

The Last Days of Żarki

It is, with an aching heart, that I attempt to unroll the horrifying scroll of our town's destruction. It is, with my own eyes, that I witnessed what happened to our dear *landsleit* during the Holocaust. Yet I must already, at this point, state in advance that what I shall describe and relate here is absolutely nothing compared to what actually took place. Only one who has walked a large part of the long road of torments alongside our townspeople, the ashes of whose bones are scattered in the fields [and] death camps, and whose blood is still crying from the earth – only he may feel the horror of those days.

Destiny wished for a few of us to survive so that the scroll of the Holocaust of our *shtetl* Żarki should not be effaced. Revenge! This was the last word that fluttered on the lips of the victims before their souls left them. Yet our hand is too short to wreak revenge on those Gentiles whose hands are bloodied with the spilt blood of our beloved ones. The Polish murderers who, with open glee, collaborated with the Nazi, and whose hands are soiled with the blood of our beloved ones, are sauntering freely in Żarki. They are wearing their/our clothes and are living in their/our houses, which they have stolen from our brethren.

They enjoy the benefits of their crimes and go to church every Sunday in order to thank God for our destruction. We feel for you, our *shtetl*. We feel for your sons who were taken from you by force [and] for the half-ruined houses, enveloped in sorrow and agony, mourning for their builders who are no more. In the nights, in the wind howling through every street and alley, can still be heard the sounds of the bitter weeping of your children and babes, whose souls soared up in the death camps and were not able to return to their homes.



Market Day in the shtetl

Żarki was a typical Jewish town in all its customs and minutiae. There were no great magnates there [and] there was no lack of the utterly destitute. Everyone shared the worries for tomorrow and the circumstances of life forced them to work hard and, sometimes, make do with the bare minimum. The head of the household, his wife, and the grown children, all together pulled the yoke of livelihood. They could not always afford to bring their family members sufficient bread or clothes to wear. The Jews drew their livelihoods one from the other and engaged in barter with the peasants from the neighbouring villages. Market days held great importance in town and they sometimes constituted the source of income for the entire week.

In our *shtetl*, Market Day was Wednesday. Preparations for it usually already began on Tuesday. Vendors from the nearby localities would bring in their goods while it was still night, in order to take a convenient spot in the market square, for long hours standing guard against theft. Just like them, the locals also took their places with their stalls well in advance. The night before Market Day was a sleepless one in the houses of the tradesmen. On Market Day itself, Żarki took on the appearance of a crowded and bustling commercial city. In the morning, the peasants swarmed to the *shtetl*, some in vehicles and others on foot - each one bringing with him vegetables, fruit, fowl and cattle. With the money they received for their agricultural produce, they purchased the essentials at the Jewish shops and stalls and, when coins abounded in people's pockets, they also set their eyes on the glass, filling the taverns to capacity.

I see before me the *shtetl* Żarki, with the market square at its centre and the town's streets spreading out from it - [streets] mostly inhabited by Jews. The stream which wound its course through the *shtetl*'s houses, flowing [normally] most of the year round, would flood its banks with the thaw of the snows - usually between *Purim* and *Pesach*. You are reminded of its traditional lifestyle, with all its study-halls and Torah scholars and of the effervescent youth, with all its different organisations, which brought a new spirit and a new life to the town's tranquil and conservative atmosphere. And, upon all these, the tree feller has come. The *shtetl* was eradicated at the hands of the wild Nazi beasts and it is no more.

In our town, people were called by the names of their deceased²³⁰ parents, such as Szlojme Hena [after his mother], Duwid Jidl-Aron, Wolf Ajzik, [etc.]. Some were also named for their professions. All the people of the *shtetl* had, for the most part, been connected to each other like members of the one family since the times of our fathers and their fathers before them. It is, therefore, natural that there were internal disputes within the "family". Everybody took part in any events that happened in town, as they were of relevance to practically everyone. There was a custom in our *shtetl* that, when a pioneer travelled to the Land of Israel, he went from house to house to farewell friends and relatives. When the carriage took him to the railway station, the whole town saw him off with song and music.

Life flowed comfortably and peacefully in the town, surrounded by those pine forests where we had our outings. On the one hand, the *shtetl* maintained its traditions but, [on the other,] there was a widespread demand for culture and this was concentrated amongst the Zionist and pioneering youth groups and in the fine library which supplied books to anyone who desired them. Several times a year, amateur plays were put on in which, for the most part, in which were invested the best of their energy and talent. And the vicinity was [also] pervaded with Hebrew culture - the local youth [was able to] study a chapter of the Hebrew Bible and comprehend it well and most of them were fluent in Hebrew.

²³⁰ [TN: The custom among Polish Jews, from time immemorial, was to refer to people locally solely by their given names and that of one of their parents (usually the father, unless the mother was more famous), or in the case of a married woman, sometimes by that of her husband - or vice-versa - without mentioning their surname. This was done so regardless of whether the persons parent/spouse was living or dead.]

The *shtetl* Żarki, which lay between Częstochowa and Będzin, was noted for its magnificent scenery and was completely surrounded by woods, which lent it a distinct charm. These woods were a place for recreation on Saturdays and in the leisure hours, while the *Lag Ba'Omer* festivities were held there. They also served as a resort for vacationers, who came from the neighbouring large cities.

In August 1939, there was already an atmosphere of impending war. The holiday-makers, who were spending the summer in our town's health resorts, hastened each to his home and to his family. The craftsmen abandoned their workshops and roamed about in the streets to hear news. Jews stood in many groups in the middle of the square, arguing heatedly. There were those who maintained that the different rumours were false and that there would not be a war - Hitler would be given the [Gdańsk] *Corridor*²³¹ and everything would turn out alright.

In those days, a general mobilisation was called. Those Jews, who remembered the First World War, looked concerned. We, the young ones, felt that some adventure was approaching - and we anticipated what was to come with curiosity, mixed with a hidden fear. Colourfully painted posters already sprawled over the walls of the houses - a handsome Polish soldier with an anti-aircraft gun in the background, beneath which was written in the hugest letters: "STRONG, UNITED, AND READY".

At the stagecoach depot, young men gathered - Gentiles and Jews - who had been called up as reserves, with their families standing next to them. Here and there, one could hear a mother sobbing. Among those who presented themselves were many Jewish lads, some of whom later fell on the battlefield, [fighting] for the Polish motherland which betrayed them so severely. Among the fallen were Sergeant Josef Rottenberg (killed in Działoszyce), Pinches Grinsztajn, Enzel Rytterband, Mojsze Werthaus [?]²³², Emanuel Majzner, Aron Kenigsberg and Ajzyk Klizman. The last three were murdered in a POW camp while they were wounded. Already, a few days before the outbreak of the War, the town was like a pot on the boil. Everyone began to hoard food. Most essentials disappeared as if they had never been. An intensified traffic of Polish military passed through our *shtetl* on their way to the German border. In the fortnight preceding the War, movements continued day and night.

1st September 1939 was a Friday. Already at the break of dawn, we heard the far-off shooting of cannon, which reached our ears like the roaring of a colossal beast. The skies were overcast and, from within the mists, the sun looked pale, as if hesitating to come out from amidst the clouds. It was on that day that the greatest bloodbath in all of human history began.

The Polish radio stations, which reported around the clock, announced imaginary triumphs and bombardments on Berlin and Leipzig by the Polish Air Force. Not even one of us was ever able to sense the existence of even one single Polish aeroplane.

On that Friday night, a dreadful depression fell upon our *shtetl*. Jews hastily said their prayers, with hurried steps sneaking away from the houses of prayer, each to his own home and family. Darkness pervaded the streets. The houses were shuttered, lest a flicker of light should seep through to the outside. Late in the evening, the first refugees were seen in town. Gentiles, who had fled from the towns and villages by the German border, said that the German army had broken through the front. By the next day, Saturday 2nd September 1939, the retreat was already fully underway. In actuality, it

²³¹ [TN: Strip of coastline on the Baltic Sea which was in Polish hands, constituting Poland's only outlet to the open sea. As this corridor effectively separated the German province of East Prussia from the bulk of Germany, the Germans demanded control of the region, threatening Poland with war.]

²³² [TN: מורטס in the original Hebrew.]

was a panicked flight. The Polish soldiers - spent, shattered and famished - looted anything they could along the way. The Jewish shops were, of course, the first victims. At twelve noon, two German reconnaissance light aircraft appeared over our *shtetl*. They circled above us unmolested and returned west. They repeated this several times because there was, at the time, a large concentration of retreating Polish military in our town. Suddenly, a large, black aeroplane was seen plunging headlong from the blue sky, followed from afar by a long trail of more aircraft - like gigantic crows. This was a bomber squadron and it bombarded the *shtetl* from all sides. Dozens of houses were completely demolished and dozens were burned. Hundreds of people were killed or injured - among them many Jews, as most of the bombs fell in the town centre, which was inhabited by Jews. Dozens of families were left without a roof over their heads. When the bombing began, some of my friends and I were in the middle of the square. We were unable to gain shelter in time. Bewildered, we stayed put, lying flat on the ground. It is difficult to describe the sight that met our eyes once the aircraft had gone - dozens of corpses hacked apart and dismembered, pieces of torn limbs, severed feet and hands were scattered about on the ground. The wounded cried for help, but there was no one to aid them. Thus they died, suffering horribly.

I found my parents healthy and in one piece, together with the family of our kinsman Hendel Rytterband. We began fleeing in panic, following the Polish army which was retreating in chaos. We walked all night. On the way, we met many people from Żarki who were trying to escape. The roads were filled with displaced peasants, who had left the villages and were wandering on the roads with their livestock. Nearing the break of dawn, we reached the village of Biała Wielka, some 30 km east of Żarki. We intended to continue going eastwards, but it turned out that the German army had gotten there before us and that we were, in fact, already surrounded. For the time being, we hid in a forest, but the Germans shelled us incessantly, as there was a large concentration of Polish military in these woods. We spent two days in the forest, without being able to leave it. On the third day, we managed to extricate ourselves. As we had no other option, we decided to return home.

The first time we came upon the Germans was before Lelów. We were seized by mortal fear when we saw Hitler's soldiers in their immaculate uniforms, the clamour of their shouting voices resounding all around. We were apprehended by a patrol which, after a meticulous investigation, made us stand with our hands raised, facing a wall. We stood in this manner for a long while and, after an officer appeared on the spot, we were released and allowed to return home. We were detained several times along the way and, eventually, we reached Żarki tired, dirty and hungry. The town looked completely destroyed. No one could be seen in the streets. We made our way furtively through alleys until reaching our courtyard. From neighbours, who had remained in hiding places, we learned what had transpired in the *shtetl* in our absence. The previous day, Monday 4th September 1939, the Germans had gone from house to house, murdering innocent people. On that Black Monday, more than one hundred people perished - among them many Christian residents also. As our house had been partially destroyed by the air strike, we were put up in the house of the Rytterband family. We were afraid to go out of doors and a tremor passed through our bodies every time we heard the heavy steps of the soldiers as they passed by our house. On Wednesday 6th September 1939, the first orders came from the German occupying forces, which included, among other things, a warning that even the slightest transgression would be punishable by death. The Germans ordered the streets to be cleaned and cleared of the debris from the fallen houses which were obstructing the thoroughfare, and to open the shops. We buried the people who had been killed and everyone returned to his own work.

On Thursday 7th September 1939, several thousand Polish prisoners-of-war from the Seventh Division, who had surrendered in the woods of Złoty Potok, were brought to Żarki. The captives were held in the Christian church. There were many lads from Żarki among them, including Jews. Over the course of the entire week, they received hardly any provisions. My friends and I tried to bring the

Żarki lads food, but we were detained by a German patrol and taken inside. Over the course of the day, several dozen more were arrested until, in all, we were 26 Jews and 70 Christians - most of us young. That same day, at dusk, we were taken, together with all the prisoners-of-war, to Lubliniec, a town by the German border.

In Lubliniec, we were held in the barracks of the defeated Polish army. Our task was to clean the premises thoroughly and prepare them for the Germans to live in. We laboured arduously all day long and, instead of food, we received murderous beatings. As evening approached, we were taken to the railway station, where we were loaded onto freight carriages, eighty men in each carriage. As we boarded the carriages, we were hit and kicked by the German soldiers. We travelled for two days, without food and water, until arriving in Lamsdorf [Łambinowice], near Breslau [Wrocław²³³]. Following a march of several kilometres, we reached the camp. This was an old POW camp from the First World War, with a cemetery of Russian POWs from those days. There were also headstones with the names of Jews who had died in captivity. We stayed in Lamsdorf for a little over a week. They separated us from the POWs and moved us to other civilian captives - mainly Jews from different border towns and, together, we were sent to Nuremberg. During the entire journey, which took some four days, we were not given any food or water, so that we arrived in Nuremberg debilitated, weary, and famished. When they led us from the railway station to the camp, we passed through the city. The Germans stood *en masse* in the streets, looking at us as if we were exotic animals. We walked with heads bowed, not daring to raise our eyes. The camp was outside the city. This was the place where the members of the Nazi Party assembled every year for a congress and listened to the speeches of Hitler, may his name be obliterated. It was here that the infamous Nuremberg Laws originated. There, we were put up in huge tents - 150 people in each tent. There were 304 of us Jews and we only had two tents at our disposal. Discipline was extremely severe. We were beaten and suffered hunger.

Once the invasion of Poland had been completed, General [Wilhelm] Keitel and Julius Streicher visited the site. They photographed us in all kinds of demeaning poses and their pictures were then published in *Der Stürmer* [The Striker] - a distinctly antisemitic weekly, whose editor was Julius Streicher.

Two months passed and we were, once again, loaded onto freight carriages - seventy people in one carriage - and were sent, as it were, back to Poland. They told us that, once there, we would be released. Each person received one kilogram of bread for the journey. Convinced that we would be home in two days, we no longer took care to save our bread. Ravenous, we ate it all. But, instead of two days, we travelled for nine days and nine nights. We arrived in Kraków and, without stopping, continued eastwards until nearing Przemyśl. The Germans wanted to transfer us to the side of the Russian occupation but, after the Russians refused this, we were taken back to Kraków and, from there, to Czechoslovakia, until reaching Oderberg [Bohumín]. There was no place for us there either.

After nine days of travelling without food or water, we returned once again to Kraków. This time, they disembarked us from the train. Worn out and sick, we could barely stand on our feet. It was an autumn day. It rained relentlessly and we were wet to our very marrow. We held each other up with our last strength, in order not to collapse. The Germans took us to Bonraka, near Podgórze [a District in Kraków]. We were put into shacks, where the crowding was horrendous. No one tended to our needs and we saw that we had been utterly abandoned and forgotten in the world.

For two days, I was in this hell. On the third day, at daybreak, the Germans allowed us to go out into the yard, in groups of twenty, to get a little water for ourselves. I managed to go out with the very first group. When I went out, I began to observe the place and became acquainted with it because,

²³³ [TN: Łambinowice is at a distance of about 90 km from Wrocław.]

when we had arrived, it had been evening and I could not see it. It was a narrow yard which contained a row of four shacks and was surrounded by a tall barbed wire fence, with German soldiers standing guard on all sides. In my heart, I decided I would not return to the shack - even at the cost of my life. I no longer had anything to lose, as I had grown loath of life and had not the strength to bear it. I took advantage of the opportunity that the Germans were occupied with guarding the people emerging from the shacks and I cautiously began to distance myself towards the fence. My friend Szlojme Kwin²³⁴ followed me and thus we managed to reach the fence. It was a cloudy and rainy morning. We crossed the fence and reached the road leading to Kraków. There was quite a lot of traffic on the highway. Labourers hastened to their work. We mixed in amongst them, with nobody noticing us. We found our way to *ul. Krakowska* in Podgórze.

Next to one of the houses stood a woman, whom one could tell was a Jewess. We approached her and, in a few words, I told her who we were and where we had come from. The lady took us in and gave us some of her own bread, which was locally already in scarcity. We cleaned our faces and washed our clothes in order to not arouse suspicions with our unusual appearance. Later, when we came to the *Judenrat*, we discovered that, that morning, a few others among our friends, who had attempted to escape from the camp, had been caught by the Germans and had been shot on the spot. We rested for a few days in Kraków and then decided to return to Żarki by foot - a distance of some 150 kilometres.

I shall not describe the adventures along the way. Upon arriving in Żarki, we discovered that, in town, they had assumed that we were dead - as no one knew what our fate had been after we had been captured by the Germans. In those times, there were many instances in which Jews were taken by Germans to undisclosed locations [and] murdered and their place of burial is unknown. I told several parents about their surviving offspring and gave them their location. Our escape from the camp aided those who had remained imprisoned there, because their parents organised themselves and sent couriers with food parcels for them. After about two months, the Germans released everyone, after receiving a ransom of hundreds of thousands of *złoty*.

The winter of 1940 and the financial situation became more difficult from day to day. Many Jews became destitute. The Germans impounded all goods. Our *shtetl* was based mainly on the leather industry, which was now the material most sought after by the Germans. It was put entirely at the disposition of the army. The merchants, who ran their businesses clandestinely, did so at the risk of their lives. The number of providers diminished and many families suffered the torments of hunger and cold. Winter was harsh and there was nothing with which to heat the houses. The situation of the Christians, compared to the Jews, was good as they received extremely high prices for their wares. The Polish hooligans rose to greatness - cheering for the new regime, collaborating with the Germans in every way and exerting themselves to make the life of the Jews miserable.

In that period, the *Judenrat* began to be organised. One of its tasks was to arrange for forced labour. Hitherto, the Germans had gone out every morning into the street and captured, for work, any Jew they happened upon.

The *Judenrat*'s second action was the collection of funds to pay off the ransom which the Germans had laid upon us.

In 1940, German colonists reached the town - their *Fifth Column*, who lived in several villages near Częstochowa and who were ethnic Germans. They took upon themselves the duties of police. They went about armed in the streets and their main activity was wreaking revenge on Jews. The curfew, which had been in place from the onset of the War, was now more strictly enforced. The Jews were

²³⁴ [TN: קוויין in the original Hebrew; this surname does not seem to appear in any of the official Żarki records.]

not permitted to leave their homes after dark. They [viz. the *Fifth Column*] were the ones who brought with them the decree to wear the Star of David symbol over one's clothes. Doing trade became more difficult, because all the roads were more keenly guarded. Our plight worsened from day to day. Cultural life came to a complete stop, as all gatherings were absolutely forbidden. We worked arduously in all kinds of labour, such as making roads, building bridges, etc. The *Judenrat* organised a Jewish police, whose duty it was to see to it that the Germans' commands were accurately carried out. Upon them also lay the responsibility of supplying Jews for forced labour. In that period, they began sending Jews far away, to different labour camps. One could free oneself of this yoke by giving bribes, wherefore the first to be sent to the camps were the poorer people. One such camp was in [the village] Zarębice near Przyrów, surrounded by a large area of swamps. Our task was to drain the swamps, in order to make the work of the farmers easier. We laboured gruellingly from dawn to dusk, standing all day long in water. The rations were those of starvation: one slice of bread and a few potatoes a day. A few among us fell ill and died within a very short time. The *Volksdeutsche* [viz. ethnic Germans] who stood guard over us knew how to make our lives miserable, and they tormented us with all kinds of torturous beatings and murder.

In January 1941, the police was replaced by the German gendarmerie, which was made up of true killers. During that period, orders were issued to the effect that Jews were prohibited from leaving the *shtetl*. Anyone caught outside it was shot on the spot. There were several victims among Jews who went to the villages to procure a little food, as the peasants now avoided coming to town. In that same period, Jewish refugees from Płock arrived in Żarki. When these fellow sufferers were brought in to us, the density of people increased even more. We strove to continue living life under all these circumstances. A livelihood was scarce, there was no sign of a cultural life or schooling for children, and people lived in fear of death and with anxiety as to what tomorrow would bring.

Spring 1941 - German battalions began passing through our town, moving incessantly day and night (Żarki was on an important crossroad). These were preparations for the invasion of Russia. As they passed our way, they confiscated horses, cattle and grains from the farmers. Our situation now became extremely bad, as it was difficult to obtain food even for money - there was hardly any bread to be found and dozens of families suffered the torments of hunger.

June 1941 - the Germans had already infiltrated Russia and the War spread more and more. The Germans were victorious on all fronts. Christian railway workers recounted that, every day, the Germans were transporting tens of thousands of POWs to Germany in sealed freight carriages. Rumours came about the murder of Jews in Eastern Poland, in the districts conquered by the Germans. Hopes, that the War would soon be over, vanished. We were depressed and, with constant trepidation, we awaited what was to come. The Germans, intoxicated with their victories, embittered our lives, forcing us to perform slave labour and ruining us, abusing us relentlessly.

January 1942 - the Germans issued a new decree: Jews were not allowed to use fur garments and, whoever did not hand the furs over to the Germans, would be executed. The first victim was Mojsze Wajs. Walking down the street, he was detained by the gendarme Siebert. Under his coat, he was wearing a fur waistcoat. The gendarme noticed this and killed him on the spot. This was on 4th January 1942.

In the spring of 1942, attempts were made to set up a horticultural farm in our *shtetl*. The goal was to attach part of the youth to this site, concentrating them at a training point. Comrade Josef Kaplan, a member of the *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* Central Management in Warsaw, came to us. Together with the local members, he influenced the men of the *Judenrat* and obtained their assistance. The point was established within the grounds of Praszki's factory. The young men worked on a piece of land, preparing it to become a vegetable garden. Szmul Borensztajn gave his money for the purchase of a

cow. The lads lived on site and, among them, were my brother Lajbel. Now, the opportunity arose to renew and arrange a cultural life, albeit clandestinely, of course. Sadly, the point did not last long, as the Germans soon found out what was taking place there. After a short time, the point was liquidated and the people were forced to disperse.

In the summer of 1942, they deported the Jews from the small towns near Żarki - Janów, Przyrów, Olsztyn and others. Utterly destitute, they were forced to leave their places of abode and were put into the Częstochowa Ghetto. Fear accompanied our day-to-day live, and we knew that we, too, were facing the bitter fate of being deported from our locality.

Summer came and went. The High Holidays approached. We asked ourselves whether we would still be spending these holidays in our *shtetl*.

The autumn of 1942 was warm and bright - more beautiful than in all previous years. It seemed as if Nature herself were taking pity on the remaining sufferers in the ghettos, by sweetening their last days. The sun sent out its warm rays like a mother caressing her terminally-ill child.

In the town's streets, the Jews ran about, setting their minds on solely one thought - how to escape, how to save themselves and their families. This was during the *Ten Days of Repentance*²³⁵. The preparations and the exaltation that we remembered from the pre-Holocaust days were absent. In the Jewish houses disorder reigned. Women went about in a daze and no one gave thought to the approaching holiday. On Wednesday, Market Day, peasants from the entire surrounding area rallied round. This time, they had not come to sell their produce for the Jewish holiday - they had come to "buy". They gathered in their multitudes to get back at the Jews. The day they had yearned for so much had finally arrived. This time, they were already drunk in the morning. Sardonic leers pervaded their features and their gaze was like that of wild beasts of prey. And they swooped in on everything, like crows. Buying almost for free, they made off with anything they could lay their hands on.

"Sell, sell, Żydzi! This time round, we will be the merchants! Generation upon generation, you have sucked our blood - now, we will take everything back. Today, we will still pay a few *złoty*, tomorrow we will take it for free."

There were some who went inside the houses, pointing out the flats that appealed to them, as they talked loudly about the changes which they planned to make to the rooms - once the Jews had been deported.

We stood by wordlessly, with bleeding hearts. We looked at the walls that had become barren. In every corner, an object was missing - a piece of furniture or something Mother had embroidered before her marriage. All the belongings were dear to us - each one reminded us of some particular thing. After all, we had grown up with all these possessions - they were like part of our own selves.

News of the deportation of Jews from cities and towns arrived from throughout the entire surrounding region and we knew that everything was finished. The *End* had come. Jews shaved off their beards in a bid to appear younger, in order to be selected for [forced] labour. With tears, they parted with the beards which had graced their countenances all the years. It was as if they were offering up one last sacrifice to that horrifying Molech²³⁶. They sneaked about ashamedly in the *shtetl*'s backstreets, so as not to look into each other's faces. There were also some exceptions - pious individuals who did not forgo their beards. They would tie them up with a bandage and pretend they had toothache.

²³⁵ [TN: The ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur.]

²³⁶ [TN: Biblical name of a Canaanite god to whom children were sacrificed.]

One day followed the other. All kinds of rumours arrived - good and bad. Jews neglected their occupations. Hundreds of plans emerged every day and, in the end, they would raise their eyes to Heaven as if, from there, their redemption would come. And so *Yom Kippur* arrived - the last *Yom Kippur* in our *shtetl* Żarki. All my life, I shall never forget it. The town's synagogues had already been destroyed by the Nazi murderers during the first days of the occupation. The Jews prayed clandestinely in private dwellings.

Like most of the youth in our *shtetl* who belonged to the [*Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*] Movement, I distanced myself from religion. Already by the age of thirteen, I had ceased going to the synagogue. This time, it was my father *hy''d* who convinced me to attend prayers and to also fast. Who knows? Perhaps he thought that this was the last hope. I am not ashamed to admit that I, too, desired to believe that a higher power would save us at the last moment - that a miracle would take place and that the decree would be annulled. We were as ingenuous as children.

And so I went to pray *Kol Nidrei*. I attended the prayer at the house of Mojsze Winter, who was mourning the death of his wife Bajla *z''l*. I should be committing a misdeed if I do not say, at least, a few words regarding this family. Who does not remember this exceptional Jew? In the *shtetl*, we called him "*Mojsze Feldscher*" [Barber-surgeon] - as in those days, it was part of a barber's duties to have some knowledge of medical science as well. He was an expert on suction cups and whoever could not afford to call a doctor, sought a cure for his ailment with *Mojsze Feldscher*. He was always ready to help anyone. And that same Mojsze Winter was a penniless Jew, with a large family to look after. Who does not remember this warm-hearted, top hat-wearing figure? He was a good Zionist. On Friday afternoons, all the craftsmen gathered at his barbershop where, in addition to a shave and a haircut, they came to hear the news and to talk about politics. German gendarmes also frequented the establishment. Sometimes, one of them would let a word [something] slip and, afterwards, a discussion was held on the topic, with each one trying to interpret the utterance, be it favourably or negatively. Of Mojsze Winter's entire family, no one survived. All of them were annihilated by the murderers.

As said, I went to his house for *Kol Nidrei*. The prayer-leader was Junis [Jonas?] Ajberszyc *hy''d*, our neighbour, a religious man who had a large family. None of his family survived either. That was the first time that I had heard him pray. It was not a prayer, but choked weeping and, when they heard the words, "*Hear our voice, O Lord our God - spare us and have mercy upon us*", the Jews cried aloud and were drenched with their tears. Have you ever seen elderly Jews weeping like children? That is what transpired the entire *Kol Nidrei* service. The following day, on *Yom Kippur*, not a single Jew could be seen on the street. The gendarmes were running about like beasts of prey, searching for Jews to send to work and I marched on my way to the prayer service, with my mother's prayer-book concealed in my armpit, under my coat. At Mojsze Winter's gate, I was detained by two gendarmes - Goetz and Siebert. All those who remember them may well imagine to what a welcome they treated me. The prayer-book flew to the end of the street and, with kicks and insults, I was led to work in the gendarmerie's yard. By then, I was accustomed to meetings of this kind and I was also no longer surprised by forced labour - yet what happened to me on that *Yom Kippur*, I shall never forget. After a forced day of fasting, I returned home dirty, exhausted and humiliated beyond words. At the close of *Yom Kippur*, refugees began arriving from Częstochowa, where the deportation had already begun - and they told horrific tales. We felt the noose tightening around our necks and there was no way out. This time around, no one thought of erecting the traditional *sukkah*. The [usually festive] meal, at the close of *Yom Kippur*, seemed more like a wake. The food stuck in one's throat with every bite. We sat in silence, each with his own thoughts.

We began packing bundles, in case of an emergency. Each of us entertained a faint hope. Who knew? Perhaps they would do us no evil - perhaps they would only deport us to a labour camp? Even

though there were already rumours regarding absolute extermination, we chose not to accept them. In our subconscious mind, we were still hoping for a miracle. But, as it turned out, miracles were scarce for Jews in those days of 1942.

Thus the days of the festival of *Sukkos* passed. These were no days of festivity, but ones of mourning - days of fear for our bitter fate. In particular, I remember the last day of the festival.

Some of my friends and I went to Praszkie's grove, which all the survivors from Żarki definitely recall. We used to call this beautiful place "*Der Fabryczner Wald*" [The Factory Grove]. Here, we promenaded on moonlit nights. Here, romances were woven. Here, we lay down and dreamt. This place was the cradle of the organised youth and the members of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* and *Ha'Chalutz*, in particular. We had outings and gatherings there and we read books under the shade of the trees.

Also in that autumn of 1942, three days before the deportation, the grove still stood in all its glory as in former days - as if there had never been a war. It seemed as if the towering trees were whispering some secret, as if they were the only ones who knew what our fates would be. The birds still jumped from branch to branch, bursting into song. The day was bright and warm. The stream, with its gleaming, crystalline waters, wound its way like a serpent. Here and there, young "*shkutzim*" could be seen, herding their cows. When we passed by them, the cows looked at us with their innocent and melancholy eyes, as if sharing in our sorrow. And you think, that had they only been given the ability to speak, they would have said, "We are more humane than many human beings, as we make do with what *Nature* gives us and we do not covet what others have". That day, we said goodbye to the grove - to our happy childhood. We returned to the *shtetl* in silence, each with his own thoughts. We felt powerless and abandoned, like baby birds which had not yet learnt to fly, that had fallen from their warm nest. We matured - and not in years - and from now on, everyone would need to fend for himself, to cut himself a path through the jungle of humanity, in order not to be devoured.

The day of the deportation came - 6th October 1942. The previous day, news already reached us regarding a concentration of horses and carts. The police and the fire department were put on standby. Our fate had been sealed. We no longer had any illusions. Jews, mainly young ones, attempted to flee the town in small groups. Few succeeded, many were caught. I had not contemplated escape to begin with. I found it extremely difficult to abandon my parents and my sisters, as I was the only remaining son at home (my brother Lajbel had successfully escaped a week earlier). My parents, especially my mother, implored me to flee for my life - "Go, my son!" - she told me - "My heart tells me you are sure to survive!" Indeed, her loving heart of a mother was able to see the future. Father wept. That was the first time I had seen him weep. He was completely shattered and he seemed to have aged quite a few years. "You are all grown up already", he said. "I raised you as best as I could, but there is nothing you can do to help us. I wish I could help *you*, but I am powerless to do so. Let us hope that, at least you, my son, will make it out alive". And with an inaudible murmur [of prayer] on his lips, he accompanied me to the gate. My elder sister, Cypora, was bedridden that day. Pesla, my younger sister, accompanied me to the rendezvous point at Lejzor Krzanowski's yard (he is still alive today). That was where my best friend, Szlojme Kwin *hy''d*, was living at the time, after their house had been destroyed by a bomb on the second day of the War. We were joined by my friend Szlojme's two brothers, Lipa and Tujja - three members of a family from which no one survived.

In all, we were eight lads and one girl. The names of the others were Hercl Borensztajn, Szmul-Josef Wajntraub, Mojsze Klizman, and Jakow-Majer Wajntraub, but I cannot recall the name of the young lady, as she was a foreigner in our town, having arrived with the refugees from Płock. She was Lipa Kwin's fiancée.

We set out on a search for an escape trail to blaze for ourselves. The *shtetl* was already sealed off by regiments of Ukrainian volunteers and Polish fire-fighters, police, gendarmerie and *milicja* [voluntary guard], who were organised from amongst antisemitic, Christian elements in Żarki. The latter, armed with sticks, pitchforks and axes, stood guard over every path exiting the town, so that no one should escape. After several failed attempts, we came back to town and we were about to turn each to his own home, when Hercl Borensztajn proposed we go back and try a new method.

You will remember the stream passing through our town. Leśniówka was its name. It wound its way through the courtyards and the houses between the Synagogue and the *mikvah*. This is the route we chose. We began wading along the course of the stream and were thus able to exit the town. At nightfall, we reached the hamlet of Przewodyszowice - a poor, little village scattered amongst the rocks. In times of peace, we made excursions to this vicinity. This time, we needed to be careful of the antisemitic peasants, lest they should notice us.

In those days, a small labour camp existed at the end of the village, where fifty Żarki residents lived - the majority of whom were Jewish youths, who had been able to bribe the *Judenrat* with thousands of *złoty*, hoping that, there, they would suffer no harm at the hands of the Germans.

Tired, soaked and famished, we arrived at this place. We wished to rest a little with them, but the people of the camp did not allow us to sit next to them, as they feared that, on our account, they, too, would be jeopardised. We distanced ourselves from there filled with bitterness and we planned to spend that night in the hills. Shortly afterwards, we heard shots and yelling from the direction of the camp (which was no more than a large barn) and we understood that the police had come to take the Jews back to town. As we later discovered, that night, everyone was brought back - also from the Złoty Potok camp - and most of the people in these camps perished.

Nearing dawn, the *akcja* took place. With our last strengths, we began to flee, and to distance ourselves from the village. On the way, we met several families heading towards Lelów. We joined them, but we soon lost them in the dark. We chose Lipa Kwin as our guide, due to the fact that he was familiar with the entire area. We walked all night and got inextricably lost in the woods near the village of Zdów. Only as morning approached did we meet an old farmer who, upon hearing that we wished to reach Lelów, told us that in Lelów they were now driving all the Jews out of their homes and transporting them to an unknown destination. It turned out that all the Jews, who had come that night to Lelów, had been captured by the Germans and not one of them had survived. Among them was Josef Zielonka *hy''d*, Chairman of the Żarki *Kehilla*.

We hid all that day in the forest and, only in the evening, did we start walking towards Pilica. Peasants fell upon us along the way and robbed us and, the following morning, we reached Pilica exhausted, hungry and thirsty.

The deportation had already taken place in Pilica - only some thirty local Jews remained there. We hid in the attic of the *mikvah*. The Jews of Pilica did not aid us in any manner - quite the contrary. The Jewish *Ordnungsdienst* policemen hunted us down, thinking that, in that manner, they themselves would be saved. My brother Lajbel, too, was captured and sent to the Płaszów concentration camp. In Pilica, we met several Jews who had managed to flee our *shtetl* and they told us about the deportation from Żarki.



Jakow-Mojsze Korcfeld

At six o'clock in the morning, all the Jews were driven out of their homes and whoever did not comply was shot then and there. They were taken in peasants' carts to the railway station in Julianka, near Janów and, from there, they were transported in freight carriages - 200 people in each carriage - to the extermination camp in Treblinka. Numerous Jews were shot to death in their own homes and, among them, ailing individuals who could not rise from their beds. The daughter of Mojsze Krzepicki, who had given birth that night to her firstborn son, was also shot in her bed by the gendarme Goetz, with her baby in her arms. At his hands, Jakow-Mojsze Korcfeld also fell. He was shot and killed in our courtyard. A few days earlier, his younger brother Herszl Korcfeld had also been murdered in the yard of the local [municipal] council. That day, I was working at the council's building. I suddenly heard a shot, peered out the window and saw Herszl collapse, wallowing in his own blood and, next to him, stood the gendarme Siebert, holding a smoking pistol. I knew the Korcfeld brothers well. Honest lads and proud Jews. They were always prepared to defend a Jew's honour. I recall how, in the summer of 1938, a group of antisemitic hooligans arrived in town and began terrorising the local Jewry. Before long, Jewish lads - among them were the Korcfeld brothers - made an appearance and they beat the rioters until they bled, driving them away in shame. Jakow-Mojsze Korcfeld was arrested on that occasion and he was also sentenced for daring to protect himself and the property and honour of the Żarki Jews.



Herszl Korcfeld

We were given no repose in Pilica either. Hundreds of survivors from the surrounding area gathered there and rumours of a new *akcja* spread. Once more, I escaped at the last moment to the woods. In the chaos that ensued, we lost one another in the forest paths and only two of us remained [together] - Jakow-Majer Wajntraub and myself. Together, we roamed about the countryside and woodlands and, for days on end, no food reached our mouths. Thus matters continued for over a month until, despairing and shattered, we decided to return to Żark, where, according to rumour, a few dozen Jews remained - mostly members of the *Judenrat* - and we thought that we might be able to hide amongst them.

I came to Żarki on my own, after Jakow-Majer left me in the village of Jaworzniak, saying that he wished to cross the border to Będzin with the aid of a Gentile of his acquaintance. Six weeks after the deportation, I arrived in Żarki during the night. The town looked like a graveyard. Houses, where generations of Jews had lived, now stood ransacked and broken into. From afar, one could hear the creak of a shutter turning on its rusty hinge, emitting a faint wail, as if mourning the destruction.

I came up to our house, where I had been born and bred. I remembered the good times, when I used to come home late and find a white bed already made, waiting for me. This time, everything seemed different. The house was like a sombre mass of darkness, jutting out from among the lower houses like a huge grey tombstone. When coming home, I would always jump up all the stairs. This time, I was seized by fear as I ascended. The door was broken [and] the rooms were without windows - they had probably been taken down by the Christian neighbours, who swooped in on the vacant dwellings like crows. On the floor, an array of objects was scattered - smashed crockery, pots, feathers, [etc.]. My heart shrunk inside me and I ran away as if pursued by demons. I went down to the stream, which flowed through our courtyard and, for a long time, I wept silently.

That night, I made several attempts to seek refuge with Gentile acquaintances - but all to no avail. I was driven away, in shame, from all places. Some pretended not to know me, while others threatened to hand me over to the Germans if I did not go away. For several days, I hid in the attics of abandoned houses and eventually returned to the forest.

Winter arrived. It began to snow. During the night, the frost was unbearable. More than once, I lay among the cows to warm myself and, sometimes, I even dreamt that I was at home, lying in my bed. The dream would soon be interrupted by the farmer, who entered the barn holding his torch and who drove me back out into the cold while it was still dark outside.

I lived this way through hard days filled with suffering - days of hunger and constant fear. More than once, I contemplated suicide, but I always changed my mind, for I did not wish to give the Nazi murderers any pleasure.

In December 1942, I arrived in the Radomsko Ghetto. Thousands of Jewish refugees, from dozens of towns from the entire region, were crowded into five buildings. It is difficult to describe the conditions under which we lived - dozens of people in one room and, more than once, I spent an entire night standing up. I was in that hell for almost a month.

The final liquidation of the Radomsko Ghetto took place on 6th January 1943. The previous day, squads of Ukrainian killers were positioned encircling the ghetto. All the yards were sealed off and one could not pass from one house to another. At six o'clock in the morning, we were driven out of the houses and led, in rows of five, to a large camp outside the ghetto. I marched alongside my brother Lajbel, who had managed to escape from the concentration camp in Płaszów. He had experienced many tribulations along the way. He was dressed in rags and was swollen from starvation. When I met him, I hardly recognised him. The torments and troubles, through which he had lived, had broken his spirit. My heart bled, seeing him and being unable to help him in any way.

We were made to stand in rows in the yard - 12,000 Jewish men and women, the majority of whom were young people in their prime. People, who had fought to survive for weeks and months, with the German murderers at their necks, now stood with extinguished eyes - defeated, starving, filthy, worn out and shattered, broken in limb and in spirit. I thought about my friend Szlojme Kwin and Rywka Kalkopf, who had remained in the ghetto inside a bunker. They had implored me to stay with them also, but I had not wished to [do so]. I no longer had the will to fight and I also did not wish breathe my last breath in some foul-smelling hole. I decided to go to meet my fate and to be together with all the Jews in life and in death. As I learnt afterwards, the bunker was discovered and the several hundred people inside it, including Szlojme and Rywka, were put to death on the spot.

The German murderers went about among the files with their Ukrainian helpers, robbing watches and jewellery, which were taken by force from the hands of the poor victims. From among the rows, they selected mainly the younger ones - 175 in total - and I was among them. They made us stand at the other end of the yard. Nobody knew where they would be taking us. We stood and saw how the foremost rows began moving on their last way - among them were many Żarki Jews, including my brother Lajbel. I did not know what destiny awaited me. But it was clear to me that I would never again see my brother. Once the grounds had been vacated, many dead lay scattered about - mainly the elderly, the sick and the debilitated. Among them, I recognised Burech-Dawid Finkelsztajn, Berisz Borensztajn, Sura Rytterband (the wife of Szlojme Rytterband z''l), Izrael Pesak, who was wounded in the leg, and many, many more - may God avenge their blood.

We remained standing on the grounds until dusk. It was a cold, wintry day and a cruel frost stuck needles into our flesh. As evening approached, we were taken back to the ghetto. We were now 225 individuals because, to us, they added the Jewish policemen from the ghetto.

That night, we remained in the ghetto. The following morning, we were ordered onto trucks and transported to the concentration camp in Skarżysko. There, they separated us. A few others from our town and I were left there. The rest of the people were sent to two other camps in the vicinity.

I was in Skarżysko for nearly two years. Of the fifty people there from Żarki, only a handful survived. Among those who perished were Ajzyk Sztorchain (once our counsellor in the Żarki *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*), Mordche Szarf (the brother of Menachem Szarf, who is still alive), Pejsach Fajerman, Szyja Szwimmer, Abram Hagerman, Lipa Kwin, Josef Szmidt [and] Benjamin Bursztajn (the three latter were killed while attempting to escape). Many others died of hunger and diseases. I went through several other camps - Sulejów, Buchenwald, Schlieben and, in the end, I was liberated from Theresienstadt [Terezín] (Czechoslovakia) by the Red Army on 9th May 1945.

I saw our *shtetl* Żarki, once again, in the summer of 1945. Half of the town had been destroyed and many streets had disappeared, as if they had never existed. From every stone, the Jewish blood that had been spilt by the Nazi murderers and their aides cried out.

I also went to see the cemetery. The number of its occupants had increased in a horrifying manner. Individual and mass graves were scattered everywhere. Even the deceased were granted no repose. The Polish residents had taken down the stone wall and the tombstones to use as building material. An old Christian woman went about inside the graveyard, herding some goats among the tombs.

The trees stood bowed down, their canopies rustling faintly - as if grieving for the centuries-old Jewish community that had been cut down and was no more.

Uszer Laudan
Hadera