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The Survivors of HASAG

In the history of the few who survived the mass murder of Polish Jews, it fell to Częstochowa to be a special place in the last months of the War: in no other Polish city, already freed from the Germans, were there so many Jews who survived – over 5,000 people. It was a phenomenon within a national scale.

The exceptional situation resulted from two circumstances:

- Firstly, the fact that an industrial plant complex, belonging to the Hasag company of Leipzig, just happened to be in Częstochowa, an armaments company catering to the needs of the German army. For the most part, the staff was comprised of Jewish slaves for whom the death sentence, imposed upon all European Jews by Hitler and his praetorians, was only postponed. The majority of their family and friends had already perished in the gas chambers of Treblinka. This postponement was triggered by a lack in the workforce for the German munitions industry, a matter of particular importance at a time when the *blitzkrieg* conquest phase of the Third Reich had already ended and Hitler's armies had begun suffering one defeat after another. Jewish slaves worked in terrible conditions - they were starved, terrorised, burdened with work beyond their strength and those who were weakened were killed. The majority of Hasag slaves were Jews from outside of Częstochowa. However, those from Częstochowa comprised the largest single group of slaves.
- The second factor which permitted such a considerable number of Jews to survive was the pace of the 1945 Red Army winter offensive, begun on 12th January and which, by the night of the 16th January, had already reached Częstochowa. Let us remember here that, for example, Oświęcim was not liberated until ten days later, on 27th January. Poznań had still not been liberated and Kraków was liberated the day after Częstochowa, on 18th January 1945.

The time factor was, in the case of the liberation of the Jewish slaves of Hasag, remarkably important, because the Germans had already commenced their evacuation in the territories of the Third Reich earlier, but the pace of the Soviet offensive was so unexpectedly fast, that the Germans had not managed to murder those who had not yet been evacuated – which was "normal" SS procedure in such cases.

In this manner, on 17th January 1945, over five thousand Jews, freed from the German slave labour camp of the Hasag armaments company, made Częstochowa, for a certain period of time, the largest place on Polish soil with a cluster of those rescued from the mass murder of Polish Jews. Only "for a certain period of time" because, for reasons

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which will still be discussed, as matters developed further, they did not permit this one, large group of Jews, rescued from mass murder, to become the first in this post-Holocaust situation to attempt to establish the idea of reconstructing Jewish life on the field of ashes which Poland had become following the effects of the German occupation and the genocide associated with it.

We do not know – and will probably never know – what proportion of Częstochowa inhabitants would have coped with their city becoming the springboard for the rebuilding of Jewish life in Poland, and what proportion would not have wished it.

Anna Iwaszkiewiczowa, wife of the writer Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, at the very moment of the city's liberation, was stopped by the Red Army January offensive at the station in Częstochowa on the way from Kraków, more specifically Rabka, to Warsaw. She noted, in her wartime writings, observations reflecting, in those first days following liberation, the view of those Poles who were moved by the return from oblivion of people who had, for several years since the Germans had established ghettos, not been seen on the streets of Polish cities. People whom it was considered would never be seen again. "In those first days", writes Maria Iwaszkiewiczowa, "I met Jews around town quite a number of times; one day (...) not far from the railway bridge on the Aleja, I met a group of young people, two girls and three boys, all around the age of twenty. They were walking arm-in-arm and were so happy, so jubilant, that I went up to them to congratulate them on their survival and that we had all lived to see this day. One of the girls, goodlooking and pleasant, soon told me that she had lost all those close to her, but you could tell that she had not allowed that fate to depress her"².

Such a positive attitude, in those days, from a section of young Jewish survivors from Częstochowa, is also recalled in the memoirs of a former Hasag-Pelcery prisoner, Jerzy Einhorn, then a young 19 year old man from Częstochowa, later an oncologist well-known in Sweden and around the world and a member of the candidates selection panel for the Nobel Prize³.

As he, himself, wrote in that first period following liberation, he mainly thought of how to get himself quickly into junior high school in Częstochowa in order to continue that education which had been interrupted by the nightmare of German occupation. He didn't think of leaving Poland. However, in 1946, he emigrated to Sweden, which became his second homeland – because that is what his father, Pinkus Einhorn, a well-known Częstochowa tailor, had wanted.

Initially, the Jewish survivors in Częstochowa still did not know whether they were a lone oasis in a desert of death of the rest of Polish Jewry. They did not know who or what had survived from the 3.5 million strong community of Polish Jews from just a few years before. In this respect, they felt like Robinson Crusoe on a deserted island. From many

² Anna Iwaszkiewiczowa, *Dzienniki i wspomnienia*, Warszawa 2000, s. 336-337.

³ Jerzy Einhorn, *Wybrany, aby żyć*, Gdańsk 2002, (przekład ze szwedzkiego.)

other reports of the time by liberated Częstochowa Jews as well as by Jews from outside of Częstochowa and Poland who found themselves in that city, we know that, in that initial period, it was hard for them to anchor themselves in Częstochowa. They could not find work. It was difficult to find an apartment. People felt alienated. The local administration did not help to reunite them in freedom. A few years ago, in material from the Częstochowa Conference of April 2004, Prof. Jerzy Mizgalski⁴, among others, mentions this. From archival material of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, stored in the Jewish Historical Institute, we know that, in February-March 1945, help was already reaching Częstochowa Jewish survivors from Jewish organisations operating, from the autumn of 1944, firstly in "Lublin Poland" and later in Warsaw, Łódź and Kraków. It was aid partially coming from the Polish authorities and later, until 1950, from self-help Jewish organisations in the West⁵.

Based upon this help, the Jews of Częstochowa very quickly set about organising, or in fact, reconstructing their social infrastructure: orphanages, cafeterias, their own trade school, medical aid for those who had suffered due to the conditions in the camps or as a result of having been in hiding. The pace and the extent of this self-help activity were truly impressive, but it did not prevent the rapid melting away of the mid-1945 population numbering over 5,600 souls. Including the non-indigenous inhabitants of Częstochowa, it was only a quarter of the pre-War population of Częstochowa Jews. The reasons for the rapid decline were various: some left Częstochowa because they had come from other cities, sometimes even from other countries, and wanted to learn, as soon as possible, who had survived from their family and friends.

Others, after everything that they had experienced here, wanted to leave Poland, the largest Jewish cemetery in the world, a place of torment of their nearest and dearest.

From the memoirs of Częstochowianin Jakub Wodzisławski⁶, we know that, by February 1945, hence already before the end of the War, news had reached Częstochowa, from Jewish organisations or, more specifically, from one of the former leaders of the Jewish Fighting Organization from the time of the Warsaw Ghetto, that there existed the possibility of illegally reaching Palestine via Romania. Wodzisławski, himself, with a group of his friends, had already left Częstochowa on 8th March 1945 in order to reach Palestine as rapidly as possible. This took place as part of an operation codenamed "Bricha" or "Alija B" and organised by Zionist organizations. The group, of which he was a part, travelled through Hungary, Yugoslavia and Italy and, after many vicissitudes, reached Palestine. They crossed the border pretending to be Greek Jews, former prisoners of Oświęcim and of the Warsaw SS "Gęsiówka" prison, who were returning to their

⁴ Żydzi Częstochowianie – współlistnienie, Holocaust, pamięć, pod. red. Jerzego Mizgalskiego, ze wstępem Zygmunta Rolata, Częstochowa 2006.

⁵ Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego im. Emanuela Ringelbluma (AŻIH), sygn.303/II/54 i in.

⁶ Jakub Wodzisławski, *Jakub syn Samuela*, Wrocław 2007 s.113 i n.

homeland. Wodziszawski states beautifully why he decided to emigrate. "With feeling of love and pain, I left Poland, our family's homeland. With thoughts of my happy childhood years amongst family and friends, but also with thoughts of the agonies during the years of the Nazi occupation of Poland. As I will never forget the good and beautiful life of my youth, I will also never forget the other choir – that of the cries of despair. Men and women, the elderly and children, during the final days of the liquidation of the ghetto in my home city of Częstochowa."⁷

Freed from the Germans, the speed by which the Jewish survivors left Częstochowa was great. Already by 1st August 1945, the number of Jews in Częstochowa was half the number at the moment of liberation – 2,314 people. In January 1946, of those 2,314 people, only 1,417 remained. From February 1946, a small trickle of Polish Jews began flowing into Częstochowa as part of the repatriation of Polish citizens from the USSR, pre-War citizens of the Second Polish Republic. However, this invigorating stream of returning expatriates, which lasted until July 1946 was not able to level out the ebbing tide. It continued to grow, particularly after the Kielce pogrom in July 1946. The circumstances surrounding that pogrom were devastating to the idea of rebuilding Jewish life in Poland. The damage done by these bestial murders spread far beyond the borders of Kielce. By February 1947, only 847 Jews lived in Częstochowa and, by March 1948, there were only 670. Some inhabitants of Częstochowa, under the influence of the post-Kielce panic, moved to the larger Jewish centres of the Dolny Śląsk Province. On 20th September 1946, 171 people were listed on the register of the Częstochowa *landsmannschaft* of the Dolny Śląsk Province. The remainder of the outflow continued at a freer pace.

What compelled these people to leave Poland? Why, from around a quarter of a million Jewish Holocaust survivors from Poland, the majority of whom had survived in the USSR and who by mid-1946 had found themselves in Poland, do only 6,000 remain in the country today – less than one-tenth of the number of Vietnamese living in Poland today? The reasons were varied. It appears, however, that the greater role was played by the unfriendly the reception of their former neighbours with which the returning Jews were greeted, as well as the feeling of danger triggered by the wave of post-War pogroms, as well as by the number of assassination murders committed on Jews.

However, many Jews, among them Częstochowa survivors, left Poland for other reasons: because the prevailing post-War political system in their homeland was not to their liking; because they did not wish to live on the "field of ashes" of their nearest and dearest, but also, as mentioned before, for other ideological considerations – a desire to participate in the establishment of their own Jewish state in Palestine.

⁷ Ibid, s.214.

