

[Testimony of Sz. Szpilberg]

Translated by David Horowitz-Larochette

Following the outbreak of the War, a great panic reigns in the city. Polish soldiers spread rumours to the effect that the danger has passed – the Germans have been defeated. The people do not believe [them]. Many flee the city. Most of the escapees are young lads and girls. I decide to remain. My father is an old man, and I do not wish to abandon him on his own. In many circles, the opinion reigns, “It’s not worth escaping – the Germans will catch us anyway.” All businesses and shops are closed.

On Friday, [1st September 1939], the first houses are destroyed by small-scale bombardment. The same happens on Saturday - for now, without casualties. We hear the bridges over the Warta River being blown up.

On the morning of Sunday the 3rd, at about 08:00, the first German front-running motorised units enter the city. The first day passes tranquilly. The Germans act peacefully - they give out cigarettes, sweets, etc. to the population.

On the following morning [4th September 1939], at about 10:00, suddenly there are gunshots in the streets. German soldiers and gendarmes shoot at the crowd – the shooting lasts a good two hours. Up to four hundred Jews and seventy-five Christians fall dead.

In the following hours, gendarmes begin making the rounds of the Jewish houses, taking out the men. They order the men to run, with their hands raised, towards the cathedral and the town’s prison complex. On their way to the prison, when the captives run up the cathedral steps, a salvo of machine-gun fire is directed into the crowd.

Six hundred Jews fall at the entrance. Those, who manage to get through, survive. They are kept there till Thursday and released in groups.

Then people start being captured for work from the streets and from their homes. All formations take part in this - mainly the Gendarmerie.

Some three months after entering the city, the Stadthauptmann [City Captain] appointed a *Judenrat* [Jewish Council]. A few members of the former *gmina* [viz. Kehilla] stayed on, and some were co-opted.

Moryc Kopiński, the owner of a chemical products factory, became President of the *Judenrat*. He was a very decent man, who toiled from dawn to dusk for the good of the Jews, undertaking numerous intercessions without payment.

The head of the Jewish Arbeitsamt [Labour Office] was Wajnryb. With his work, he made a good name for himself among the Jewish population. He was a regular visitor to the Gestapo, and used for the greater good. He actually did me a huge personal favour. My wife had illegally crossed the border from Praszka to Częstochowa, for which she faced a penalty (Praszka was inside the Reich). He arranged for her to be freed from the Gestapo, where she was being detained.

His intercessions took up a great deal of time, and this forced him to resign from the Arbeitsamt. He was replaced by President Kopiński's brother. He, too, followed in the path of his two predecessors, and endeavoured to help the workers in any way he could, that they should receive food and payment. He imposed a tax on the wealthier Jews, who had sent poor Jewish volunteers to work in their place, whom the Arbeitsamt paid and gave special allotments [of food]. Those, who bought their way out of work, paid between twenty and a hundred złoty per month, depending on their circumstances.

On 15th December 1939, the Stadthauptmann issued an order [for Jews] to wear, on the right arm, a white armband with a blue Star of David in its centre.

One Saturday night, at the end of December [23rd], the Germans drove several vehicles with barrels and tar to the synagogues on ul. Nadrzeczna and ul. Wilsona. They were accompanied by a great many Poles, who started dragging all the moveable objects out of the synagogues to be burned.

Then, the Germans together with the Poles, set fire to the synagogues. The fire continued smouldering till Sunday evening [Christman Eve]. The soot-covered walls are all that remains of the torched synagogues.

At the start of 1940, the Germans captured about twenty-five Jews in the street, including some fifteen-year-old boys, and led them away to the prison. They said that these would be hostages, to ensure that nothing would happen to the Germans. And we found out, a few weeks later, they had been sent away to Oświęcim [Auschwitz].

During this period, the Germans extracted Jews from their homes for different work, where they were beaten and tormented. Men's beards were also cut off. The halachic scholar [Reb Josef] Klajnplac was caught to fill in the *schrony* [Pol., bunkers]. He was ordered to bury his ritual fringed garment [tzitzit] and unearth it again. They then chased him jeeringly across the streets. The halachic scholar [Reb] Josef "Kira" [Prokosz] suffered an attack of madness during the work.

At the start of 1940, the Stadthauptmann summoned President Kopiński and Vice-President Adv. Pohorile, and ordered them to present, to the Germans, a colossal sum of money – several hundred thousand złoty and one kilogram of gold. This was the first contribution which the Jewish population was forced to bring to the Stadthauptmann. Later, there were two more contributions - in 1941 and 1942.

During those months, a couple of hundred Jewish men and women were captured for work in the Częstochowa armaments factories, such as [HASAG] Raków, HASAG [Pelcery], [HASAG] Częstochowianka and [HASAG] Warta. A list was made of these people, and they had to report for work daily. The work lasted twelve hours a day. On site, the workers only received lunch - no payment. Some of those caught hired poor Jews, who went to work in their place. Afterwards, the *Judenrat* took over the deployment.

At this time, all Jewish businesses are closed down. The smaller ones are completely liquidated and the larger are left under the direction of commissars and trustees. In very few cases, the Jews stay on as employees. These are quick to welcome the commissars and, together with them, run the factories and businesses, making a profit.

In March 1941, the Stadthauptmann, Dr Wendler, ordered the creation of a ghetto for Jews, in the quarter that had erstwhile been densely populated by Jews, such as Garncarska, Nadrzeczna, Stary Rynek, Nowy Rynek, etc., up to Aleja Maryi Panny 11. The Poles, living in the Jewish neighbourhood, were forced to move out.

Jewish and Polish policemen were stationed at the entrances. Poles were allowed to enter. Jews were only let out with a *przepustka* [pass], which was issued by the *Judenrat* for workers employed outside the ghetto, and for Jews who had stayed on as assistants in their former enterprises outside the ghetto.

At the beginning, there were many cases of Poles denouncing Jews who had exited the ghetto without a pass (they had off taken their armbands) in order to procure food. They did this for the price of the liquor and cigarettes which the Germans gave for denouncing a Jew.

After the synagogues were torched, the *Judenrat* requested of the Stadthauptmann permission to conduct prayer quorums in private homes. There were instances when soldiers dragged Jews out, wearing their prayer shawls, and chased them across the streets, mocking them.

The *Judenrat* organised kitchens for the poorer populace. There was no great hunger in the city. Poles came into the ghetto and traded with the Jews, and the latter somehow managed.

The *Judenrat* created a system of representatives. Each neighbourhood had its own representative, who collected data on the financial situation of the Jews in his neighbourhood. The representatives shared this data with the *Judenrat*. For the poor, the representative received allotments [of food] and money.

In the cultural field, there was a certain activity. The organisations did not carry out their work officially. The Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair and Mizrachi organisations distinguished themselves with their information work.

In May 1941, a command came from the Stadthauptmann, Dr Wendler, to send a couple of hundred men to the camps in Lublin, such as Cieszanów, Bełżec and others. The *Judenrat* decided to send, first and foremost, those who had hidden from forced labour and had not wanted to pay them [for that privilege].

However, as they still failed to provide the full quota of workers on time, the Gendarmerie set out onto the Jewish streets and captured the required quota of Jews. The *Judenrat* sent two delegates to inquire as to the fate of the deported Jews. They also took food with them.

A couple of months later, the Jews returned. Many had fallen, shot during work. The rest were exhausted, filthy, lice-infested, and swollen from hunger.

At the end of July 1941, an order came that Jews must hand over all the furs in their possession. Jews were not allowed to own any fur garments, under threat of being shot. The *Judenrat* formed a commission to collect the furs. After the deadline to hand in the furs had expired (the *Judenrat* co-opted the

representatives to the work, and, by the deadline, they had managed to present a colossal number of furs), searches began. Anyone, in whose possession the Gendarmerie found furs, was shot on the spot. Thus, up to fifty individuals were then shot in their homes, including many women.

First Resettlement¹:

A few weeks before Yom Kippur 1942, rumours spread about the liquidation carried out in Warsaw. The people comfort themselves that this will not happen in Częstochowa, because the Germans need the Jews for the armaments factories.

On Yom Kippur day, during the prayer service, voices spread that the ghetto is surrounded by Ukrainians and the Gendarmerie. Jews hurriedly run home – to pack.

On the following morning, the group from the ghetto is not let out to work. Before daybreak, the Jewish streets are more brightly lit up than usual. Suddenly, people start running in confusion. Jewish policemen and German gendarmes drive everyone out of the houses – kith and kin, young and old – and order them to line up in the courtyards. Whoever is found hiding will be shot.

The Germans – the gendarmes and Gestapo – drive the assembled Jews out into the streets, in front of the houses, and carry out a selection. Those, who are employed and hold proof of it, should be spared and remain standing on one side of the street. The elderly, infirm and the unemployed form the other group. But the Gestapo does not look much at their verifications – yes paper, no paper, to the right, to the left, to the right, to the left.

The first time, the *akcja* [operation] was only carried out on the streets Warszawska, Garibaldiiego, Garncarska, and Nadrzeczna. A lot of shooting ensued. Those killed were the people the Germans found in hiding.

The group destined for resettlement was led to the railway station, where they were crammed 150 individuals into each wagon. A couple pf hundred people, from this group, returned to the ghetto (due to a lack of wagons), and a rumour spread that the resettlement had been called off. “It will already be calm now.”

¹ [TN: “Aussiedlung” in the original; euphemism used by the Nazis for deportation to death camps.]

A total of 1,800 people were sent away in the wagons. This happened on Tuesday, 22nd September 1942, a day after Yom Kippur. The Jewish Police later recounted, that the Gestapo went, first and foremost, to Wajnryb, the former chief of the Arbeitsamt, and took him and his family to the resettlement. It was said that they liquidated him because he was a habitu  of the Gestapo and knew too much. The one in charge of the *akcja* was the Chief of Gendarmerie, [Paul] Degenhardt.

On the following day, Wednesday, persistent rumours spread that no more *akcje* were to be carried out. Meanwhile, a prohibition was issued not to leave the houses. It was permitted to go out to the street for one hour a day to purchase food. (The prohibition was in place all days of the week, to the end of the last *akcja*.)

On Thursday, by orders of the Germans, the Jewish policemen are transferred, with their families, to the Mikveh building on ul Garibaldiego. "There, they will be safe from the *akcje*..."

Second Resettlement:

On Friday morning, at 05:00, Jewish policemen began running about in the streets near the Stary Rynek, and ordered everyone, big and small, to gather, without the slightest delay, at the Stary Rynek. The Jews were allowed to bring packs weighing up to five kilograms each.

Here, German Gendarmerie had already gathered, and they drove the arriving people to the Nowy Rynek, where the Gestapo came and carried out the selection. This time, a couple of thousand people were led away to the train.

Before entering the wagons, the Jews were forced to cast aside their packs and take off their shoes. The Gestapo continually shot into the bewildered crowd running into the wagons. Many fell dead. The *akcja* lasted till 11:00 before noon.

The 1,200 people selected to remain were sent off, by the Gestapo, to the formerly Jewish-owned *Metalurgia* factory. I, too, was among those remaining. We sat there for a couple of hours. Sometime later, the Gestapo arrived and selected another one hundred individuals, and sent them to the train. The rest were sent off to various workplaces.

A group of Jews and I were sent to HASAG, where I had previously worked. Upon arrival in HASAG, on pain of being shot, we were ordered to hand over all the valuables and money that each of us possessed. After this, anyone on whose person anything was found was murderously beaten.

Following the search, we were led to a bath, where the Ukrainians present beat us for no reason. After the bath, they let us into a barrack, where we stayed for the time being. A gendarme, with a machine-gun, stood at the door.

In the middle of the night, everyone was awakened by a shot. We came to our senses and saw, at the centre of the barrack, a Jew lying on the ground, shot. "He tried to run out", the watchman said.

In the morning, we went to work in HASAG. Those, who lived in the parts of the ghetto where the *akcja* had not taken place, and worked in HASAG, were not let out to go to work. Their place was taken by the others, who were left from the *akcja*.

In the ghetto, an *akcje* continued taking place every other day, on a massive scale. The majority were sent to resettlement, and small groups to different workplaces, first and foremost to the armaments factories.

The last *akcja* took place on Shemini Atzeres [3rd October] 1942. Those taken were the Jews of the Aleja Maryi Panny. All married policemen were sent away with their families. [Members of] the *Judenrat* was left amongst the "productive" Jews and were sent off to various *placówki* [work stations]. After Shemini Atzeres, the "Big Ghetto" was liquidated, and all the Jews were billeted in their workplaces.

In October 1942, the Germans create the "Small Ghetto" on Garncarska, with the official total of 3,000 Jews. There are another 1,000 Jews living illegally in the "Small Ghetto", the exits of which are guarded by Jewish Police and Gendarmerie.

A [new] *Judenrat* is formed, with Dr Wolberg as president. He is a great formalist. Kurland becomes chief of the Arbeitseinsatz [Labour Deployment]. The latter conducts himself well towards the Jewish populace.

The *Judenrat* creates kitchens for the poorer population, where good and sufficient food is given out. There also exists a clinic for the sick, with doctors and nurses.

Generally speaking, the situation of the Jews in the ghetto is good. The Jews of the *placówki* trade with the Christians and bring enough food into the ghetto.

With time, life in the ghetto takes on abnormal forms. The portent of impending doom dictates one to enjoy life for as long as possible – “Everyone here will eventually be liquidated.” Concerts and entertainments are held. The daughter of the well-known industrialist, Tenenbaum, lives with Commander Degenhardt, for the promise that her life be spared. (Aged twenty-two or three, she was a famed beauty, who was nicknamed “Królowa” – Queen – for her attractiveness.)

Purim Akcja:

At the start of 1943, by order of the [Nazi] authorities, a registration process is made of all those with relatives in the Land of Israel. On the Fast of Esther², a command arrives from Degenhardt to present the list to him. He orders the 150 registered intellectuals – doctors, lawyers, etc. – to report within ten minutes, as they are to travel to the Land of Israel.

The arrivals are loaded onto vehicles, surrounded by gendarmes and Ukrainians, and driven to the Jewish cemetery, where they are shot. Many jump out along the way, in a bid to save themselves through flight. They all fall by the guards’ bullets. One woman of the Kohn house, a medical doctor by profession, manages to flee. She hides, and later comes into the ghetto.

Resistance:

During this period, in the ghetto, rumours spread regarding the formation of resistance groups. Jewish lads and girls make the rounds of the Jewish houses, raising funds for the underground organisation. With the monies collected, weapons are purchased from Poles at the *placówki*. Some fifty young lads and girls are organised in the underground movement, the majority from Ha’Shomer Ha’Tzair.

² [TN: The day before Purim, in this case 18th March 1943.]

The two Szwimer brothers, known men of the underworld, take advantage of this campaign, and use the money for their own personal purposes. They are executed by the resistance members.

On 15th April 1943, the first act of sabotage is perpetrated. A group of forty-eight Jewish labourers employed, at the Bahnschutz [Railway Security] *placówka*, unscrews the rails before the arrival of a train carrying soldiers and ammunition.

The Bahnschutz guard notices this and opens fire on the Jews. Two boys from the resistance movement, fifteen-year-old Altman and seventeen-year-old Lustiger, respond to him with revolver shots. The Bahnschutz guard is mortally wounded by the boys. A punitive operation is carried out on the spot. Every second man in the group is shot. The rest are led to the ghetto, and the *placówka* is liquidated.

At the beginning of June, the president of the *Judenrat*, Dr Wolberg, is called out to Degenhardt. He is to bring injections with him, as Degenhardt is ill. Dr Wolberg never returns. We find out Dr Wolberg was shot.

On the following day, Degenhardt summoned his Jewish Fräulein Tenenbaum, ordering her to also bring, with her, her little brother and cousin. On that same day, the Chevra Kadisha received orders to take home their dead corpses.

From time to time, searches are carried out amongst the unemployed in the "Small Ghetto". These raids are personally conducted by Degenhardt. Those found in the ghetto are shot. During one of these *akcje*, eight people are shot.

From time to time, *akcje* are carried out on children and old people. These are sent to the Judenstaat³ - Radomsko.

In the second half of 1943, a command is issued by the Stadthauptmann to bring all children, under fourteen, to the roll-call square. The Jewish Police then brings forth twenty-five children, along with all the others who did not go out to work that day – a total of two hundred people.

At the roll-call square, a certain Fiszlewicz, an escapee from Treblinka, shoots and wounds a gendarme. He is shot on the spot, and twenty-four other men are shot along with him. The rest are sent away to Radomsko.

³[TN: Ger., "Jewish State"; mocking ref. to the Zionist vision of a Jewish homeland. Radomsko, at this time, was a concentration point all for Jews captured throughout the region that were to be sent on to the death camps.]

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It is 28th June 1943, at 18:00, after work in HASAG. At the roll-call square, where we stand ready to be counted and be sent back home, we perceive not only the usual Werkschutz [Work Security] and guard, but also a large number of Gestapo and Gendarmerie, headed by Degenhardt.

After the head-count, the Jewish policemen are led away – we know not where. We, the workers, are held on site. We are told we will continue staying in HASAG, while the “Small Ghetto” is to be liquidated.

We spend the night in the hall. In the morning, in the grey, early hours, Jewish men and women begin arriving from the “Small Ghetto”. The last group recounts that they heard the ghetto explode on their way here.

The ghetto is burned down. Many, who are hiding, perish in the flames. Others, found in hiding, are shot. A group of older children, aged fourteen, are rescued by the director of HASAG, Lütt, who is present. He stands up for them and demands them for his own work. He threatens to complain to Degenhardt of sabotage, unless his request is granted.

In the meantime, all of us who remain are left in the hall for a couple of days, sleeping fully dressed on our packs, which many have brought with us from the ghetto. During the day, we work.

In these days, the foremen take note of all those on whom they cast a bad eye, and not knowing the names of the fresh arrivals, under the excuse of taking down their names to give them shoes, they register their details.

A day or two later, a roll-call of both the day and night shifts together takes place. Vehicles arrive, and all those registered are loaded onto them, taken to the cemetery and shot. Along with them, the Jewish factory policemen, who had been detained a couple of days earlier, are also taken to their deaths.

The commander of the [Jewish] Police is approached by one of the [German] foremen, who tackles him to the ground and kills him with a hammer.

Up to 5,000 people remain working in HASAG, about half of them women. We rise at 05:30. Roll-call is at 06:00. We work in two twelve-hour shifts. No work is

done on Sundays. Still, we cannot rest, because we are caught for work at different *placówki*, such as loading coal, sweeping, etc.

We can only wash after work, in the washrooms of the work department, but not in the morning, before work. Two times a week, we may enjoy a shower.

In the entire factory, there were five Jewish overseers, who behaved brutally to begin with. They maintained themselves by stealing, from Jews, their portions of food, through deceit and swindle. Later, once trade with the Poles developed, and we received “rags” from the factory, and there were opportunities to make money, they left us alone. The worst among them were Szperling and Kadzidło.

At the beginning, the management gave us 150g of bread a day, and later 500g. Lunch also improved later. At night, after work, we were also given soup.

Director Lütt, a decent German (it was said he held a high position in the Gestapo), set up a canteen, where one could buy bread. There was no hunger. The people would cook in field kitchens improvised of bricks.

During the first few weeks, many *akcje* were carried out on those workers, whom the foremen (Germans and Volksdeutsche) pointed out as being unproductive. They would be led out to the cemetery and shot. In the first two *akcje*, 600 people fell. Afterwards, the number of people shot in an *akcja* dropped to sixty or seventy. The last *akcja* took place at the end of 1944. The people were not shot, but taken away to Buchenwald.

In December 1944, rumours spread of great Russian victories. They are moving towards Kielce. A ray of hope steals into our souls.

In January, these reports increase, confirming the earlier ones. On the morning of Monday, 15th January 1945, a command [is issued] – “Both shifts are to remain in the barracks.” We do not go out to work.

Wagons arrive at the factory’s platform. 1,800 workers, including myself, are loaded and sent away to Buchenwald. Lütt is present during the deportation and, under his supervision, each of us is given 1kg bread and a tin of preserves.

On the evening of that same day, the rest of the men, and those among the women wishing to accompany their husbands, are also sent away. The Germans say everyone has to leave, because the factory will be blown up before the

arrival of the Bolsheviks. Nevertheless, many men still hide, and many of the women also stay. That same night, the entire German administration abandons the factory.

With the grey morning, the Jews crawl out of their hiding places and run about in the storerooms and buildings – everything is unlocked and deserted. Free. That same day, the Russian army enters Częstochowa.