

Felicja Karay<sup>1</sup>

## **A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE BOOK *THE HASAG-APPARATEBAU CAMP IN CZĘSTOCHOWA***

Today, we work in a munitions factory  
Like machines with hearts of stone.  
Each of us has changed,  
Each of us has grown old  
And today I only live a shadow of a life ....  
Ill fate gives us no rest ....

These Jewish people are strange,  
That a spark of hope still lingers.  
Maybe a miracle may yet happen,  
Their fate hangs in the balance – “To be or not to be!”.

Roma Nadelberg

Who wrote that verse? Who are the “we” locked in behind the wires? What torments and suffering did they experience during those long years? How did they fight for their lives and with what miracle did they manage to avoid death? And who brought them freedom?

For more than twenty years, I have occupied myself with the subject of German arms company HASAG (Hugo Schneider Aktiengesellschaft, Leipzig), and its slave labour camps for Jews in Poland and in Germany during the World War II years. In September 2006, the Association of Częstochowa Jews in Israel published, in Hebrew, the monograph *The Hasag-Apparatebau Camp in Częstochowa*, in which I endeavoured to provide answers to the above questions. There were a few reasons why I undertook this task. The first of them was the lack of research on the Częstochowa camps and a considerable vagueness in the notated data from various sources.

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An example – in *Informator Encyklopedyczny* under the “Częstochowa” entry, five camps are listed, among them the Apparatebau camp and the Pelcery camp<sup>2</sup>. However, in the listing of munitions factories in the Radomsk district as at 30<sup>th</sup> June 1943, only the “Apparatebau”<sup>3</sup> camp appears. Where did “Pelcery” disappear to?

On the other hand, original meetings with former camp prisoners revealed that only “Pelcery” was the generally accepted name and that very few remember the name “Apparatebau”. They had scant knowledge of Hasag. In Częstochowa itself, the situation was not much better. In April 2004, the Jan Długosz Academy in Częstochowa hosted an international research conference on the subject “The Jews of Częstochowa – Coexistence, Holocaust, Remembrance”. Among the papers presented was that of Dr Mark Kiel, who endeavoured to find traces of the Hasag-Pelcery camp where his mother had endured hell. People stopped on the street were asked about Hasag. Not only did they not know where it was, they had no idea what it was. Even in the city where there were once four Hasag enterprises, its name was unknown! Shouldn’t the inhabitants of Częstochowa know about that part of the not-so-distant history of their own city?

But it was not just the history of the Hasag enterprise which led me to reach my final decision. The story of Zygmunt Rolat, a former inmate of the camp, made me aware of what was to be the main purpose of the book. His memories, as a twelve year old boy, were of the terrible selection in July 1943 which the camp prisoners were forced to undergo, his despair, when the brutal hand of the executioner pointed at his next victim – his mother – thus showing the true face of the Pelcery “good camp”. That true face appears in dozens of stories from former prisoners. For this reason, this book is, above all, a memorial. It is a “macewa” (a gravestone”) for the Jews who slaved away, who starved and who perished. Their experiences and emotions were altered by the moral commandment to those who had survived, “Remember! And let your children know what your fate was like as prisoners in Hasag!”

The monograph is divided into four parts. The first part (from the beginning of the War until the opening of the “Big Ghetto”) describes the activities of the Hasag company in occupied Poland. It also explains how Budin (Paul Budin, SS-Sturmbannfuhrer and General Manager of Hugo Schneider AG) managed to take control of the spinning mills “Peltzery” (that was its official name) and convert it into a munitions factory. In February 1943, the factory was officially renamed as “Apparatebau”. During that period, Budin established the “Hasag Kingdom” in Częstochowa which, by the end of 1944, comprised four enterprises: the steel-mill in Raków and three munitions factories – “Apparatebau” (Pelcery), “Warthawerk” (Warta) and “Częstochowianka”.

The second part contains a short history of the Big and Small Ghettos in Częstochowa. From the beginning of its existence (April 1941), the Big Ghetto was regarded as “a good place” and drew waves of refugees. Despite the harsh conditions, the cramped living space, the meagre food rations and the constant terror, when the Big Ghetto was

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<sup>2</sup> Nazi camps on Polish soil 1939-1945. *Informator Encyklopedyczny*, Warsaw 1979, p.146.

<sup>3</sup> Felicja Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow*, Skarżysko-Kamienna Slave Labour Camp, Amsterdam 1996, p.52

opened, the majority of its inhabitants was not starving. The task of organising forced labour for the Germans fell to Bernard Kurland who was universally trusted. Conflicts between the *Judenrat* and the people were not extreme in character, as in other ghettos. A continuous string of bribes “moulded” a (seemingly) liberal relationship with the German authorities and fed the illusion of relative safety. Various groups (TOŻ, political parties, youth movements, religious groups, etc.) operated socially and culturally. Of course, there were negative aspects: the informers, the police and the corrupt officials. But that does not lead us to doubt that family ties, social and cultural, existing in the ghetto, had a positive influence on the formation of life collectively and later life in the camps.

Displacement operations from the Big Ghetto began in the autumn of 1942. They put an end to all illusions. In September, the first one thousand men were sent to the Apparatebau factory, where they were “stored” in empty production halls, without bunks or partitions. This was the first “residential station” for Jewish workers of the Apparatebau. The Small Ghetto was established and all of Częstochowa’s remaining Jews were gathered into it. The ghetto was officially changed into a “Forced Labour Camp for Jews” (ŻAL). Jews were also sent back here from the Apparatebau. Every morning, they marched to the Apparatebau factory and, in the evening, they returned to the ghetto which, for them, became a second “residential station”.

Life in the Small Ghetto was under constant terror. How its inhabitants lived, did business and loved is described in the memoirs of A.A.Kromołowski, Jurek Einhorn, Henia Lustiger, Reuven Monowicz and others<sup>4</sup>. Under these conditions, the Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa (Jewish Fighting Organisation) was established by the youth movements in order to defend the ghetto. Groups of youth were sent to the forests with the aim of establishing contact with the Polish partisans. But a lack of military experience and betrayal foiled any plans to fight and, on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> June 1943, the Germans, following a bloody massacre, put an end to the resistance movement and burned the ghetto. The remaining Jews, in the main, were sent to the Apparatebau factory. During the final selection, Apparatebau Director, Ernst Luth, saved the lives of thirty boys and sent them to work in the factory.

The third section describes the camp which was established, during this time, on the factory grounds. This time, it was a permanent camp, Hasag-Apparatebau – the third and last “residential station” for Jewish prisoners. On the night of the 19<sup>th</sup> July, the Germans undertook a huge selection (as already mentioned) – nearly 400 people fell victim to it. Over 3,000 Jewish men and women remained in the factory. A separate chapter describes the stages of how people settled into the new camp, which offered each prisoner 40cms of space for a shared bunk, a pallet and thousands of bedbugs.

This section is full of descriptions of back-breaking work, undertaken in 12-hour shifts. Twelve year old children served in the main production section – the “heavy transport”. This is described by Halina Barkani, Israel Zylberglajt, Miriam Zalberg, Rut Stern, Chaim Gotensztajn, Edith Zierer and others. Readers learn about the German staff, the

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<sup>4</sup> A detailed bibliography of all sources can be found at the end of the book.

factory security force (*Werkschutz*) in which Ukrainians and *Volksdeutsch* served. There were also Polish workers and Jewish foremen (*Vorarbeiter*). All possible varieties appear in the broader and more detailed picture of relationships between the German *meisters* and the Jewish workers – from sadists who tortured unto death through to *cadyks* who brought sandwiches to “their” Jews. Those in the *Werkschutz* were the worst. They were the ones who administered the flogging punishments.

In view of the meagre rations, hunger prevailed. In the struggle for survival, and with the aid of Poles, Jews organised the illegal production of various articles and developed trading contacts with the outside world, having bribed Germans and members of the *Werkschutz*. In the camp – at least in the first period, there were no “Muslims”. But with the passage of time, the cramped conditions in the barracks, a lack of clothing, insufficient nutrition and bad sanitary conditions (despite the hot showers) all led to the outbreak of several epidemics which the hospital staff, headed by Dr Sperling, fought against.

This period ends in March 1944 with the arrival of a transport of Jews from Łódź. Among the arrivals was a group of pre-War stage actors who revived local cultural activity. A drama group was established with satirical and singing performances. Within the camp, the singer Roma Nadelberg became famous. It is her poem which appears at the beginning of this article. It faithfully portrays the mood of the exhausted prisoners who awaited liberation.

The fourth part of the book is marked by the impending defeat of Germany. It ranges from the spring of 1944 until the liberation of the camp. Polish workers bring the news with them to the factory. The monotony of daily life of the *Hasagowcy* rolled on against this background. Their greatest concern was to obtain an additional portion of bread. As part of the struggle to survive, aside from the old ones, new forms of internal organisation arise – “camp families”, cousin “couples”<sup>5</sup>, party cells, Chasidic groups, former neighbours. Each group supported itself internally or mutually supported another group. This, by no means, meant that mutual help led to the removal of social differences between prisoners. The divide amongst the poor, the rich and the middle class prevailed during the entire time of the camp’s existence. Despite all its negative aspects, the prevailing public opinion was that it was “possible to live” in Hasag-Pelcery, by comparison with other camps.

Internal conflicts heightened with the arrival, in August 1944, of a transport of Jews from the camp in Skarżysko, The *meisters* carried out small selections more and more frequently and transports left, bound for Buchenwald. From December, the Hasag camps in Częstochowa came under the control of the SS. The Apparatebau was “promoted” to the level of concentration camp and groups of SS-men, who had arrived from Płaszów, turned the prisoners’ lives into a living hell. Hunger, the loosening of discipline and rumours about the planting of mines in the factory all led to disorientating hundreds of people. Every day, another group of German staff would leave the factory.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> January, the long-awaited for day had arrived. The Russians were in the city suburbs. Whoever could, hid themselves in some hiding-place – Maryla Halpern and

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<sup>5</sup> This was the name given, in mixed camps, to unmarried couples who were living together.

Róża Bloch hid in the German section, Symcha Monet and his friends sat in the storehouse, the Edelist family hid in the kitchen, while others lay under the bunks. And there were those who escaped from the camp – Dr Szarota and his wife, Sara Gutgold and Dorka Sztemberg with their friends, Kromołowski and his brother. But there was nowhere to escape to. Unfortunately, in the words of the poet, “Yet freedom awaits us” – there was no hiding from reality. Apart from very few exceptions, no one was waiting for the prisoners. New people occupied their apartments. It took weeks and months for a small Jewish community to organise itself anew.

... And the remainder spread throughout the world. They carried with them a picture of the Hasag-Appartebau-Pelcery camp – one camp.

In short, this is all that can be said about the new book. Anyone who is searching for answers to these and other questions should read it. The English version is being prepared. It will help revive memories - bad memories and maybe a few good ones.