

Sigmund A. Rolat  
As If It Were Yesterday



I was born in Czestochowa on July 1 many years ago. My grandfather operated a small school at Stary Rynek, where children were taught in the Polish language. For the boys and girls to be instructed in Polish rather than Yiddish, my grandfather needed a special license from the authorities. Ever the schoolmaster, he taught me how to count to 100 in Russian and he gave me a Kolo Swiata, an ingenious two part cardboard disk which, when properly aligned, showed you the capitals and other information for all the countries in the world. I must have been the only five year old boy in Czestochowa who could tell you that Bangkok was the capital of Siam, and that Siam was a kingdom.

My parents and my older brother Jerzyk were killed during the war. Both my father and Jerzyk died fighting the Nazis. I was among some 30 children who survived in the HASAG Pelcery Labor Camp to be liberated by the Russians in 1945.

Older people probably could tell you much more about Jewish life in Czestochowa before the war. From the vantage of a little boy, I actually remember a lot as if it all were yesterday. I remember a beautiful, vibrant, green city. For me, it was a metropolis. But when you came out of the train station, there were no taxis - only dorozki. There were no streetcars. The only public bus line operated from Nowy Rynek along the Alejas to the Park. The city boasted only a few three-story buildings, none of which had an elevator. It was an event for me to ride an elevator for the first time in Krakow.

By and large, the orthodox Jews were more concentrated in the Nadrzeczna, Garncarska part of the city. The beautiful Old Synagogue, with its famous frescoes by Prof. Willenberg, was there as well as numerous smaller temples and countless sztibus. There you found the yeshivas and the cheders. The language you would hear in that area was mainly Yiddish. As you would walk towards Nowy Rynek and Aleje and Kosciuszko more and more Polish would be heard and the younger the speaker the more likely he would be to speak Polish. As for me, I did not speak a word of Yiddish until I was brought to HASAG.

We lived at Aleja 6 where all our neighbors, certainly proud of their Jewish faith, would at the same time, consider themselves very Polish. They read *Nasz Przegląd*, a Jewish daily printed in Polish. Their children attended schools in which all subjects were taught in the Polish language even the religious instruction which in Poland was a very important subject. On high holidays we attended services at the New Synagogue at the corner of Wilsona and Garibaldi streets (now the Philharmonic Hall). But we also celebrated the Constitution Day on May 3<sup>rd</sup>. When our beloved Marshal Pilsudski died, there was pervasive sadness and mourning among the Jews of Czestochowa.

Jerzyk and I went to the Hebrew Gymnasium, the most prestigious Jewish school. Our school was at the corner of Dabrowski and Raclawicka. In 1938, a beautiful new building replaced it on Jasnogorska and we were so proud of it. My friend Eli Zborowski is a native of Zarki, a small town near Czestochowa. Presently, he is the President of the International Society for Yad Vashem. He told me recently that the proudest moment of his pre-war life was his admission to the Czestochowa Hebrew Gymnasium.

Under the Nazi occupation, Jewish children were not allowed to attend school. In our building Mrs. Madzia Horowicz organized clandestine classes for boys and girls. I was more upset by the prohibition against seeing movies my favorite pastime. The prohibition against Jews entering movie theatres was one of the first decrees issued by Hauptmann Franke, the German governor of Czestochowa.

One day, my "bona" (nanny) took me into Jasna Gora. I mostly remember climbing the high tower in the middle of which we passed the huge clock with its loud mechanism and booming bell. The day she chose for this expedition was Yom Kippur, when my parents and Jerzyk were in the synagogue.

Elka - my nanny - was Christian and she was totally devoted to me. If I quarreled with my childhood friend, Romek Einhorn, in the park, Elka would argue with his nanny. If our quarrel would lead to blows, Elka would get physical with Romek's nanny. Mostly, we played and the two nannies chatted away like the best friends they were. When the ghetto was set up, Elka refused to leave our household. The night before the big ghetto was liquidated, we left our apartment to spend the night in our Uncle Leon's factory for seemingly greater safety. Mother insisted that Elka leave the ghetto immediately. I would learn only later that Elka stayed on in our apartment waiting for her Zygmus and perished in Treblinka.

We, who lived here in Czestochowa during the war in the Ghetto, in hiding, in the HASAG camp carry with us some harrowing memories. Let me share with you two that will stay with me forever.



Ryneczek, the little market square, at the confluence of Warszawska, Nadrzeczna and Garncarska Streets formed the only entrance to the small ghetto. Here, labor details assembled in the mornings and here they returned at night, weary. Here, they were counted and searched by the Schupo Germans and their Ukrainian Werkschutz auxiliaries, all overseen by a fat Hauptwachmeister Ueberscher. Those hidden during and after the ghetto liquidation now would somehow have to be brought in through the Ryneczek gate. And that was accomplished - at times in harrowing and brave acts, always with risk. But hundreds and hundreds were brought in. Here I saw what no nice twelve-year-old boy should ever see.

I lived with my mother in a room at Nadrzeczna 88, in an apartment shared with others. My mother was lucky to find work in the so-called Moebellager. I was still quite short and small, and so, would be left in our room at Nadrzeczna with not much to do until the evening with all the other children and people without work, and no official right to live.

To save us from expected searches and selections, bunkers were built in most houses. Nadrzeczna 88, the biggest building in the small ghetto, had several. The first I used was in a big room on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor where you entered a wardrobe, of which the back moved aside to let you into a narrow space. We would spend entire days there, even on rumors of possible action of any kind. And we lived with rumors and alarms without let-up.

There was one bunker in the cellar, where we hid from before sun up till the evening. After we filed in, our families would block and disguise the entrance by throwing coal and garbage in front from floor to ceiling; and then, hopefully, free us at night before we suffocated. I did not like this bunker because one woman there had a tiny baby who would cry at critical times. And, in fact, that bunker was busted on January 4<sup>th</sup> with fatal results for all its occupants.

Mostly, I hid out in an ingeniously masked portion of the attic, which was large enough for some twenty people. It had a tiny opening that looked out toward the Ryneczek. This was the only source of air and light at which I now sat on the floor, on Monday January 4, 1943. During the night, we received fairly strong intimations of a pending action, this time more sinister than the usual rumors. Work details were to report earlier, Jewish police were ordered to seal off the hospital, public kitchens and the so-called Offices of the Jewish Council and the lights shone all night in the Wache building of Hauptwachmeister Ueberscher.

My mother tearfully embraced me in the morning, a ritual we already repeated many times as she and the other mothers left for work.

Always the first thing you remembered before you entered the bunker was to go to the bathroom because if you had to move to the pail on the far wall - especially if the German shouts were heard nearby - you risked being killed by your companions if only with their eyes. Second thing, you dressed in all the clothing you possessed to withstand the bitter winter cold in that drafty attic.

For a while, perhaps an hour, it was quiet. Then all hell broke loose. Loud speakers, trucks coming to a screeching halt. Everybody was ordered to come out and line up in front of buildings. From the trucks at the Ryneckek gate, jumped armed Ukrainians, several with gas masks. From the Wache, Ueberscher came out flanked by two Schupos and more Werkschutz guards. They all came into the ghetto, and with the help of the Jewish police, started dividing the people lined up in the snowy streets into two moving groups - both being pushed to the Ryneckek gate. The loudspeakers blared instructions to come out of the buildings, warning that all those found inside would be shot on sight. And now, we heard the first shots as the Ukrainians began entering houses.

At the Ryneckek, a military DKW car now arrived from which stepped out Lt. Rohn resplendent in a heavy army greatcoat and shining boots and his ever present companion Wachmeister Fritz known as Lalka (Doll). He was joined by Ueberscher and the other Germans in the center of the Ryneckek. They looked on as the Ukrainians herded the larger group of men, women, two with babies, in the direction of the trucks. Through a bullhorn, Ueberscher now ordered all the men and women working night shifts in the HASAG factories to assemble to the right of the gate.

It was at this point, incredibly, that my Uncle Leon raced in on his bicycle, and fearlessly strolled over to Ueberscher. He seemed short and thin and cold despite his leather jacket, but not afraid, as he gesticulated towards the massed group near the trucks. Somehow, he persuaded Ueberscher to walk with him towards the doomed people where he called out some names, and two men and a woman came forward. Ueberscher led them all to the Wache building and let them leave. I would later learn that Leon convinced Ueberscher that the three were working in his shop on a project for Captain Degenhardt, the Schupo Commandant. Leon had managed to rescue members of his resistance group.

People started climbing into the first truck. Shots continued to reverberate from inside the ghetto. The last group was walking through the gate along the barbed wire to join the doomed throng at the open trucks.

And then, suddenly, out of that group, jumped a young woman, a girl really, in a tight black coat. Blond hair flying - she threw her knapsack to the snowy ground, and she was brandishing a big butcher knife. She ran towards Lt. Rohn. As if by signal, from the HASAG night shift contingent, a young man darted to join her and... oh my God... in his hand was a pistol. A strong, beautiful, fighting Jew. In a flash, the two faced Rohn as the Germans and Ukrainians actually froze, and none raised their guns. The girl grabbed Rohn's lapel. The young man aimed his revolver inches from Rohn's face.

Eerie silence. I stopped breathing. Nobody dared move - not the Germans, not the Ukrainians, and not the Jews in one group or the other or on the truck. And then the girl's words brave, desperate, loud - "Brothers and sisters - fight! They are cowards - there are enough of us - kill them now. Fight, fight!" Incredibly Rohn raised his hands and so did Lalka. Terrified, meek, looking anxiously at the pistol aimed at him, he bellowed in a breaking voice; "Children - nothing will happen to you. I swear. Nothing will happen to you. You will..." Seconds passed, maybe a very long minute when clicks were heard all around as tens of guns were now raised. Lt. Rohn shielded his face with both hands as the Jewish fighter pulled the trigger. And pulled again. His revolver would not fire. A dozen guns now exploded all aimed at the young girl and boy. Another salvo, as they lay prostrate at Rohn's feet. And now Rohn, to display his manhood, drew a Mauser from his holster and shot into the two bodies. And kept shooting until his magazine was empty.

Within minutes, detachments of Germans crowded into the Ryneckek in troop carriers and on motorcycles. Oberleutnant Frankowski was now in charge. The trucks were quickly and brutally loaded up and left the Ryneckek. The remaining Jews were divided into groupings of men and a smaller one of women. Most of the men - a few hundred - were from the HASAG night shifts. I could see among them Moniek Dauman whose younger brother Idek was my friend.

A portion of the men was now lined up single file against the barbed wire as if for

execution. The rest of the men and women remained standing where they were. It was about noon. The weather was freezing. Oberleutnant Frankowski and Leutnant Rohn went into the Wache for lunch.

An hour later, they reemerged sated and cheerful. Frankowski flanked by about 20 Germans with rifles and sub-machine guns walked over to the Jews standing at attention at the barbed wire. As punishment for what happened here today - "Verbrechen und Frechheit" he called it, crime and impertinence - they all should be shot. But he will be merciful and spare the lives of most - only twenty would be shot. And he now proceeded to pick every fifth man. As he counted off, eins, zwei, drei, vier, funf, the riding whip now pointed at Moniek. Their eyes met for a second and Frankowski moved his whip to the next man.

The condemned twenty were led through the gate and lined up at the nearby house to face a firing squad of Germans and Ukrainians. One man tried to escape. He ran, and was nearing the corner of Kozia when he was hit by several rifle shots. He staggered a few steps and fell.

The other 19 were now executed.

That evening, I staggered out of the bunker to hug my mother and tell her what I saw. Someone near us said that the 20 men were buried with the young man and woman, and the history of the day's happening was buried with them in a sealed bottle. The day was described as Krwawy Poniedzialek - Bloody Monday.



The old house at Wilsona 34 is quite important to me. Long ago, the Daumans lived here, the Wisnickis too. There were no regular libraries in the ghetto. But here on the ground floor, for pennies you could borrow books. This is where I borrowed the exciting Karl May's Rodriganda volumes. The book most in demand was *Gone With the Wind*. When the big ghetto was liquidated, up there in the poddasze was a half way house. Children hidden in the Moebellager were brought to await a chance to be smuggled into the small ghetto. After many weeks in the Moebellager attic, I spent some ten days here. Some children languished here for months. Some died here.

The hideout was also used for children in the small ghetto for whom a place was found with a Polish family or a convent. They were the lucky few - how we envied them - and here they waited for the signal to cross over into the Arian part of the city and live. Here at Wilsona 34, I saw my brother Jerzyk for the last time.

Jerzyk was 18 when he was killed by the Nazis. To me he was always a giant - strong, handsome and very intelligent. We both attended the Hebrew Gymnasium, which I chiefly remember as a backdrop for Jerzyk's many activities and achievements. A brilliant student, he shone especially in the humanities - history, literature and languages. He was a born writer with several stories actually published. He won the first prize of *Swiat Przygod*, a weekly nationwide magazine, in which the prize-winning story appeared during the summer of 1939 - when he was 15 years old.

He excelled in sports and captained the school soccer team. In the school theatrical depicting a group of Jewish students in a tour of the more sensitive world spots of the 30s, Jerzyk played the student leader and guide. Leadership came to him naturally and easily.

It was obvious that in a confrontation with the Nazi murderers, Jerzyk would not suffer passively.

Unusually tall and strong for his 18 years, he joined a resistance group in the Moebellager-Garibaldi work detail, led by Machel Birencwajg and Leon Silberstein. All too little is known about the hundreds of Jewish lives (mine among them) saved during and after the liquidation of the ghetto in Czestochowa by Birencwajg and Silberstein. Even less is known of their daring acts of sabotage.

For one such action, Jerzyk was given the task of securing a full German officer's uniform, pistol included. Enlisting the willing aid of a pliant Polish female, he prepared

and planned meticulously. Above all, he had to avoid any tell-tale traces which could connect the deed with the ghetto Jews. (This overriding concern for his Jewish brethren would later, tragically, dominate the last hours of his life.) As planned, the incident started in the Old Park near Jasna Gora as an almost comical amorous tryst, in which the Nazi superman was chalking up another conquest. When it was over, the superman's body was found under a park bench and the resistance group had its German officer's uniform, revolver and even a riding whip as an extra.

On our most holy day, Yom Kippur 1942, the Nazis proceeded to liquidate the Czestochowa ghetto, and within a few days, deported some 40,000 men, women, and children to Treblinka. Among them was my father Henryk.

A very beautiful father-son relationship existed between Jerzyk and my father. It was he who instilled in Jerzyk his love of humanities, of languages, and who taught him Kipling's "If" in the original English. My father's deportation and presumed death was a shattering event in Jerzyk's life. As I was later to learn from survivors, our father took part in the final cataclysmic uprising in Treblinka. Too bad that Jerzyk was never to know this. His chief purpose now would be to avenge our beloved father. Up till now, the Resistance was a matter of form - the right thing to do - now the confrontation took on a new character. It was revenge, pure and simple; it was to kill the German beast!

Active resistance was becoming difficult in the aftermath of the ghetto liquidation. Those Jews who remained were confined to smaller, tightly guarded quarters. And so in the cold month of January 1943, Jerzyk joined a small band of like-minded friends - Jerzyk was the youngest at 18. Their objective was to move east to join up with the Jewish partisans or the Armia Ludowa.

I shall never forget the last time I saw him. It was the night he left with his friends. He was so tall, so manly, my brother. He told me never to forget who I was and never to forget what I saw and to be a good son to our mother. He smiled and he embraced me. Oh how I loved him...

The brave six boys fought their way east for several weeks. Alas, the Germans were not their only enemy. They had to contend with anti-Semitic Poles as well. Once tracked by the extreme elements, they had to turn back. Fully armed and loaded with grenades, they set up temporary camp at Wilsona 34 on the outskirts of the old ghetto. Their intention was to set out eastward once again the first week of April with the onset of warmer weather.

Some Jewish boys and girls survived the war posing as Christian children. One who did not survive was Mietek, my classmate and 12 years old on that wintry day in March when he was picked up by the Polish police and turned over to the Gestapo. He thought he would save his life if he told the Germans what they would surely want to know. Somehow, he found out about the Jewish partisans at Wilsona 34. Now he was telling it all to the Gestapo.

Within an hour, this place was ringed by the SS and the Wehrmacht. Through a loud speaker, the Jewish fighters were commanded to give up. It would have been easier to fight and kill a few Germans and die in a hail of bullets and exploding grenades. But the six young brave men knew what Mietek did not know: in the same building there was also a hideout for Jewish children.

Was it my brother's decision or a comrade's of his to walk out of that building so uncharacteristically with their hands up, but their heads ever so much higher? Was it the on the spot collective wisdom of the six youngsters to forego avenging death but to attempt to save the lives of Jewish children?

I only know that theirs was the greatest courage a man can muster. For in the night of torture that followed their capture, not one of them revealed his true identity or any names in the resistance movement.

The six, including my brother Jerzyk, were shot to death the next morning, March 19, 1943 in the Jewish Cemetery of Czestochowa.



I was a Pole whose religion happened to be Jewish. And then came the rude awakening. During the war, the Germans declared Jews to be Untermenschen and our Polish compatriots, with some notable exceptions, were passive, or worse. The horrors continued after the war. In 1946 Kielce and random violence. In 1968 - the coup de grace. Poland lost her Jews.

I was lucky to immigrate to the USA where I proved, as millions before and after me, what America is all about. A young penniless orphaned boy willing to apply himself, can receive the best education, prosper in business, and secure a solid place in society for his family. Only in America! But my roots are here. I am a Jew from Czestochowa. I wish my city well. May it prosper and grow.

I salute all those many wonderful people who turned a wish into a reality starting with Professor Berdowski and Professor Mizgalski and City President Wrona. I appreciate the early offers to participate of Ambassadors Christopher Hill and Shewach Weiss and Rabbi Michael Schudrich and Rabbi Mark W. Kiel, Konstanty Gebert, Professor Feliks Tych, which elevated our original, modest project to its present level. I am grateful to Elizabeth Mundlak Asch, Elżbieta Surma-Jończyk, Janusz Jadczyk, Jan Jagielski, Ireneusz Kozera, Professor Jarosław Kweclich, Professor Tadeusz Panecki, Mark Shraberman, Dr. Dove B. Schmorak and especially to my dear Piotr Stasiak for their untiring work and countless hours. My cousin Alan Silberstein and I are proud to be part of this distinguished team.

This book reflects pictorially our Exhibition "The Jews of Czestochowa." I trust that all who view it, old and young especially the young will shed a tear for the once vibrant community now reduced to a tiny handful. Let us remember Jan Karski's words: "For us Poles it was war and occupation for the Jews the end of the world".

How shall we judge the success of our project? A great philosopher wrote that those who fail to remember history are condemned to repeat it. It is my hope that our young visitors long remember the story of the Jews of Czestochowa.

*Sigmund A. Rolat*