

A Few Memories

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Częstochowa Ghetto In the Child's Eyes

I am one of the thirty children, who survived the war in the Częstochowa ghetto, and after its liquidation in the HASAG slave labor camp. It is not my intention to present a scholarly study here, which requires objective and dispassionate approach aimed at some synthesis. On the contrary, I want to tell you about my childhood experiences, events I witnessed, events which keep coming back to my mind after all these years, clear and painful as if it were yesterday. It is a story of a child, who lost his parents and his only brother, and many, many other close and distant relatives, friends and strangers. His entire world! Before the war I lived a very happy life, lucky to have loving parents, caring elder brother, tender nanny, and a home that was warm and safe. And upon the long awaited liberation in January 1945 I was a lonely, emaciated orphan, who by some miracle survived the German occupation of his homeland.

My memories will not follow a chronological order, as I am not a historian, even though history, and the history of Częstochowa and its Jewish inhabitants in particular, has become my passion and I devote a lot of time and energy to this pursuit.

Pre-war Częstochowa

I was born in Częstochowa and Częstochowa has been and will always remain my little homeland. My grandfather Abram was a teacher and operated a small school at Stary Rynek, where children were taught in the Polish language, contrary to the common practice under the Russian rule. For the students to be instructed in Polish rather than Yiddish my grandfather needed a special license from the tsarist authorities. My Dad, Henryk Rozenblat, taught math at grandpa's school for some time.

What I remember most of my grandfather are the walks we took around the woods near Blachownia, where we used to spend summer vacations in a rented peasant's cabin. Two most vivid memories of the time were a trapdoor in the floor of the biggest room: it opened onto a cellar, delightfully cold even during very hot weather, where we used to store our food; the other thing was a small, wooden outhouse.

A well provided us with drinking water, which we carried inside in big tin pails.

My grandpa, who seemed an elderly man to me with his remarkable beard, spent the vacations with us. Ever the schoolmaster, he taught me lots of interesting things, for instance, how to count to 100 in Russian. He gave a Kolo Swiata once: 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 Częstochowa, who could tell you that Bangkok was the capital of Siam and that Siam was a kingdom. Now I see this toy in more symbolic light: not as a Disk of the World, but rather as Keys to the World which my beloved learned grandfather Abram bestowed on me.

Despite being such a small boy I remember pre-war Częstochowa very well as 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 droshkies. 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 streets part of the city. The beautiful Old Synagogue, with its famous frescoes by Professor Perec Willenberg, father of a renowned sculptor Samuel Willenberg, whose works have been displayed at the Jews of Częstochowa exhibition. All around Stary Rynek numerous smaller temples and countless shtibls were also scattered. There you found the yeshivas and the cheders. The language you could 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.

Movie-Theaters in Częstochowa

My favorite pastime was going to the movies, as a matter of fact, still is, if not for the lack of free time to pass. I recall how on Saturdays my father used to come home from work earlier, had lunch, and then the best part of the day began. Holding my hand he would take me to the barber on Berka Joselewicza street. My dad would sit comfortably and let the barber shave him, while I was studying colorful film posters on the walls. I would climb up a chair to be able to pick up the one at the top and leaf through all the posters. We had quite a choice because there were as many as four movie-theaters in Częstochowa then. The biggest and most classy was Luna on Kosciuszki street, Eden was near our house. The most exciting films, such as *Captain Blood* or *Robin Hood*, were for some reason shown at the Atlantic movie-theater. Swit was not a place respectable people like my Dad would go to, although I liked westerns shown there. Unfortunately, the equipment at the Swit movie was very fallible and the caption "To be continued in a moment" was often displayed on the screen. Leaving the barber's we already had a plan agreed upon.

We lived at Aleja 6 in a comfortable and airy apartment. I had many friends there, with whom I would play at a large courtyard. Our favorite game was *kashtany*. My closest friend, Heniek, lived there as well, and above our flat – lovely Lilka Koplwicz, who was my first true love, even though she was unaware of the fact. Another boy was Sewek, whose father had a photo studio. Everybody in that big tenement house was Jewish, except for the caretaker, who was a Catholic. A small prayer room, *shtibl*, was located on the second floor. During Sukkot the courtyards were crowded with *sukkas*, built by devout Jews, such as our next-door neighbors, the Freimauers.

All our neighbors, certainly Jewish and proud of the fact, 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 Polish language, even the religious instruction.

Under the Nazi occupation, Jewish children were not allowed to attend school. In our building Mrs. Madzia Morawska organized clandestine classes for boys and girls. I was more upset by the prohibition against seeing movies. The prohibition against Jews entering movie theaters, theaters, or museums was one of the first issued by Hauptmann Franke, German governor of the city.

My first home movie-theater

When in mid-1940, after twelve long months without watching any film at all, my friend Heniek told me, that his uncle had a 16-mm film projector and several short movies and cartoons (silent, of course), I was overjoyed. And an excellent business plan, as we would say today, came to my mind immediately, for the first time in my life: we would rent the projector and invite all the children from the neighborhood, who missed going to the movies as much as I did, and for a small fee show them the films. Obviously we could not do it at my place, since my Mum would not let me even think about it! But at Heniek's would be fine, since his flat was consisted of a kitchen and a large room, almost as big as a movie hall. If only his mother would agree... How did we manage to convince her, I have no idea and will probably never know, but it must have been my first big success as a negotiator.

Persuading Heniek's uncle to let us borrow the projector with a Charlie Chaplin film and a cartoon involved even more difficult negotiation. He mentioned the copy of Chaplin's film was pretty worn out, but who would listen. Heniek's cousin swore he could operate the projector, because he watched his father do it. Thus we had an operator, who would get his share of our profits in return. With the equipment and service available, we proceeded to advertise, by whispering campaign, our first show on Friday afternoon. We squeezed fifteen chairs into Heniek's room. We charged one zloty per seat and fifty groszes for a standup, hoping for some thirty people audience to turn up.

We smuggled the projector to Heniek's place so cunningly that his father never noticed it, as he was to be back at home late in the evening. Adas, Heniek's cousin, tried to insert the cartoon into the projector, but the worn film was going apart in his hands, so we decided to skip the starter and serve the main dish. We produced about forty ticket with our toy printing set and waited for the opening at 2.p.m.

We had the first sign of trouble as early as at 1.p.m. Our whispering campaign proved surprisingly effective and all the seats were sold in no time at all. Another ten minutes and the run for standup tickets began. But spectators kept on coming and coming, not only children and teenagers, but also the grown-ups. Our back courtyard was soon crowded with people, and the central yard started to fill too. Without much ado, I signaled to Adas to start the show earlier in hope that we would do reruns to cater for everybody.

The light went out, the audience murmured with delight; the air was tight with expectancy. The projector moaned, a flash of bright light illuminated the sheet, which served as our screen, and – wonder of wonders – the title and captions appeared, followed by the figure of Charlie Chaplin in person, with his characteristic brisk walk and walking stick. We watched a street crowded with people and cars, when, all of the sudden, the projector clattered and the image disappeared. Adas fumbled with the broken film trying to fix it, the audience were waiting impatiently, but generally it was dark and quiet in the room, when loud banging on the front door was heard. In a moment the door burst open and two Jewish policemen rushed inside, cursing, brandishing their batons and yelling, 'Who is responsible for this? Who let it happen? We arrest all leaders? Where is the money you collected?'. They emptied our money box in a flash. The audience vanished immediately, too, together with my dreams of becoming a movie tycoon.

Our high school (gymnasium)

My brother Jerzyk and I went to the Hebrew Gymnasium, the most prestigious Jewish school in Częstochowa. The youth started their education in the first grade of elementary school, which was followed by six years at the gymnasium with the high school finals and diploma (*matura*) upon graduation. All subjects were taught in Polish, but we also

had Hebrew classes from the very beginning. Our school was at the corner of Dabrowska and Raclawicka streets. In 1938 a beautiful new building replaced it on Jasnogorska¹ and we were so proud of it. My friend Eli Zborowski is a native of Zarki, a small town near Częstochowa. 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 Częstochowa Hebrew Gymnasium.

My nanny

My beloved nanny's first name was Elka. I do not recall the surname of that brave woman of valor, as I might have not known it at all. She was the first to take me into Jasna Gora. I mostly remember climbing the famous high tower in the middle of which we passed the huge clock with its loud mechanism and booming bell. It was then that I saw a beautiful panorama of Częstochowa for the first time. The day Elka chose for this expedition was Yom Kippur, when my parents and Jerzyk were in the synagogue. I was under 13 then, too young to accompany them. I did not have my *bar mitzvah* yet and without this ceremony no Jewish boy is considered a man, fit to read the Torah at the synagogue. And at thirteen I could not have my *bar mitzvah* ceremony. I could not go to the synagogue with my parents and my brother. My parents and my brother were dead and our synagogue was gone.

Elka was a Christian, Catholic. She came from some place near Piotrkow Trybunalski. In the retrospect I can see now how devoted to me she must have been. I recall going to the park with her and my childhood friend, Romek Einhorn² and his nanny. If in the park I quarreled with Romek, as small boys often do, 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 in our apartment waiting for her Zygmus and was deported with other ghetto inhabitants to Treblinka, where they all perished in the gas chamber.

34 Wilsona Street

The old house at Wilsona 34 is quite important to me. Long ago, the Daumans³ 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 *poddashe* was a half way house. Children hidden in the Moebellager were brought here to await a chance to be smuggled into the small ghetto. After many weeks in the Moebellager attic, I spent some ten days at

¹ Presently it houses the C.K. Norwid High School.

² Roman Einhorn was born in 1931 in *Czestochowa*. He survived the Holocaust and after the war lived in Canada, where he worked as a doctor. Now he has retired. His elder brother, Jerzy, became a doctor, too. It was in his room in Lodz, on Piotrkowska, where he was a medical student that I spent my last night before leaving Poland. Jerzy emigrated later to Sweden, where he got a teaching job at Uppsala University. Professor Jerzy Einhorn was a prominent radiologist, a member of the Nobel prize committee. He died in Uppsala several years ago. His son, also a physician, and his daughter, a film-maker, have been living in Sweden.

³ Their son, Sam (Moniek) Dauman took care of me at HASAG and we were best friends for the rest of our lives. In the U.S. we always lived close to each other. He died in 2003 and I miss him very much.

Wilsona 34. 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 Aryan part of the city and live.

Here at Wilsona 34, I saw my brother Jerzyk for the last time. Jerzyk was eighteen when he was killed by the Nazis. He will stay in my memory for ever as he was then – tall, strong, handsome, and 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 short 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 Jerzyk was fifteen 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 1930s, Jerzyk played the student leader and guide. Leadership came to him naturally and easily.

It was obvious that in 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 Silberstein⁴, father of my cousin, Alan, whom you already met. 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 held 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.

Arabs were not the first to make use of our most sacred holiday of Yom Kippur to start a massacre. 30 years before, in 1942, the Nazi murderers with all their cynicism proceeded to liquidate the Czestochowa ghetto exactly on Yom Kippur⁵ 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!

⁴ Leon Silberstein, born in 1903 in Piotrkow Trybunalski, married Roza nee Rozenblat. He died in 1996 in the U.S. Roza Silberstein was born in 1907 in Czestochowa, and died in 1973 in the U.S. During the war both their sons were most brutally killed. Their third son, Alan Silberstein, was born after the war and he is with us today.

⁵ In 1942 Yom Kippur was on September 21.

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 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 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 a temporary camp at Wilsona 34 on the outskirts of the old ghetto. Their intention was to set eastwards once again the first week of April with the onset of warmer weather.

It is a historical fact that some Jewish boys and girls survived the war posing as Christian children, thank to Christian help. One who did not survive was Mietek⁶, my classmate, a twelve-year-old boy 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, the place was ringed by the SS and the Wehrmacht. Through a loudspeaker, 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 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 at the lime wall of the Jewish cemetery of Częstochowa. Their mass grave is marked now by the memorial with the engraved names⁷ of the six young members of the Jewish Fighting Organization.

Garibaldi Street

After the liquidation of the ghetto, all along Garibaldi street the plundered Jewish belongings were sorted out. It was from here that the valuables were dispatched to Germany proper. And thus, for instance, at no.19, glassware, lamps and china were collected. House no.16 was a store of carpets and furniture. Clothes were loaded in a neighboring house. On upper floors of Garibaldi 14 the Germans stored works of art,

⁶ Mietek Kongrecki, born in 1930 in Czestochowa; shot by the Germans on March 19, 1943 at the Jewish cemetery.

⁷ The inscription includes: Moniek Flamenbaum, age 21; Olek Herszenberg, 26; Janek Krauze, 23; Heniek Rychter, 19; Jerzyk Rozenblat, 18; Szlamek Szajn, 23.

precious books, and paper. The ground floor was occupied by my uncle Leon Silberstein's labor detail of Jewish artisans, skillful craftsmen.

It was here that Jewish carpenters, cabinet makers, mechanics, decorators, and painters fulfilled every whim and wish of the German Herrenvolk, in exchange for a chance to upkeep themselves and their families, at least for the time being. Uncle Leon somehow persuaded the German manager, Schlosser, to let me join the detail as a jack-of-all-trades. I worked hard all day, but I did not close my eyes to what I saw and I remember it to this very day.

At the courtyard of the splendid Naye Shul synagogue, which I attended with my parents before it was burnt down by the Germans, opposite Garibaldiego 28, where the Schupo headquarters were during the occupation, an SS-man Klipsch, a tall, pockmarked madman nicknamed Weisserkopf wanted to have "fun" with a beautiful Jewish girl, who worked in the glassware warehouse at no.19. The girl's resistance made him furious, so he started to hit her, first with his fist, than his revolver. When she dropped to the ground, bleeding, Klipsch shot her straight in the head.

I also saw the death of Mrs. Birencwajg, through a window at the staircase of the building at Garibaldiego 14, showing partly the courtyard of the Moebellager. We knew all too well that the Germans were looking for Machel Birencwajg, because the storeroom was to be liquidated. Machel was warned in time and managed to hide somewhere, but the Germans found his mother and dragged her out of her hiding place. She was questioned in the middle of the courtyard by Kuhnel. Each question was followed by a blow of a riding whip. I was too far away to hear the terrified elderly lady screaming, just saw her trying to shield herself from the blows. At some point Kuhnel drew his revolver and killed Mrs. Birencwajg with several shots.

Mikveh

For some time uncle Leon lived here with his family and several workers from his detail, who treated it as a great honor. The rest of the team, including me, lived in the small ghetto.

It was a beautiful building of the pre-war mikveh, ritual bath, with mosaic floors and glazed tiles on the walls, with stained glass windows.

During the liquidation of the small ghetto all Jews, whom the Germans considered fit to do hard work, were moved to HASAG, and the rest were shot to death on Kawia street and at the Jewish cemetery. The sorting of Jewish belongings on Garibaldiego street was ended when all things of any value were sent to Germany proper.

Some of the mikveh inhabitants, including uncle Leon, were moved first to Garibaldiego 28, and then to HASAG. But prior to that, on the last day in the mikveh, my cousin Niutek, a boy of twelve, was shot to death at its courtyard⁸. I have been haunted by the thought that my uncle Leon saw a German officer shoot his son.

At the mikveh the cement dumpster was also a hideout for Mr. Bender and his wife. They chose to die of their own hand and took cyanide instead of waiting for the Schupo to kill them.

Zygmus

My uncle Leon had two sons when the war started. The younger, Zygmus, was born on May 12, 1936, the day of the coronation the British King, George VI. The date imprinted

⁸ Niutek Silberstein, the eldest brother of Alan; his picture with my family in a droshky has miraculously survived.

itself in my memory, because my clever and far-sighted aunt Roza asked my father to write a letter in English and address it to the royal court in London, imploring the King to grant British citizenship to Zygmus with regard to his birthday date. Before the war uncle Leon and aunt Roza were very well off. My aunt, a trained accountant, was a bright business woman, as we would say today. Uncle Leon had a lot of good ideas and could do anything with his skillful hands. Soon after their wedding they set up a workshop producing bicycle parts. They both worked very hard. My uncle invented and patented a special bicycle lock, which was selling very well. The company grew and the new workshop on Krotka street was a model factory.

To his expertise and skills did uncle Leon owe a relative security under the German occupation, but he knew all too well that no Jew could feel safe then. Being a protégé of Leutnant Werner made him automatically a target of attacks of Leutnant Rohn. Moreover my uncle's involvement with the resistance movement could end tragically for him and his family at any moment. Fortunately, his good material standing allowed Leon to provide seemingly the best hiding place for his son. My cousin Zygmus was placed with Dr. Ziemaszewski⁹, a physician and pre-war acquaintance of uncle Leon. Zygmus, a beautiful and very bright for a six-year-old boy, was quick to grasp what was demanded of him. He learnt the basics of Catholic catechism, while expert hands of Dr. Ziemaszewski managed to conceal almost entirely the fact that Zygmus was, as any Jewish boy, circumcised.

He became a member of the family and was introduced as a son of the late half-brother of Dr. Ziemaszewski. The latter demanded a very large sum of money from Zygmus' parents, and they agreed to pay in hope that even if they would not survive, their son would be lucky to live after the war in a prosperous family. For obvious reasons my uncle's contacts with Dr. Ziemaszewski were irregular, but more money and valuables were passed each time.

When all the Jews were removed from Garibaldi street and confined in HASAG, especially when it was the SS who took charge of it, no contacts were possible. Dr. Ziemaszewski must have believed that all the Jewish inmates of HASAG would perish together with the rest, or else he must have just panicked and did what he did... Upon the liberation of Częstochowa at night on January 15-16 1945 there was nothing more urgent for my uncle and aunt than to look for their son. Early in the morning on January 16 they went to Dr. Ziemaszewski's house. No one was there. The following days and weeks were endless torment of fruitless search for Zygmus. At last we all learnt from a reliable source, confirmed by other testimonies, that just before the end of the war Dr. Ziemaszewski drowned my little cousin.

Moebellager

The name means a furniture warehouse in German and was applied to a complex of buildings on Wilsona street. It included a carpenter's and upholstery workshops, mattresses manufacture, and all kinds of workshops and storerooms. Several hundred Jewish craftsmen and mechanics worked there supervised by Machel Birncwajg and Leon Silberstein. My dad also worked there in an office. His manager was Lange, an elderly, relatively gentle German officer. His passion was collecting butterflies. I remember him showing me proudly dozens of his beautiful items on the walls of his office room.

⁹ I do not recall his first name.

On the eve of Yom Kippur rumors were heard of something terrible to happen. The ghetto was sealed off from the rest of the city and cordoned by hundreds of Ukrainian guards. Many Jews working at Moebellager managed to smuggle in their clothes and hide them in some hiding places (bunkers).

I cannot recall why we were not at the Moebellager premises next morning, when the liquidation of the ghetto began. We spent the night at Uncle Leon's workshop nearby, with his sister Regina and her two children: my friend Kuba¹⁰ and his baby sister Lusia. Suddenly loudspeakers started to blare orders and instructions how and where to go. All men were herded into Metalurgia, a large factory on Krotka street, just by Uncle Leon's workshop, where we were hiding from the previous night. At the Metalurgia premises the men fit for work were to be selected by the Germans, while the remaining would be sent to the gas chambers of Treblinka. Women and children were driven on foot to the bus station on Wilsona St. There a few young and fit women were chosen to work in the HASAG ammo factory and at the sorting of Jewish belongings at Garibaldi. The remaining women, about 95 per cent, and all children were herded to the siding¹¹, into the trains which carried them to their deaths in Treblinka.

I mentioned the wonderful Saturday afternoons I used to spend with my father, I remembered how happy I was when he took with him on some of his business trips, to Katowice, where I saw my first streetcar, or to Krakow, where my father found time to show me Wawel Castle, or to Bedzin, where we went to see the ruins of a local castle. We usually commenced our travels from the bus station at Wilsona. To this very day the smell of gasoline and fumes brings to my mind the atmosphere of Częstochowa bus station with the roaring noise of buses setting out to various magical destinations. And then I was to set off from this station with my mother to our destruction. And I felt I was parting for ever with my beloved father, whom I would never see again.

Marching towards the bus station we turned from Krotka into Wilsona. Ukrainian auxiliary forces were lined along the other side of the street with their guns aimed at us and whips held high. Cursing loudly they rushed the marching. When we were approaching the Moebellager gate Regina whispered that we should try to slip in there. we slowed down so that other would screen us from the Ukrainians' eyes. Boldly and resolutely we opened the door to the guardroom of Moebellager. My mother and me, Regina with her son Kuba and daughter Lusia, and her sister Hela with her daughter, we all rushed inside in no time at all.

A Polish guard who was arguing over something with two Jewish workers, yelled at us to leave, but Regina took the initiative by now. She demanded firmly to see Mr. Leon Silberstein. One of the Jewish workers told the guard to throw us out before the Ukrainians burst in and shoot us all on the spot. The guard nodded and aimed his gun at us while opening the door to push us out. Hela, terrified, grabbed her daughter and ran out. At this very moment we noticed Uncle Leon at the back of the courtyard. My mother instantly opened a window and called for his help. And he did help us, as many times before and afterwards. But for Hela and her daughter it was already too late.

Following this action we spent many weeks in a crowded attic above the upholstery workshop. The ceiling was sloping and the hideout was about a meter high at the center and only twelve inches by both side walls. A velvet drape divided it in two parts. At least fifty boys and girls with their mothers were crowded in the major section, while the other had a tiny window and some pails serving as our lavatories. Every night

¹⁰ Jakub Szacharon, my friend, left for Israel after the war and worked as a guide there. He wrote a number of books on Israel. He died in 2005 in Tel Aviv.

¹¹ Along the Warta, by the Paper Factory of Kohn, the people from the ghetto were driven down Warszawska street, New Market Square, and Krakowska Alley.

the hatch in the floor was opened and somebody delivered us food and drink standing on a ladder and took from us the full pails.

During the day we tried to move as little as possible, and we froze completely at the dreaded signal, a single knock. It always meant that a German or any other enemy was approaching the upholstery shop. We literally held our breaths until the other signal, two knocks, would relieve us. Sometimes the alarm was called off in a matter of minutes, but many times we waited for it for long hours, alert and silent, with terror mounting in our hearts. The worst thing then would be to feel the urge to use the lavatory, because we could not move an inch.

Nevertheless, when some days passed, we worked out certain daily routine, we played and listened to some stories and even read, when our eyes got used to the almost complete darkness at the attic. On the right side there was some more light and air and consequently those, who stayed there were considered privileged: "living in a better neighborhood". Some friendships were struck up, or even some romantic relationships budded. Kuba and me got a note from Polcia and her nice friends, stating more or less "We are alive today, but can be dead tomorrow, let us check what it is all about".

It was very innocent, of course. First two weeks we spent at the attic the weather was hot and we were thirsty all the time. I dreamt of cold lemonade. But soon the autumn set in with the cold.

Market Square

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. 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 Moebellager. In winter of 1943 I was still quite short and small, but my uncle Leon decided I would be safer being with him and in February 1943 he managed to enlist me in his labor detail working at Garibaldi 14. Prior to that I was 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 repeated 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 third floor where you entered through a wardrobe, of which the back moved aside to let you into a narrow space. We would spend entire days there, even on rumor 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 4th 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 Rynecek. This was the only source of air and light. And it was there where I 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 (guardroom) 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 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 Rynecek 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 Rynecek 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 Rynecek, a military DKW car now arrived from which stepped out a superman, Lieutenant 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 Rynecek. They looked on as the Ukrainians herded the larger group of men and 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 the project for Captain Degenhardt, the Schupo Commandant. Thus Leon 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 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 his 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 Ryneček in troop carriers and on motorcycles. Oberleutnant Frankowski was now in charge. The trucks were quickly and brutally loaded up and left the Ryneček. 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 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 twenty 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 now he proceeded to pick every fifth man. As he counted off, eins, zwei, drei, vier, fuenf, 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 Poniedziałek*, Bloody Monday.

I do remember many other events and experiences of my childhood in the Częstochowa ghetto. I recounted some of them in the *As If It Were Yesterday* documentary shot in Częstochowa in 2003 at exactly the same spots where the Germans were perpetrating the Holocaust: at Ryneček, on Wilsona and Garibaldi streets, in HASAG, at the Jewish cemetery... Some other I intend to describe in detail in an autobiography I am going to write. Other yet I will relate on some other occasions: to honor the memory of the

murdered Częstochowa Jews and to teach the young people of today a history lesson, because “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”.¹²

¹² George Santayana