

Testimony of Michał Lajzerowicz

Michał Lajzerowicz was born in Włocławek, in the Kujawy region of Poland, on 28th November 1927. Włocławek was a beautiful town on the banks of the River Wisła. The town was large, more than a kilometre wide. On one bank of the Wisła were very beautiful woods and pleasant places for leisure, and the town itself was something special, like a holiday resort. M. loved it there, and that is where he started attending school.

M.'s father owned a beer-bottling plant, where he filled bottles from large barrels. They had a large yard and a motor vehicle, and supplied the bottled beer to the entire vicinity.

M. was the youngest of five siblings. He had two brothers and two sisters. His two brothers were no longer living in Włocławek. One of them, Mietek, was studying engineering in Częstochowa (he became a textile engineer), and the other was studying electrical engineering in Łódź. As a result, M. hardly ever saw them. As his father was constantly on the road with his beer deliveries, M. spent most of his time with his mother and two sisters.

M.'s family was not religious, but traditional. His father would attend prayer services on Saturdays and holidays, and would take M. along with him. This was an enjoyable experience for him. While his father prayed, he played with his friends at the synagogue.

M. attended a state school, where both Jews and non-Jews studied. Most of M.'s friends were non-Jews. This was also the case later, when the family moved to Częstochowa, because the family lived in a non-Jewish neighbourhood.

The family moved from Włocławek to Częstochowa in 1936, when his father decided to expand his other business – the “Kawopol” coffee factory. The reason his father decided to develop his business precisely in Częstochowa was because it was his hometown, where he had been born and bred, and had family and many connections there, and had always been drawn to return there.

In Częstochowa, the family's situation was very good. They owned a coffee factory and lived in a fine, spacious, four-or-five-room apartment with hot water and all the commodities at ul. Nowowiejskiego 9. They went on holiday every summer to the woods and various holiday resorts and, in general, M. had a very good time. In the summer of 1939, M. was on his own, staying with his aunt in Wiśniowa Góra, near Łódź but, by September, he was already back in Częstochowa. He was about to start studying at *gimnazjum* [secondary school].

Being just a boy of eleven, M. was not very concerned with the rumours of impending war, but he did see German Jewish refugees that arrived in town, and heard news in his Betar youth group, which also organised aid for these refugees.

When the War broke out on 1st September 1939, M. was already back at home. Bombardments and shooting were heard, and the residents were in a state of panic, not knowing what was happening. And already on the following morning, the Germans entered Częstochowa.

There was a large Polish military base at the end of M.'s street, ul Nowowiejskiego, and M. saw multitudes of German soldiers march down his street towards this base, obviously to take it, and then be billeted there and have some rest.

M.'s father had served in the Polish army along with ethnic Germans, and M. grew up hearing favourable stories about them, so when he saw them enter Częstochowa and march past his house, he felt no fear or anxiety. He never thought they would do something bad to the Jews.

However, just days later, he sensed that things were not as he had thought. The Germans started running after Jews and put up all sorts of proclamations, that no Jew was allowed to leave the house, and that they were to yield forth all their valuable possessions – the jewellery and everything. The family had to go to a German collection point and hand over their radio, for example.

On one occasion, the Germans also entered M.'s house in a very violent manner, bringing some woman with them – apparently a *Volksdeutsche* [ethnic German] girlfriend of theirs. They pointed to one of the rooms in the house and said that that room would be hers. The woman lived with them for some time, acting as if she owned the place, and there was nothing they could do about it. Eventually, they were able to persuade her to leave.

The Jews were also no longer allowed to go about freely, as before. Now they had to wear a yellow patch with a Star of David. M. himself managed to sidestep these restrictions, because he did not look Jewish, plus he spoke perfect Polish and had many Polish friends. Before the War, he felt quite at home in the city's complex of Catholic sacred sites, the Jasna Góra neighbourhood. He now took advantage of his familiarity with the Poles, and his parents would send him out on all sorts of errands to the surrounding villages to maintain the family.

On one occasion, his father gave him a map from Damascus made of twenty-four sections with special seals to give to some farmer in Brzeziny, near Częstochowa, in exchange for a little flour and food products. Thus, sometimes on foot and sometimes travelling in carts, M. would procure for his family flour, a bit of meat, vegetables and anything he could bring them. He could do this because he did not wear the armband, and was not recognised as a Jew. In this manner, the household somehow managed.

Under these circumstances, M.'s father saw no point in remaining in Częstochowa with the Germans, who were ruining them. He thought they should flee from there – somehow travel eastwards, towards Russia. But, by then, M.'s eldest brother Mietek was an officer in the Polish army, and M.'s father was unwilling to leave Częstochowa, in case Mietek returned home and found them gone. So, they waited and waited for Mietek, but had no news from him.

M.'s second brother was still a student in Łódź at the time, and also never returned home. The family lost contact with him when the War broke out. According to what they heard afterwards, the Nazis apparently deported him and killed him, along with all the Jews of Łódź.

Although after the outbreak of the War M. no longer attended school, he continued studying privately with his older cousin, who worked with him on mathematics, Latin, reading and so on. She had a good background to tutor him, because she had a sister¹, also named Lajzerowicz, who was the well-known headmistress of a very large state school in Częstochowa.

Some six or eight months later, the remaining family members – the parents, their two daughters and M., the youngest child – were transferred to the Częstochowa “Big Ghetto”, taking just their clothes, bedding, personal effects and what they could fit on a handcart (there was no transport), abandoning their lavish abode with all its furniture and other contents to the Germans. Once in the “Big Ghetto”, M. was no longer sent on missions outside it. He wore the armband like all the other Jews and lived as they lived.

Before leaving their home in town, not knowing what would happen to them, M.'s father dug a large hole in the cellar. They now quickly put all their most valuable objects in a crate and buried it in this pit. After the War, M. would retrieve this crate and live off it.

At this point, M.'s eldest brother Mietek, the Polish army officer, also arrived in the Częstochowa “Big Ghetto”. He had been captured by the Germans as a Polish POW, but when they discovered he was a Jew, they sent him back to his place of residence to share the fate of all the other Jews there. He lived with his family in the ghetto, and was routinely taken to forced labour by the Germans.

The “Big Ghetto” was a large, two-by-two-kilometre fenced-off area, which encompassed the Third Aleja and all the streets of the Jewish neighbourhood. Before the War, 90% of the residents of this neighbourhood were Jewish, and it was the city's slums, where the marketplace was located. The rooms were not rooms and the buildings were not buildings. Everything was derelict, and there were no toilets or anything. There were some nicer buildings on ul Warszawska, Nowy Rynek and a few other streets, but not where the family received accommodation.

¹ [TN: Later in the interview, Michał says this headmistress was actually his father's sister – so perhaps she was the mother and not the sister of the cousin that tutored him.]

In the "Big Ghetto", the family was given a single detached room in a commercial complex that housed the very large "Belke" sausage factory, storage units, shops, workshops and some 15-20 apartments, where craftsmen lived and worked. The family was happy they were alone, even if they were living in just one room. In the larger two or three-room apartments, multiple families were forced to live together, sharing one kitchen, etc. Although, here and there, some people were sent off to forced labour in digging, construction work, cleaning, etc. most stayed in the ghetto all the time, which made living conditions very crowded.

Those sent to work were not paid any money, so they could not buy food, clothes etc. Some people, who before the War had lived where the ghetto now was, continued to operate their workshops or businesses clandestinely, but most people neither worked nor had any source of income.

On the one hand, it was not very convenient to live in the courtyard where the sausage factory was located, because it was operated by the Germans, and they continually walked about in the courtyard and came to take products away. But on the other hand, M.'s father was in good standing with the Jewish and Polish workers at the sausage factory, which now and then threw the family a bit of meat or fat.

There was also a one-room clandestine bakery in the courtyard, and M. and his father would help there a little. This bakery did not operate in a normal manner, because there was no flour to be bought. So, whenever someone somehow got hold of a few kilos of flour, he would come to the bakery and, during the night, they would bake bread with it and give him bread for the flour he had brought. At any rate, there was always a little left.

M.'s father was the *de facto* concierge of the courtyard, serving as watchman, cleaning and doing the odd jobs. Thus, the family somehow had food to eat, and even enough to help their less "fortunate" friends, who were starving.

One time, in the winter, M. went outdoors and was caught by the Germans for work, to dig trenches for sowing potatoes. After being caught once, M. was already on the list of workers and was taken repeatedly to work in other arduous jobs. But, most of the time, he endeavoured to stay and help his father as much as possible with cleaning the toilets, etc., so as not to fall foul of the Germans in the courtyard.

The Germans and Ukrainians entering the ghetto would often randomly beat Jews in the street or enter the dwellings and take anything they fancied. No one ever said anything – they were afraid. On the contrary, they hid.

There were also Jewish Ghetto Police. The Ghetto Police consisted mainly of volunteers, who thought that by aiding the Germans they would preserve their own lives. Some may have been taken by force. They wore police uniforms and were masters of the ghetto. There were good people and bad among them, but they all mistreated the Jews when the Germans were looking, to show that they were "working".

On one occasion, M. saw a group of Jewish policemen bring a fellow Jew into his courtyard. They beat him to near death and then shot him dead, all in front of M.'s eyes. Sometimes, they would come drunk into the courtyard, acting wildly, and started pulling people out of their apartments. M. avoided all contact with the Ghetto Police.

By this time, the Jews in the ghetto were already fully aware of what was going on. Many people were taken away in vans, never to return. It was obvious they were being killed. M. forgot what it was to be a child, and even his parents treated him more or less as an adult. His father was now very reluctant to go outdoors, and tried to stay inside the room as much as possible. M. went out whenever different errands needed to be run in other parts of the ghetto. He was his family's connection with the outside.

During this period, M. witnessed a horrifying scene in his own courtyard. A group of Germans seized a baby from its mother and played a game with it: they threw the baby up into the air and shot it.

On Yom Kippur 1942, the ghetto's Jews fasted and went to attend prayer services. At about ten or eleven o'clock in the morning, M.'s brother came home and said there was a great panic. The Germans were rounding up all the Jews at the synagogue and driving them to a gathering point at the Nowy Rynek, the ghetto's central square.

Within the hour, M. and his family were driven out of their room and herded along with all the other Jews to the Nowy Rynek Square. They took some personal effects with them and put on as many clothes as they could, into which M.'s mother had sown all the money they had in the house. Skilled labourers took their tools, thinking they would need them for work. Although they knew they would be deported, they still were not sure they would be killed. They were told they would be going to work, under good conditions. With tears in her eyes, M.'s mother told her family to look each to his own self and take care, for they would not be able to remain together, and that hopefully they would meet again after the War.

At the Nowy Rynek a selection was carried out. SS officer Degenhardt stood there, pointing left or right with his baton. M.'s mother was shown to the right (as it later emerged, to be annihilated). Seeing this, his father volunteered to join his wife and also went to the right. M.'s eldest brother Mietek and two older sisters were spared in the *akcja* and shown left – to work. M., the youngest at just fourteen, managed to sneak over to the group where his siblings were and reunite with them, but he was spotted fifteen minutes later by SS men and *Werkschutz*, who started leading him away with their rifles. They apparently needed a few more people to fill the train. Mietek clutched onto his little brother, but the guards beat him with their rifle butts and led M. off to the train to Treblinka, where he was crammed into a freight wagon with about 130 other victims.

The wagon had two small windows with barbed wire on one side, two on the other, and two doors. Once the wagon was completely full, the doors were locked and sealed from the outside. After standing for one or two hours, the train started moving. The journey took about two days, during which the doors were never opened and the people were not given any water to drink. The crowdedness was unbearable. Everyone wanted to be near the windows, so the stronger climbed on top of the weaker. There was obviously no possibility of using a toilet. Each person found his own little space where he could stand, and no one said anything. No one escaped from M.'s freight wagon.

Thus, they arrived in Treblinka. The doors were suddenly opened, and Ukrainians and SS men shouted "Everybody out! Let whoever doesn't feel well stay put – he will be taken to hospital." Despite the state he was in, M. somehow managed to run in the direction they were shown. There were sheds in front of them, and also railway tracks and an earthen platform. They were led inside the camp and made to sit Turkish-style on the ground, next to the sheds.

The women were ordered into the sheds, while the men sat outside. Shortly afterwards, the women emerged from the back of the shed already undressed, and were led towards the crematorium. Then the men were ordered to strip. M. was an avid stamp collector, and as he started to undress, he took out from his breast pocket a small album of precious stamps. An SS officer – obviously an enthusiast of philately himself – noticed the album and took M. to one side before he finished undressing and asked him to show him the stamps. He looked at them at length, murmuring, "How beautiful, how fine these are..."

The SS officer told M. to go over to a group of twenty or thirty people that had been selected for work. The Germans needed experts in textiles to sort the clothes according to different materials.

Meanwhile, the rest of the men had already undressed and were made to run holding their clothes and other effects, while being savagely beaten non-stop with clubs and whips. They had to throw their clothes and bundles on huge piles in an immense yard, and then run back and do the same with the women's things. There were orderly mountains of shoes, eyeglasses, clothing and other personal effects in the gigantic yard. Then the screams of the women were heard from the crematorium. They continued for two or three minutes, and then all was still.

There were some two hundred people working in the camp, sorting the possessions of the transports or doing other jobs for the Germans. There was also a second camp of workers at the crematorium. They were then given some water and soup, and sent off to work in groups headed by different Jewish kapos.

M.'s group of about twenty men were sent to sort the victims' bundles, separating the clothes, money, gold watches and other things into different piles. They found great amounts of money and gold, as well as professional work tools and such. The food and refuse was thrown into a huge pit by the Lazarett [field hospital], where a great fire was permanently burning.

When the next transport arrived, M. was already given the horrifying task of escorting the infirm Jews to the Lazarett. Two men with go with their kapo, take a blanket from the pile, and carry the sick person in this blanket, like a stretcher, from the freight wagon to the fire pit. They were forced to hurl the sick Jews straight into the blaze, and whoever did not perform this duty well was also thrown in by the other workers. Sometimes there were dozens of sick people to be thrown into the pit, and sometimes hundreds.

The trains arriving from places further abroad than Częstochowa travelled three or four days, and the passengers were all half dead when they arrived. Many of the victims were unconscious when they were thrown into the pit, but immediately revived when they felt the flames. But there was nothing they could do, and they were burned alive. There was an Ukrainian there, who sometimes shot someone here and there, but often just let them slowly burn alive. Some victims screamed with pain for half an hour or more, before finally expiring. M. could not bear the constant, overwhelming smell of burning human flesh.

Life in the camp was extremely difficult. They were only given a bit of watery soup once a day, and had no toilets or anything. But they were at least able to eat the food they found among the victims' possessions, and there was no lack of it, because the trains were so crowded, that none of the victims could open their satchel to take out the food and eat it. Also, they did not want to eat, as they were given no water and were too thirsty.

Out of every transport, some twenty or thirty individuals were chosen to write cheerful postcards to their families, telling them they were working in a labour camp and that everything was all right with them. M. later met people who had received such postcards, and were very surprised when he told them Treblinka was actually a death camp.

The workers in the camp were never permitted to sit or rest, but had to be in constant movement, always running. They were guarded by very cruel Ukrainians, who beat people at random, for no reason.

On one occasion, a prisoner allegedly tried to escape from the camp. A gallows was erected, and all the workers were summoned to a rollcall. The poor man was stripped naked and hanged upside-down, with his feet up. The other prisoners were told this was what would happen to anyone attempting to escape. They started beating him ferociously, targeting his genitalia and other sensitive parts. They did this for a long while, and left him hanging to die. He expired after about two hours.

The workers could not wash, change clothes or sleep normally. They lay uncomfortably on bare bunks without mattresses, and slept unwashed, in their work apparel – which were the same clothes they had been wearing when they first arrived in the train. Throughout the duration of his stay in Treblinka, M. never wore any other clothes or undressed. A bucket by the door served as a public toilet. Winter was nearing, and it was very cold and rainy.

Although the workers were not allowed to speak to one another during work, the kapos could speak to them. M.'s kapo asked him about himself, and it turned out that the kapo was also from Częstochowa. Although M. did not know him, the kapo knew his family, who were well-known in Częstochowa.

The workforce (barring the kapos themselves) was continually refreshed. Some prisoners would be sent to the crematorium, to be replaced by fresh workers from the new transports. Their kapos were informed in advance. One day, M.'s kapo approached M. and told him he would be sent on the following day to be killed in the crematorium.

Having so often heard the blood-curdling screams from the crematorium and the Lazarett (on some days, up to three transports of 2,000-3,000 people each were exterminated in this death factory), M. decided he preferred to die by bullet rather than by gas or fire.

He made up his mind to attempt an escape. He was almost certain to be spotted and shot, which is exactly what he wanted. And if he actually did pull it off, that was obviously even better. In case he miraculously managed to escape, M. lined his *pilotka* hat with coins, diamonds and jewels and put on a couple of watches he took from the sorting area, to have something to live on once outside the camp, and also took with him a special electrician's pliers with a rubber handle, to avoid electrocution.

That evening, the workers finished working as usual and went to have their soup and chunk of bread. Then they went to the barracks and lay down. It was a dark and rainy night. M. fell asleep and dreamt that his father and mother came to him and told him, "Get out of here!"

M. awoke from this dream and immediately got up and started walking towards the exit, where the "toilet" bucket was. He opened the door and saw it was raining so hard that it was impossible to go out. He thought to himself, "This is the moment!" and went outside, heading straight for the watchtower. There was an electrified fence around the camp and a watchtower with a machine-gun every fifty metres or so. There were also floodlights, but perhaps some were not working due to the rain, because it was quite dark.

M. watched a guard go by on patrol, and once the latter left, he ran up to the fence and lay flat on the ground for a while, waiting. He then cut a hole in the bottom of the fence with his special pliers and crawled out. His hat with all the valuables got caught on the wire and fell off his head, but he did not go back to retrieve it. He left it by the fence, and ran and ran for hours on end.

When dawn came, he saw a village. It was still raining torrentially. He entered a shop, and a Pole there said to him, "What are you doing here? It's full of gendarmes with dogs everywhere around here. Run to the forest – you're just two kilometres from the camp here!" As it turned out, M. had been running in circles all those hours in the downpour and darkness and had hardly put any distance between him and Treblinka.

M. once more started running and running, this time in the direction the Pole had shown him – to the woods. After a while he came to another village, but was afraid to enter it, being soaked and looking the way he looked. He waited in the woods for the rest of the day, and in the evening snuck into a barn and lay down to rest. He returned to the forest before sunrise.

He was elated to be free. Also, he had relatively good clothes. He was wearing two suits. One was an elegant uniform that had been made specially for him just before the outbreak of the War, because he was about to start attending *gimnazjum*, and although he had not changed even once in Treblinka, he had taken care of it and not torn it. The other suit was a regular man's suit, which he wore over his own smaller one.

M. tried to fend for himself in the woods, but soon lost his way and did not know what to do. He saw a peasant's cottage and knocked on the door. When the owner opened, he asked him for some food and a place to spend the night. The owner immediately recognised him as an escapee from Treblinka and told him he was in danger, for other people would also surely recognise him as such, and the region was full of bands partisans and bandits, who were seeking people like him to kill them and rob them. The farmer told him he was too conspicuous with the clothes he wore, and gave him clothes of his own in their place. During the War, the Polish peasants made their own clothes with strips of sacking, which they dyed in various colours. The peasant gave him a pair of these sack trousers, dyed blue, and a coat.

He asked the peasant how far it was to Warsaw, and he replied that it was very far – some eighty or a hundred kilometres. He was in the village of Kukawki². M. said that, in that case, he would like to stay with the farmer for a few days, for which he would share with him the things he had with him from Treblinka. The man acquiesced, but said he did not wish his wife to know anything of it, and hid him in the barn. He then brought him the aforementioned trousers and coat, a shirt, and some food. He was very pleased with the fine suit M. gave him in their place.

He told him he could stay with him for a few days, but that no one was to see him – and especially his wife. M. then told him he was from Częstochowa, and if he accompanied him there, he would take him to his house and reward him with a large sum of money from the treasure that was hidden there. The farmer said he would think about it, and left him in the barn.

On the following morning, the farmer brought him more food and told him he was too frightened to keep him there. His wife was sure to find out soon. So he asked him to be on his way. M. thanked him and set out on the road again.

² [TN: Kukawki is 45km from Treblinka and 74km from Warsaw.]

He approached someone else's house and told the owner he would give him one of his watches if he took him to the Kukawki railway station and purchased a ticket for him with the Polish money he would give him. He also told the man he could accompany him on his journey if he wished, and that it would be well worth his while. The man agreed, and said he would be happy to accept whatever M. could give him.

Two days later, the man took him to the railway station and purchased a ticket for him, but when the train pulled up the man was spooked, because it was full of German gendarmes and military, apparently returning from some holiday. So he decided he would not join M. on his journey, after all. M. boarded the train, sat right among all the Germans, pulled up his collar and fell asleep.

He was wakened by the train guard asking to see his ticket. He showed him his ticket to Warsaw and curled up in his coat again, so no one would notice him too much or see his face. He wanted to see how things were in Warsaw and whether he could find any of the family members he had there before the War. The journey continued through the night, with most of the passengers asleep. The train arrived in Warsaw before daybreak.

M. alighted and peered outside the station. He saw the street was completely deserted, and everything was closed. He thought there might be a curfew and waited a bit, but time passed and no one appeared in the street. M. did not like this at all. He was frightened. He decided he would stay in the station and look for a train to Częstochowa. He found the platform and was told the train to Częstochowa would depart only in the late afternoon. By now it was already eight or nine o'clock and there were already some people in the street, but also many gendarmes and policemen. So he bought a ticket to Częstochowa and waited in the station all day. When the train arrived, he once more sat among all the Germans.

After another uneventful night journey, M. arrived in Częstochowa at dawn. Once more, everything was deserted. Fearful of going out into the street, he hid in a public toilet until full daylight. He went to the marketplace and bought something to eat, and then wandered about in the streets. He asked passers-by if there were any Jews in the city, and learnt that the "Big Ghetto" had been liquidated, and that there was now a "Small Ghetto". M. thought perhaps he might make his way to the village of Brzeziny, to find the farmer to whom he given various valuables in exchange for food in the times before the "Big Ghetto". Perhaps he could stay with him there.

In the meantime, he entered a confectionery owned by a Turk – he felt closer to the Turk, due to his appearance being more similar to that of the Jews – and also asked him if there were any Jews in Częstochowa. The Turk replied that the remaining Częstochowa Jews were all in the "Small Ghetto", but that a few of them were living in a large house at Aleja 14, which had been within the "Big Ghetto" but was now outside the "Small Ghetto". These were skilled, professional Jewish craftsmen, such as specialist tailors and shoemakers, who were living and working there for the Germans. M. was sure he would know several people in the Craftsmen's House, and made his way there.

He entered the courtyard and asked who the craftsmen living there were, and learnt his friend Moniek Baum, one of the best tailors in town, was also among them. (Moniek survived the War and remained in Poland, and he went on to become an engineer. He emigrated in the late 1970s to Israel, where he worked in a paper factory in Hadera.) M. was allowed to enter the Craftsmen's House and see his friend Moniek. He told him about his experiences in the death camp. Moniek was surprised to hear this – he had been among those who read the postcards from there, saying it was a nice labour camp. M. repeated that it was a death camp, and those sent there never returned. He said this in a loud voice, so the others present would also hear.

He went from person to person telling the horrors he had witnessed during his three days in the death camp. He spoke to another friend of his, Ajnchorn, and to Parasol, the chief of the Jewish Police in the "Small Ghetto", who was also living there in a special apartment. Parasol yelled at him that he was insane, and that all he was telling was impossible – everyone was alive and well! M. insisted that all the Jews deported to Treblinka had already been killed in the gas chambers or burned alive. For three days he tried to convince them that he was telling the truth, with tears in his eyes, but to no avail.

M. then asked Chief of Police Parasol to inquire whether there were any of his family members left in town. If he found any of his relatives, he would join them. If not, he would go to the Polish peasant in the village. After a

day or two, Parasol returned with the news that M.'s two sisters were in the "Small Ghetto" at the moment, and that his brother Mietek was also alive, but was working in a factory outside the ghetto. Thus, after spending three days in the Craftsmen's House, M. asked Parasol to take him to his sisters in the "Small Ghetto".

Upon arrival there, he immediately met one of his sisters, who embraced him warmly. (At this point, M. broke down in tears and asked to pause the interview.) She asked him about their parents, and he told her they were no longer alive. She then took him to where she and their other sister were living. (In the "Small Ghetto", the men and women lived in separate quarters.)

In the evening, M.'s brother Mietek returned from forced labour to the room where he were living with five or six other young Jewish men who worked with him. M. went to stay with them, and he once again told everyone there about Treblinka, and this time they believed him. They all agreed there was no sense in sitting and waiting to be killed by the Germans, and that they had to escape. Mietek said something was actually already being planned. Several groups had organised and had even managed to procure some armaments.

Mietek said he had connections, who could help them escape. They pooled their money together and purchased [fake] Polish passports. Meanwhile, some of Mietek's friends took M. to work with them in a kitchen, where he was received very well. Everyone wanted him to rest after his ordeal and they did not let him do much actual work. There, too, he told everyone about the real purpose of Treblinka, but secretly, because he feared the police would get wind of his propaganda against the Germans and arrest him.

About a month later, a young man tried to shoot a German officer³ but was stopped. Thirty or forty men from the "Small Ghetto" were immediately rounded up and shot in reprisal, and 100-150 others were herded to a specific spot to be deported to Radomsko. Radomsko served as a collection point for the Jews caught here and there in the region, and the time to liquidate Radomsko was obviously nearing.

Mietek was among those selected to be deported to Radomsko. As a worker in the kitchen, M. had good connections, and managed to get Mietek pulled out of this group. All the others were sent on the following day to Radomsko, and from there to the gas chambers in Treblinka.

At this point, the siblings decided to carry out their escape. They already had their Polish passports. Unfortunately, that very day the "Small Ghetto" was closed off, and all the workers were stuck in their workplaces. M. was alone in the ghetto, and his three siblings were in the HASAG munitions factory, which was in the Polish neighbourhood and at quite a distance from the ghetto. The workers were marched from the ghetto to HASAG and back every day, escorted by Ukrainians with dogs.

The Germans had decided to liquidate the "Small Ghetto", retaining only the workers in the factories. M. noticed the intensified military movement around the ghetto. There were not only more German gendarmes and SS men than usual, but also hordes of Ukrainians, in preparation for the definitive liquidation.

At night, M. crawled his way over to the room where he and Mietek were living, collected their Polish passports and whatever money they had, and put on his brother's suit over his own, to give to him when they met, if he was able to make his way into HASAG. And even if not, it was good to have an extra suit, which he could sell. M. then returned to the centre of the ghetto.

In the morning, everyone was led to a square outside the ghetto. They stood there for a long time, while the Germans searched the ghetto house to house, and anyone they found hiding was loaded onto vans and taken away to the woods to be immediately executed. The vans would return empty after a while, with just the SS men and their machine-guns. During the entire time, the people in the square were also subjected to cruel beatings and dogs were sicked on them.

Then a selection was carried out, and some of the people were chosen for work in HASAG and another factory in Częstochowa. All the rest were killed. M. had the luck to be selected to work in HASAG. There, he was reunited with his three siblings and welcomed very warmly by everyone. He told them the tragic news of the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto". All of them had had family members there.

³ [TN: Ref. to the attack perpetrated at the beginning of January 1943 by Mendel Fiszlewicz (also a Treblinka escapee) upon Lt Rohn of the Schupo.]

At the beginning, the workers slept in large halls on mattresses, inside the factory. In some halls there were also three or four-tiered bunks. Afterwards, the workers built a camp. M. also worked in this construction project. M. could not say exactly how many Jews worked at HASAG, but there were at least several hundred, or even in excess of a thousand.

The food they were given was enough to keep one alive, but was almost inedible. They called the bread “clay”, because it was a sticky, nondescript lump. The soup contained what the prisoners called “soles”⁴, which no one ate. They just drank the warm liquids with their “bread”. Nevertheless, since Poles also came to work in the factory, the Jews were able to procure extra food from the outside, such as bread or eggs. These products were usually sold for money, but there were also instances of kind-hearted Poles who gave them the food for free.

Everyone toiled arduously, from morning to evening. M. worked first in construction, in the transport [of building materials], and was later taken to work in a field kitchen outside the factory, where he prepared food for the sick workers, along with the kitchen’s manager, Karmazin. This was very good for M. because he was tasked with taking food, water, etc. from the main kitchen to the field kitchen, and thus had access to food, which he brought to his siblings and friends. His mobility also enabled M. to procure clothes and other items that were sent there from other camps, which he would later distribute inside the factory. Those who worked solely inside the factory could barely move from their posts and had no access to all these things. They were not even allowed toilet breaks.

At first, the factory produced primarily wood-burning boilers. The Germans had no fuel for their vehicles, and these boilers were fitted onto the vehicles, which were modified to be powered with wood gas instead of conventional fuel. Every German lorry carried large sacks of beech wood, which is hard and burns slowly, with which to feed its boiler.

Afterwards, the factory’s production switched to the recalibration of casings of various calibres to be reused. The shells were cleaned, carefully inspected and tested, and then packaged and shipped to the front. This was done in different departments, according to calibre and stage of the process.

The treatment of the forced labourers at HASAG was not as bad as in other camps – they were not treated so brutally and cruelly or tortured. But, of course, there were beatings. There was a German, Stieglitz, who was in charge of the yard. He was particularly vicious and gave people 25-50 lashings. But even Stieglitz did not actually kill people. With time, the prisoners even organised drama and song circles.

There were further selections in the factory. Those too weak or sick to work were picked out and sent to Oświęcim, Treblinka or other death camps to be exterminated.

Thus, M. and his siblings continued working in HASAG till 14th January 1945, when the Russian bombardments began. The people in the factory did not see the Russians yet, but they knew they would arrive any minute and heard the aeroplanes overhead.

That morning, the Germans did not allow the night shift workers to return to the barracks, but started leading them to the railway line, to send them in freight wagons to Buchenwald or other places to continue working. They took several other people besides the night shift – several hundred in total. From where M. was standing next to the kitchen pantry, he saw his brother and one of his sisters among those being taken away. He got their attention and managed to hide them. The rest of the people were put on the train and sent to their deaths.

On the following day, 15th January, M. and his siblings saw that the remaining workers were also being marched away by the Germans, and they decided to wait no longer and attempt to escape from the camp. They cut a hole in the barbed wire fence and fled into the woods. They reached a railway track, and from there they already saw the war raging. The trains were under attack and all ablaze, with shooting from all directions. They were very lucky not to be on those trains.

⁴ [TN: We know from other sources that these “soles” were desiccated beetroot.]

From there, Mietek took them to the house of a female acquaintance of his and asked her to let them in. They were warmly welcomed and given to drink. During the night there were fierce bombardments, and everyone went down to the bomb shelters, but M. and his siblings stayed upstairs. They were glad, not frightened, and just wanted to sleep.

On the following morning, the Russians were already in Częstochowa. M went for a walk in the street and was stopped by the Russians, who mistook him for a German and wanted to kill him. Luckily, one of the soldiers guessed correctly that he was a Jew, and they spared him.

Then M. and his siblings went to an apartment that had belonged to some of their family before the War, near the shops. Along with other Poles and Jews, they raided the former German shops and helped themselves to canned meat, liquor, etc. and had a meal.

When the survivors from the camp tried to return to their own pre-war homes, many found Poles living there, who wanted nothing to do with them. The survivors organised and went to live together in the part of town where the Germans had lived. They were later also joined by other survivors, who emerged from bunkers and other places.

Two or three days following liberation, Mietek travelled to the textile factory in Gnaszyń, where he had been manager before the War, to see if he could resume his work there. The factory was obviously operational, and he started working there and bringing the family food, etc. M also had the crate of valuables he and his father had buried before the War. They obviously looked all around for any surviving family members, but there was no one.

The plans were for M. to resume his studies and start a new life in Poland, but friends of his, also HASAG survivors, convinced him they had no future there and needed to emigrate to Palestine. M. had always felt closer to the Poles, and was not a Zionist – so he did not know what to expect in Palestine. Nevertheless, he joined a group affiliated with Antek Cukerman, [his wife] Cywia Lubetkin and others from Warsaw, which sent someone down from Warsaw, who helped them organise towards emigration.

The whole group (some forty individuals) moved to Warsaw, where they lived at the organisation's headquarters at ul Poznańska 38, on the fifth floor. They worked in clearing the rubble in the former Warsaw Ghetto and studied a little Hebrew, in preparation for life in the Land of Israel. They decided they would live in *kibbutzim* when they arrived there.

When their turn came, the group travelled by train to Czechoslovakia. They arrived in Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad), but were detained by the Russians. When the Russians found out they were Jews, they sent them back to Prague. There were members of the organisation there, who after a couple of days put them on another train, this time to Germany.

M. and his group arrived in the Landsberg DP camp, where there were already many other groups from different places. There, the group lived as a collective, sharing everything. The party soon chose M. as an organiser and sent him with a few other comrades (also from Częstochowa) to Rehau, Germany to help smuggle other Jewish refugees across the border. He worked there for some eight months, in logistics, provisioning, and smuggling groups of 200-300 refugees each across the Czech-German border.

They would set out on foot every evening from Rehau and hike to Aš, Czechoslovakia – a trek of about 15 kilometres. In Aš they would meet the group of refugees and cross back into Germany with them during the night. In the winter there could be up to two metres of snow, and the trek across the border was very difficult. M. and his friends did this every night, and in the morning had to provide the hundreds of refugees with food and food coupons, and help them register in Germany as refugees. Their task was only complete once each batch of refugees was already on the train, on its way to Munich.

After eight months of this backbreaking work, M. went on a short holiday to a health resort in Germany. Meanwhile, his group had already sailed for Palestine. He was adjoined to a youth group in the DP camp of Zeilshheim, near Frankfurt, and travelled with them in lorries to a camp on the French coast, where they awaited their ship for some time.

They set sail on the vessel "Yagur" around May 1946, and eventually arrived in Palestine, but the British authorities did not allow them to disembark. Instead, they put them on a British ship and transported them to Cyprus. They were among the first refugees there, and lived in tents in Camp 55, where M. was among the organisers of the camp and was soon in charge of the kitchen. They also arranged sports. M. was pressured to train for combat in Palestine, and soon a way was found to secure a certificate for him to emigrate legally.

M. arrived in the Land of Israel in October or November 1946 with a larger group from the camp in Cyprus. He immediately joined the Jewish Palmach military organisation, where he underwent military training. He was stationed at Kibbutz Negba in the Negev Desert, where he served mainly as a guard. During the 1948 Palestine War, he fought Egyptian and Sudanese forces there.

Following the war of 1948, M. and his unit were sent to Megiddo, the border at the time, to secure the area. Then M. was transferred to Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'Emek, where he worked in agriculture and served as the kibbutz's driver. M. lived there until 1952 and then moved to Moshav Kfar Vitkin, where he had distant relatives. He was still single at the time. After working in the moshav and in lands they owned in the south for about a year, M. decided to move to an urban area and went to live in Haifa, where he worked as a semitrailer driver for a petrol company.

Of M.'s three siblings, one sister was already living in Israel, another was still in Poland (she later also emigrated to Israel), and Mietek lived until 1957 in Poland, whereupon he, too, moved to Israel.

M. stayed in Haifa. He married a young woman from Romania, also a Holocaust survivor, who had arrived in the Land of Israel aged ten or twelve. They had a son, a daughter and four granddaughters at the time the interview was given in 1992. M. was living in Haifa and was about to retire after thirty-eight years of working there.