiding and the fate of these was extremely bitter. For instance, Abram Goldberg and his daughter were brought out of their house's cellar and killed there and then.

Korcfeld, the brother of the murder victim mentioned above [on p.118], also a butcher, was found in a haystack. When they brought him out and he sensed that his life was lost, he managed to plunge a knife into one of the gendarmes standing next to him, whereupon he was also obviously slain on the spot. The murderers entered the house of Fajwel Rozenbaum and, to their surprise, they found him wrapped in his prayer-shawl, sitting and studying a page of the Talmud [out loud] with his son [Icze]. Even when the murderers addressed them, the two did not budge from their seats and, in this position, they were both murdered. In one of the houses, they found the cobbler Krzepicki's daughter, who had given birth just one hour before. The killers slew her together with the baby, who had only just now first seen the light of the world - a world which, for us, had become so dark. One of the Ukrainians found an elderly Jewess and led her towards the square. When he told her to hurry and she could not keep up, he began beating her cruelly until she faltered and, when the poor woman collapsed, he shot her and burst out laughing in a sickening manner.

The number of victims who fell, on that day, in Żarki reached twenty-three. The hunt for victims and arranging them all into rows took hours – and, during these hours, our *shtetl* was utterly bereft of all its Jews who, for centuries, had lived in it for generations upon generations. All these hapless people were sent to Żłoty Potok, where they were all loaded onto freight carriages and transported, in the manner and conditions we are familiar with, to Treblinka. More than one of these poor people gazed, for the last time, at our beloved town, in which he had been born, where he had suffered and rejoiced and where his bitter destiny had reached him - the destiny of all its Jewish brethren.

Thirty Jews were left, by the Gestapo, in Żarki to clear out the Jewish houses and to liquidate their property. They felt like corpses returning from the grave and it was they who absorbed, within themselves, all of the sorrow and pain which still hung in the air of the *shtetl*, after its Jews had been sent to their doom. These thirty were put up in Kalman Kalkopf's house and were later moved to Szlomke Tenenbaum's house. The head of the gendarmerie, Joseph Schmidt, who had hitherto maintained a more-or-less "civil" relationship, as it were, with the *Judenrat*, while he systematically received large sums of money and many valuables, now gave free rein to his debased passions with the thirty downtrodden men who were under his orders.

At this time, there were still hundreds of Jews in Żarki - in attics, cellars and bunkers - who had managed not to fall into the hands of the murderers. From day to day, the food and water with



which they had provisioned themselves was becoming scarcer. They could not leave their hiding places. So, many of them decided to slip out at night. However, many of them were captured or killed. Some of them made it to Pilica, despite everything. I saw them. They were no longer like human beings, but like worn-out shadows. Starved and terrified, they already stood not only on the threshold of utter despair, but also in [such] an appalling apathy that it already bordered on insanity. Despite the dreadful peril they faced, the thirty authorised men acted to aid their brethren in the bunkers and began bringing them food and water by a variety of means. This, however, could not continue for long, so that these hapless people were left with no option but to attempt, despite the danger they faced of being killed on the roads, to sneak out and flee.

A group of Jews, among them Chaim Tenenbaum and his son Abram, found refuge in the forest under the open sky. When they ran out of food, the son decided to sneak into Żarki. However, as he was passing through Leśniów, he was noticed by Polish youths, who caught him, bound him and turned him over to the gendarmerie. It was only by a miracle that Izrael Borensztajn (Tenenbaum's nephew) was able to save him from the gendarmerie's bullets. He was later transferred to another location and since then - all trace of him has disappeared.

The plight of those, who were still in the bunkers in Żarki, became increasingly critical. The need to satisfy their hunger forced them to occasionally leave their hideouts and, when the Poles noticed this, they at once reported them to the German headquarters. Polish youths regarded the detection of hidden men, women and children as a fine sport. Everybody was sent to Częstochowa and shot. Among them were Abram Rapoport and his family, Fizl the baker and his family, Mala Szulman and her mother, and many more.

Izrael Borensztajn, Chairman of the *Judenrat*, once again invested great effort and large bribes, until he was able to raise the number of authorised Jews in Żarki to 120. After staying for a short time in Pilica, I also returned, with my family, to Żarki as one of the authorised persons. [How] can I describe here what my impressions were this time when I returned to Żarki, after all that had happened in this town of mine and which now resembled a huge cemetery and its houses - gigantic tombstones? The silence in its streets was such that it seemed to echo in my ears. The echo of my own footsteps also sounded as if from far away and it seemed as if, from every window and every door, eyes were staring at me. But, in reality, these were just imaginary figures and the shadows of those who once lived in the houses, whose spirits still continued to hover in the air of the *shtetl*.

Every morning we, the authorised Jews, were required to present ourselves before Lieutenant [Schmidt]. He would count the rows and the people and divide us into groups, each group to be sent to its intended work.

I was sent to work at the furniture warehouse, which was in Chaim Tenenbaum's [former] tannery. Herszl Monat, Tenenbaum and I worked in sorting out the furniture that was brought from the Jewish houses by the Polish coachmen. Each piece of furniture, each object with which we came into contact, was like a reminder and a symbol of the act of extermination and utter annihilation.

Thanks to the enlarged number of authorised Jews (everyone was housed in the three houses of Szlomke Tenenbaum, Berisz Wajzman and Kalman Kalkopf), the plight of the Jews in hiding was slightly alleviated, because it was easier to provide them with food. On the other hand, their situation worsened in that the filth and stench in the bunkers, under the conditions of that bitter reality, became unbearable.

Meanwhile, the days of winter arrived with storms, blizzards and cold winds, which pierced every part of one's body - and all this was the same inside the unheated bunkers. The situation of the Żarki

Jews, who were living in Pilica, was also terrible, because the Germans insisted that the number of Jews in Pilica greatly exceeded that which appeared in their records and, in the end, they started hunting for the unwanted people. The same [thing happened] in Wolbrom. Both towns experienced the taste of a second liquidation and, once again, freight carriages with people were sent to Treblinka and Auschwitz. The Jews in these towns learned of the designated time of the second liquidation the day before. Once again, a frantic escape ensued in different and strange directions - into the Reich, to Kraków and to an array of points in the vicinity. Once again, many sought to hide out with Polish peasants, giving them what was left of their money and gold and, once again, there were many cases in which, once everything had been taken from them, they were turned over to the German gendarmerie. Once more, the distress and terror reached unimaginable proportions, until a few of the Żarki Jews - exhausted, famished and wearing summer clothes and rags - returned to Żarki, to once again hide in attics and cellars. This time, among those coming to Żarki were some of my own family members, including my mother z''l - who made the 40 km journey to Żarki on foot, sometimes running. It was with a bleeding heart that I welcomed her, without being able to give her much aid. It was impossible to bring her into our own lodgings, as this would jeopardise the situation of everyone staying in the three houses. I put her up temporarily in a coal cellar and, later, transferred her to a safer hideout, next to the furniture warehouse where I was working. This would enable me to provide her with food more easily.

The Polish youths continued with their sacred duty - sniffing out Jews and turning them over to the Germans. Those captured were no longer murdered on the spot, but only detained. When their numbers reached several dozen, they were sent to Radomsko and from there onwards . . .

All day long, those in hiding sat like rats in their secret places and only at night would they crawl out and jump like bats through fences and other obstacles. Hurriedly and in a panic, they snatched up the little bread and soup that we prepared for them and hastily returned to their hideouts. As a result of the acts of detecting those in hiding, capturing them and putting them into the hands of the Germans, their numbers decreased. In the bunkers, quite a few perished from the cold, the starvation and the terror which drove people to insanity.

In November 1942, orders arrived from Radomsko which brought a temporary redemption to those living in the hideouts. According to these orders, four ghettos were set up for all those in hiding - in Sandomierz, Szydłowiec, Ujazd and Radomsko. All those hapless people were granted permission to converge in these four towns, each wherever he chose. This concentration was to end by 30<sup>th</sup> November. Those who were late would, as usual, be put to death. These orders did not include the authorised Jews. One cannot imagine with what gladness those in hiding received these tidings because the majority of them had reached the end of their tethers and there were dim hopes that they would be able to continue surviving for much longer in those inhuman conditions. Everyone left their hiding places, whereupon they were put into special concentration points. We, the 120 authorised ones, began tending to their basic needs - mainly clothes, shoes, etc., which we took, at the risk of our own lives, from the Jewish houses which were under the process of demolition. The stream of who had hidden, emerging from their hideouts, was quite considerable, although many of them looked more like shadows than human beings. Many also came from the surrounding localities. Some 600 Jews gathered in Żarki. This was the last group of wanderers. They spent a couple of days or so in Żarki and, on 29<sup>th</sup> November, they were all herded to one spot. Here, too, there was no lack of abusive acts in which Lieutenant Schmidt, particularly, distinguished himself. Here and there, he brought his rubber baton down on the heads of the people standing in the rows who were, after all, all broken and shattered from what they had experienced in the bunkers. Most of them were people who had already, more than once, gone from fire to fire, bunker to bunker, patrol to patrol, killers to killers and from one danger to another even greater one. Almost all were

humiliated, depressed and utterly destitute. We, the authorised ones, did what was possible - as well as the impossible - to provide these "liberated people" with their most basic needs.

The largest camp of detainees was the one in Radomsko - some 5,000 Jews from various cities and towns - Wolbrom, Pilica, Sędziszów, Wodzisław [Śląski] and a considerable number of Żarki Jews. At first, conditions in the Radomsko Ghetto were very difficult, because all were concentrated into seven big houses. The crowding was terrible.

On one of those days, fifteen-year-old boy Jechiel, the son of Hercl Borensztajn and grandson of Lajzer Krzanowski, also came to us. While the Radomsko Ghetto was being liquidated, he had hid inside a pile of rubbish for two days and two nights, until he managed to escape and make his way to Żarki, together with his cousin Karol, the son of Szyja Krzanowski. Jechiel came to us with half-frozen feet. One of the authorised women, Cywia Fiszer, devoted herself to his treatment and to healing his feet. To this end, every night, we brought him down from the attic. Once he had recovered a little and was able to stand on his feet, Chaim Tenenbaum took him and his cousin to one of the Christians - Bojanek - and he crossed them over the border into the Reich. Moving them entailed not only great monetary expenditure, but also constituted a risk to Chaim Tenenbaum's life itself. From there, they were both sent to a labour camp, where Jechiel met his death. The only one who survived was Karol Krzanowski, who nowadays lives in the USA.

In January 1943, following the final liquidation of the Radomsko Ghetto, a few people from Żarki who had been there escaped it - and this was after the ghetto had already been surrounded by Gestapo men and Ukrainian volunteers. Among the escapees were Motl Rapoport and his family, Ale Rapoport and his twelve-year-old daughter, Heniek Pesak, Herszl Monat and many others whose names I do not recall. They were in total some forty individuals. Most of them hid in various hideouts. In order to grasp the plight of the escapees, we must remember that this took place in January, during the toughest days of the winter. They had practically no chance of being saved from death, lying in wait for them every step of the way and, indeed, only a few of them, after many tribulations, reached Żarki and snuck into the house, where the 30<sup>223</sup> authorised Jews were living. In one of the flats in that building, there was a hidden trapdoor by which one could access the attic. That is where they all hid, and in this clandestine manner we supplied them with their bare necessities, at the risk of our own lives. Among those hiding were Mojsze Rotsztajn and his wife Bella *née* Grundland, Motl Rapoport and his family, Ale Rapoport and his daughter, Herszl Monat, Krajndla Plawner, and others – almost twenty men and women. Krajndla Plawner-Zilberberg, who was among the hiders, was a very pious woman – and every Friday afternoon she lit *Shabbes* candles in the attic. Although this put the lives of all of us in peril, she did not relinquish this [ritual], in her belief that thanks to these *Shabbes* candles, God would save us from all evil. As a precautionary measure, we hung sheets up around the candles so that their light should not seep through to the outside.

In February 1943, one of the gendarmes told the head of the *Judenrat* that, on the next day, a special Gestapo unit would come to carry out a serious inspection and search in the house of the authorised Jews. This information created panic. After a joint consultation, we decided to transfer all those hiding in our attic to a bunker in the marketplace, at the Lewenberg family's house. Back in the day, this house had served as a *shtiebel* of the Aleksander *Chassidim*. Behind the bookcase, which held the religious books, there was a hidden door through which one could access that house's cellar. One by one, without any mishaps, we transferred them during the night. The place was so cramped, that the people were barely able to fit into the bunker - and the lack of air caused such great stuffiness, that it was impossible to light a candle. On the following day, it turned out that all the panic had been for nothing – so, that night, we would need to move them back under the cover of darkness. We transferred them two by two. Only the last three - Mojsze Rotsztajn and Ale

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<sup>223</sup> [TN: The original group of 120 authorised Jews was reduced in December 1942 to 60 and, again in January 1943, to just 30, as the author explains below on p.135.]

Rapoport, who was forced to carry his daughter in his arms due to her frozen feet - encountered one of the gendarmes, Siebert, who was known for his cruelty. The sight of the girl being carried in her father's arms drew his attention. He detained the three and all attempts to have them released were in vain. The following morning, they were all shot at the Żarki cemetery. The Polish constable, who took part in the execution, gave me the grisly details of the cruel murder. Ale Rapoport and Mojsze Rotsztajn were the first to be shot. The latter had been an active member of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* since adolescence, a teacher and an educator, brimming with youthful energy and the joy of life - he was only thirty-years-old on his death. The girl, after being shocked by the murder which she had witnessed, began to flee, hiding behind the tombstones, until she pressed up against one of them. When they neared her, she once more tried to escape. In the end, they caught her and bound her hand and foot and, in this position, they shot her. Two of the authorised Jews, Mane Grundland and Chaim Tenenbaum, were sent by the gendarmes to bury them. They found their last repose in the Żarki Cemetery.

On 6<sup>th</sup> October 1942, a boy of fourteen - the son of Beni Feldman - fled our town. He escaped just before the *akcja* [operation] of liquidation. His only goal was to stay alive and, to this end, he wandered far afield. Somehow, he miraculously managed to survive outdoors in the cold and rain, hungry and thirsty - occasionally receiving a little food from some Gentile, who took pity on him. His meagre, emaciated and shrunken body was covered in tattered rags and he had no shoes on his feet. Once he had reached complete depletion, the boy was stricken by utter apathy - thus losing any ability to show any resistance to what was happening around him. It was in this state that he returned, in December, to the *shtetl*, whereupon he started roaming about in the streets, utterly devoid of any concerns or fear. It was not long before the Christians noticed him, whereupon they immediately notified the gendarmerie of his existence. When one of the gendarmes approached the miserable boy and looked at his emaciated body and his innocent and apathetic facial expression. Even he was stunned and could not find the courage within his soul to murder him. He ordered the boy to be gone at once - assuming that he would run away from him. But the boy no longer had the strength nor the will to escape. The gendarme [then] shot him, but the bullet only hit the boy's hand. The white snow was spattered with red stains and the boy's cries of pain split through the air. The second bullet shot at him redeemed the boy of the extended wandering and suffering which he had withstood for three whole months in a row.

Following the first liquidation, in October 1942, the houses [in Radomsko] were completely emptied. Those now inhabiting them lacked the most elementary things - beds, cookers and kitchenware. It was only after a certain period that we were allowed to send them a shipment from Żarki with various items to alleviate their plight a little - clothing, shoes, bedding, linen, food and also a little money. Inside the camp in Radomsko, there was relative freedom and only some of the detainees were required to perform forced labour. The German hangmen knew that, sooner or later, these people, too, would be sent to the gas chambers and crematoria. So they did not pay close attention to the internal arrangements inside the ghetto. Power was effectively in the hands of the Jewish [Ghetto] Police - the "*Ordnungsdienst*" [lit. Order Service]. Inside the ghetto, with money, one could obtain anything, given the circumstances. Over the course of time, they even set up cafés, bakeries and confectionary workshops. Many were puzzled by the freedom which they were granted to engage in commerce, craftsmanship and barter in branches which were classed as being absolutely prohibited. But the Germans did not interfere - and the Jews thought that it was better not to scrutinise their actions and arrangements too much and that they should accept the order of life as it was.

We must point out one saddening detail. The senses of Jewish policemen - the majority of whom were young people had, over the course of time, become dulled and their hearts had become hardened by the horrors which they had witnessed. They took the liberty of abusing their brethren –

beating, robbing and living it up at the expense of those under their authority, as in *“Let us live, for tomorrow we shall die.”*<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> [TN: Based on the verse *“Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die”* (Isaiah 22:13).]

In December 1942, the camp of workers in Żarki was reduced from 120 to 60 people. The other 60 were sent to Radomsko. They did them the kindness of sending them in a freight lorry, carrying all kinds of essentials with them. When they arrived in Radomsko, they found it in panic and distress - word had come that the liquidation operation was to be repeated. There were many different rumours. Among them was one, according to which they were about to conduct only a partial liquidation, meaning that those fit for work would not be killed, but would stay put. Mass psychosis seized the people in the ghetto, with each one trying to prove that he was one who could perform any sort of work at all - and all this in order not to be sent to the extermination camp. The atmosphere in Radomsko became increasingly denser from day to day. Once more, the deeds of robbery and murder abounded and, once more, the ghetto was in a frenzied state of nervousness and fear of death. And the days were the harsh, cold and freezing days of winter. The roads were blocked and there was nowhere to where one could try to escape. There was no other option but to helplessly await the bitter day of doom.

In this charged atmosphere, the souls of the German vandals craved for new inventions by which to further torment their Jewish victims. Thus, for example, huge posters appeared one day in the ghetto, announcing that the English had agreed to an exchange of their German prisoners-of-war for Jews detained in the ghettos and that, in this context, the ghetto Jews would be given the chance to emigrate to the Land of Israel. The first to be taken into account would be the Jews who had relatives in the Land [of Israel] and, first and foremost, they would see to it that families were reunited - wives with their husbands, offspring with their parents, etc. In order to carry out this operation, an enrolment bureau was opened and each application cost ten *złoty*. It is hard to describe the elation and relief and the crowds of ghetto Jews at the door of this bureau. In order to increase the panic and the crowding, the abusers added that one needed to sign up as soon as possible, because the full listings were to be sent to the Gestapo headquarters on the following day. These sadists were not content with annihilating human beings - they also felt the need to amuse themselves at the expense of their hapless victims! Meanwhile, the Germans used these lists to ascertain the precise number of people who were being held in the ghetto. All this happened on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1943 - just a few days before the final liquidation was executed.

In the meantime, orders arrived in Żarki that the work of the sixty Jews, who remained there, was to be concluded and that they were to be transferred to the Radomsko ghetto. By intervention of the *Judenrat* - which still continued to function - Lieutenant Schmidt kept half of the people in Żarki and sent the other thirty to Radomsko. The latter had been required to show up one hour later next to the Synagogue but, instead of thirty, only twenty people appeared - the rest had vanished and concealed themselves. Despite the fact that those missing faced the death penalty at any moment, they chose this as the less hazardous path - and one must admit that several among this group of "criminals", who disappeared into their different hiding places, were able to survive and see the defeat of the Asmodeus.

Those who were sent to Radomsko, upon arrival, found the ghetto surrounded by armed forces. The preparations for the liquidation were in full force. Escape was already difficult and just a few were able to do so - only by paying huge bribes, obviously. Many of these fugitives were shot, even after they had handed over their money. The 6<sup>th</sup> January arrived. All the people of the ghetto were concentrated in one place - the market square. The frost was at its harshest - everyone stood in the deep snow, many of them dressed in rags, exhausted and starving. Bread had not been baked for days and was difficult to obtain, even for money. The large crowd was surrounded by Gestapo men, gendarmes and Christian youth and these, once again, gave free rein to their sadistic urges - to abuse, to beat and to murder. All around, the groaning, wailing, shouting and screaming reached the heavens. And among the rows of the miserable, ill-fated and powerless people, there was a demonic dance of wild men on the rampage who, to that end, employed all sorts of diabolical stratagems.

The well-known scene repeated itself. All those, who had planned it in advance, once more hid in bunkers. Anyone caught was killed on the spot. And, here, a new rumour spread among the rows - this time a true one - that all those who worked at the Thonet-Mundus [furniture] factory, which was then producing wagons for the army, were to gather to one side. The number of workers was about 300 but, in those desperate moments, many pressed and jostled to where this group of labourers were standing, in the hope that everyone found among them would be allowed to remain. The commotion and panic increased with every moment and the Ukrainian *shkutzim* rained murderous blows, with their rifles, onto the heads of the pushing crowd. Once the gendarmes had managed to separate this group of lucky individuals from the rest of the crowd, orders were given to proceed towards the freight carriages, which stood ready to receive this human cargo – which was, in fact, already void of any human semblance. Before loading them onto the carriages, the murderers did not forget to rob them not only of the meagre possessions a few of them still had, but also of their outermost clothing and shoes. They threw them into the carriages half naked, with frozen bodies and souls, and without any concern for their provisions. The carriages stood on the tracks at the Radomsko station for many hours and only in the evening did the shipment commence moving towards Treblinka.

Besides the forced labourers, many in hiding also remained in Radomsko. Over time, the majority were captured, detained for a while and then taken to the cemetery and executed. In many Jewish houses, small children were found whose parents had abandoned them, because they had not wished to see their annihilation with their own eyes. In one bunker, where several dozen people were hiding, there was also a woman with an eighteen-month-old boy. The child cried incessantly which to put the lives of the entire group in peril. With the mother's consent, they smothered him. Nevertheless, the group was discovered and they were all murdered at the cemetery, in the manner accustomed by the Gestapo - the victims dug their own graves, then stood by the open pit and were shot and thrown into the grave, whether they were dead or just wounded.

There was one exceptional case in which one of these condemned people grabbed a shovel and mixed with the Ukrainians, who were conducting the operation, and miraculously managed to sneak away from the cemetery. I spoke with him and he gave me the details of the murders. He told me that, during the murder at the cemetery, among the others was the sixteen-year-old Cyrla, Chaim Tenenbaum's daughter. She knelt at the feet of Lieutenant Kempenik, who was heading the operation, and begged for mercy. She was killed together with all the others.



*The shochet Berisz Wajsman and his two sons escorted by a gendarme*

The remaining forced labourers were sent to work in Skarżysko[-Kamienna], at the armaments factories. Among them were some twenty people from Żarki, one of whom was Herszl Rotenberg, from whom I received some details regarding the work at the factory. Around 10,000 people worked there, of whom 3,000 were free Christians who received wages. The rest were Jewish forced labourers, who lived within the factory walls under the conditions of lepers and who were subjected to endless check-ups, in order to periodically remove the weak ones from among their ranks. The latter were sent to the extermination camps. When Rotenberg sensed that his turn to be sent away was approaching, he managed to escape and reach Żarki at the beginning of 1943. There, for a long time, he hid with a Pole who, in the end, stole his money and murdered him.

In April 1943, the thirty authorised labourers were still in Żarki. About the same number of people had also miraculously survived in the bunkers. We, the authorised ones, worked hard in the gendarmerie's garages. Our lot, although we were aware of what awaited us in the end, was infinitely better than that of those who had been already sentenced to death and were only still alive thanks to their hideouts. Some of them were hiding in the attic of the house where we, the forced labourers, resided. All of us - both they and we - went about as people condemned to certain death. Only our movements were still comparatively free, whilst for them, every tiniest motion caused them constant trembling and terror. Nevertheless, even under all these harsh and most inhuman conditions, one immensely powerful desire stood out among the people - the majority of whom were still young – *to live!* To put the day of annihilation off! *To live, to live!!!*

In our lodgings' attic, there was a small window through which the sun's joyous and magical rays shone and played. From outside, there came the tumult of people in the streets, but not of Jews - these were no longer seen and the sound of their children's laughter was no longer heard in Żarki. Those, who were still going about here and there, were forced labourers. The Gentiles were meanwhile getting on with their lives. They were all in good spirits, as most of them had filled their houses and pockets with Jewish property and money. Different events were taking place all around, while we were as if on a desert island - completely isolated from the entire world. The only source of information was the Gentiles, who were allowed free movement. The living conditions of those in hiding became unbearable and, in moments of desperation, they envied those whose fate had already been sealed. We, the small handful, were the last witnesses to the tragedy of Żarki's Jews, to the dance of demons and to the spilling of blood in all its forms, horrors, atrocities and nightmares - which even the most horrible dreams and the cruellest imagination, could never equal!

I shall never forget the day when a newspaper fell into my hands, from which I learned of the speech the Press Chief of Germany, Dr Dietrich, had held at an international journalism conference. He said that the global press needed to assist Germany in restoring Europe, the cultural giant and the conscience of the world, to its former glory and to build a new Europe based on pillars of law and justice. Russia, England and America aspired to the eradication of this culture and it was Germany's task to uphold it. At this point, he mentioned the names of dozens of famous inventors, poets, composers and painters, all of whom had contributed to raising the horn of European culture. As I read these words, a dreadful tremor passed through my whole body and I thought to myself, "True, geniuses like Boccaccio, Kepler, Galilei and [Giordano] Bruno brought light to the world with the collapse of the scholasticism<sup>225</sup> of the Middle Ages. They fought for light and freedom, while you, the barbarians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, take humanity back to a world of such darkness and sadism that, by comparison, even the deeds of [Tomás de] Torquemada<sup>226</sup> seem like nothing at all. The world has known excellent painters - Rembrandt, Raphael, Rubens and others - while you, the savage Huns<sup>227</sup>, have painted your pictures with the blood of millions of innocent people. The words of the great

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<sup>225</sup> [TN: Scholasticism was a medieval school of philosophy.]

<sup>226</sup> [TN: The Spanish Inquisition's first Grand Inquisitor and one of the chief supporters of the expulsion of the Jews in 1492.]

<sup>227</sup> [TN: Pejorative term used in reference to Germans widely used by the allied forces during the First World War.]



poets arouse in us wonder to this day, while you gave the world the lyrics '*Wenn [das] Judenblut vom Messer spritzt*' (When [the] Jew-blood from the knife sprays). The great composers created sublime works, while you brought to the world the melody to [the words]: '*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*' (Germany, [Germany] above all). Great were the achievements of European culture in different realms, while you brought to it the culture of Auschwitz, Bełżec and Treblinka!"

The fate of the thirty forced labourers depended on three different authorities: the first - Lieutenant Schmidt, who could liquidate us at any given moment, because it was only by his demands, that he needed us, that the district authorities kept us alive. These thirty individuals' main task was to provide Schmidt himself, his family, all his relatives in Germany and all the other gendarmes, with everything they required and fancied - from food and wine, which were hard to come by, to fine official and civilian clothes, etc., etc. There was a good tailor among us - Naftuli Rabinowicz - and all his work was solely to supply Schmidt and his family with raiment. The second authority was Colonel [*Hauptmann*] Dale<sup>228</sup> in Częstochowa. He came to Żarki each week to receive what had been prepared for him during the course of the week - and not only food and clothing, but also valuables and money. The third authority was the Gestapo in Radom. We had no direct contact with them. We found out that, in June 1943, orders had arrived from Radom to the effect that we were all to be liquidated and, only due to the intercession of the first two authorities, were these orders not carried out.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> July, the house where we lived was suddenly surrounded and we were taken to the Synagogue, to be transported onwards from there. It must be noted that Izrael Borensztajn was, once again, miraculously able to convince Lieutenant Schmidt to allow the few Jews remaining in hiding to join us as well. Otherwise, they faced certain death. They, too, were sent together with us authorised ones - thanks to which they also survived. Among them were Mojsze Wolhendler with his wife and daughter, Hillel Goldman (now in Israel), Mrs Wajnryb, Zosia Dauman and others whose names I do not recall. All of them must thank Izrael Borensztajn z"l - who did not live to see the defeat of Asmodeus himself - for his last intercession.

While we were being held in the Synagogue, a freight lorry surrounded by Ukrainian guards was already parked outside to take us to an unknown place and direction. Three people among us managed to escape by jumping through a small window - Mojsze Zborowski, Mane Grundland and Lajzer Rottenberg. The first was, in fact, able to escape, but was later caught and killed by Gentiles. The two latter were captured by a farmer and his two sons, who took all their personal belongings and brought them back half naked and barefoot, whereupon they were immediately [made to] stand facing the wall. And once more, only thanks to the immediate intervention of Izrael Borensztajn, who had an extraordinary influence over Lieutenant Schmidt, were both of them saved. Mane Grundland did not have the good fortune to survive - still young, he was murdered by the Nazis sometime later. Lajzer Rottenberg, who passed through all seven lairs of hell - in the form of labour, detention and extermination camps - survived and is now in Israel, in Ramat Gan.

The freight lorry, carrying the last load of Żarki Jews, got under way and brought us to the camp for Jewish detainees in Pionki, in order to share in their bitter fate. Thus ended the sad chapter of the Jews of Żarki - a *shtetl* with thousands of Jews, with a way of life and traditions hundreds of years old - while, on the hearts of us all, were engraved the resplendent memories and images of the near past and the nightmarish and hellish images of the present, which was all darkness.

At this point, I wish to provide some details about the fierce struggle of one family in Żarki, which displayed monumental vigour, strength to resist [and] to overcome [difficulties] and evasive ploys

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<sup>228</sup> [TN: דאלע in the original; we have as yet been unable to ascertain the identity of this individual. It may be a nickname for Hauptmann Paul Degenhardt, who was Chief of Police in Częstochowa at the time.]

which were quite extraordinary in order to escape the claws of death – which, in the end, they were unable to do, as once they had succeeded in escaping from the claws of the Nazi vandals and hangmen, they fell into the hands of their own Polish friends, acquaintances and neighbours. This family's struggle may serve as a wonderful example of how great and mighty is Man's lust for life and what super-human strengths lay hidden within him, which are revealed when he stands before a threat to his very existence.

The Nunberg family consisted of a father, a mother and two sons. Back in the day, they had a lucrative tobacco, cosmetics and newspaper business in Żarki and their financial situation was very good. Even when the terrible events took place - including the liquidation in 1942 - they still managed to dodge all the tribulations thanks to their financial means, by paying off people right and left.

In the autumn of 1942, before the Żarki liquidation operation, the family was able to sell their property and move to Wolbrom, where there was still a handful of Jews, even after the first liquidation. Once the final liquidation ensued in Wolbrom, the family returned to Żarki. This time, however, they were forced to pass from more or less normal living conditions to a life in hiding. When those in hiding were permitted to join those being sent to Radomsko, they, too, were among them and, in Radomsko, they returned to a more or less regular life – as they still had their monetary means.

However, as I mentioned above, the concentration of those in hiding in Radomsko was no more than a German ruse to entrap them all in the one place. After a few weeks, the time came for the Radomsko ghetto's new liquidation and the Nunberg family, once again, managed - by giving a huge bribe to one of the gendarmes - to flee to Częstochowa, where a not very large Jewish ghetto still existed. Here, they found a relative, Abram Sojka, who assisted them in their new situation. Events also repeated themselves here and, some time before the Częstochowa Ghetto is liquidated, the family fled once more to Żarki. In Żarki, as described above, the thirty authorised forced labourers still remained, but they could not help the Nunberg family much, as any such attempt could have cost them their lives. After all the countless wanderings and tribulations, which they had experienced, the Nunberg family were already physically and mentally broken and shattered. To add to their misfortune, they had also run out of funds. With the little money that we collected for them, they were able to hide out with a farmer in a small village near Żarki. For many years, this farmer's daughter had worked as a maid in the Nunberg household. She now agreed to assist them in their time of trouble and to save their lives. This farmer's daughter contacted us and we gave her the money which we obtained for the family's maintenance.

But the day came when even the authorised Żarki Jews disappeared and the *shtetl* became "*judenrein*" [clean of Jews], whereupon the Nunberg family was left as if shipwrecked on the open seas, without any aid or support. With the Christian girl's help, one of their relatives, who was in the Zawiercie Ghetto, managed to send them a sum of money. Under these conditions, the Nunberg family somehow continued to fight for their existence – although, by now, their lives already resembled those of starving dogs. However, even in this manner, they were not permitted to carry on. The Christian girl - their helper and crutch - became embroiled in a row with her sister-in-law and she - in order to get back at her - ran to the gendarmerie to reveal the hiding place of the "*Żydzi*". The Nunbergs were able to get wind of this in time and, once more, they fled their hideout before the gendarmes came looking for them. Finding that they were no longer there, they arrested the farmer and his daughter and deported them from the village.

The plight of this family which, with the last of its strength, was trying not to succumb to death, then reached its tragic peak - winter was at its harshest and they were wandering about without a roof

over their heads. Nobody would take them in, as their money had run out. They had no other option but to try and hide in the woods, under the open sky. When hunger began to gnaw at them all, Mrs Nunberg decided to return to town, in order to attempt to purchase a loaf of bread. They would not sell her any at the bakery, as she had nothing with which to pay. On the edge of despair, she exited the bakery and, roaming about aimlessly, she came upon the family home where they had lived before the Holocaust. She entered the courtyard and, peeping through the window, she saw rooms filled with light and warmth. At the table, where she had once sat with her husband and sons, a Gentile sat with his family eating their supper. Memories of the past raced inside her, burning her mind with lightning speed. In this house, she had spent most of her life. It was here where she had raised her children, who were now sitting, together with her husband, freezing from cold, awaiting the chunk of bread that she might bring them – and she was so helpless!

Without much thought -half-faint as she was - she knocked on the door. Upon hearing the knocks, a Pole came to the door. His name was Maszczyński. He had always been known as a hater of Jews and had been the Nunberg family's competitor. She begged him to have mercy on her and her sons and to give her a loaf of bread. He showed her into the corridor and told her to wait, whereupon he went out and informed the gendarmes of her arrival. They came immediately and arrested the woman. The following day, she was taken to the cemetery and murdered. In vain, her family waited for her in the woods. In the morning the echo of a shot reached their ears, whereupon they understood that this shot had put an end to the suffering of a wretched woman and mother.

It was at this point that the bundle finally became undone. They did not wish to see one another in sorrow and suffering. The father and one of the sons went one way and the second son went the other. For a long time, they wandered from place to place in cold, hunger and utterly destitute. One day, the father and son came to Żarki. They went to see a Christian acquaintance to request his assistance and he, too, promptly informed the gendarmerie. They were detained and put to death the following day. The second son continued his wanderings, begging for alms and mercy and sleeping in the open air. One night, he sought refuge inside a haystack in a farmer's yard. He suddenly began to cough and this reached the ears of a Christian passer-by. He went to the owner of the yard and asked him who was hiding there. He [said that] he knew nothing and they both went to find out who it was and found the *Żyd*. The owner of the yard wanted to set him free, but the other man fetched the gendarmerie. He, too, was killed on the spot.

Thus ended the sorrowful episode of a fierce and audacious war of existence on the part of a entire family who did everything within and [even] above its power to overcome the devil's devices and the rule of the vandals, which was supported by all the haters of Jews wherever they were. Thousands upon thousands of our brethren displayed an extraordinary force of resistance, be it without means of protection, or [in] very few [cases] - holding weapons. The might of the accursed enemy, however, was far too great, as was the support he received from those who could have aided us, but did not wish to do so.

When we remember all these things, our hearts fills with sadness and our soul weeps unceasingly. We shall never forget you, our dear *shtetl* - with all our brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, the elders and the babes, who went to their doom without having committed any crime, but only because they were the children of Jacob, Isaac and Abraham.

In my mind, I see you, my poor *shtetl* - lying amongst the rubble, while all our treasures in you have become ruins. In our houses - yours - live our sworn enemies who, with glee and revengeful joy, assisted our oppressors, thirstily drank our blood and abused our [living] bodies and corpses.

In my mind, I wander around your deserted alleys and streets, searching for a mark and sign of your sparkling and bustling Jewish life in the houses, the study-halls and the synagogues - but it is all to no avail! Silenced are the voices of the running children, silenced is the melody of those praying and studying the Talmud in the study-halls and *shtieblech*. That special atmosphere, which enveloped the town on holidays and the High Holydays, has forever passed and vanished and one can no longer hear the raging arguments and the singing and rejoicing of the youth, who acted extensively to hasten the redemption of Zion.

How can we console you, our poor *shtetl*? We, the ones who witnessed your horrific destruction alongside dozens and hundreds of other cities and towns, shall not forget you and we shall carry the memory of your bitter and terrible fate in our wounded hearts evermore!

We, those who witnessed the annihilation of six million of our brethren and who, by some miracle, survived, after having experienced, with our own flesh, the full extent of their tragedy and suffering, are the most tragic of all generations in the history of Jewish martyrdom. We drank the poisoned cup to its dregs and there were moments when we reached the bottom of the abyss of despair. And yet, we may well find our consolation in the fact that, along with all that which we experienced, we have also had the fortune to be the first generation of the Redemption - the happiest of the seventy generations that had dreamed of deliverance and redemption. We are participating in the beginning of the Redemption [viz. the Messianic Times], in the labour pains of our old-new homeland. We witnessed the destruction and annihilation and we also witnessed the miracle of our people's revival and rise on our homeland's soil. In the building of our country and the flourishing of our homeland, we find our consolation. And not only in moments of agony and sorrow, but also in those of our rejoicing, shall we call you to mind, our dear *shtetl* and, with the perpetual tears in our eyes which are like memorial candles, we shall sing the words "*Am Yisrael Chai!*" [The People of Israel lives].

**Jakow Fiszer**