

"Opfer fuer Hitler"

Annihilation of the Remnants of Jewish Intelligentsia
in Czestochowa

After the liquidation of the large ghetto in Czestochowa, when on Hauptman Degenhardt's orders fifty thousand Jews perished, the small ghetto was established.

On October 19, 1942, remnants of the temporarily saved Jewry in "Metalurgja" and "Landau" factories, as well as other work groups in the "Aryan" sector, were brought into the small ghetto, behind barbed wire.

After some time, a new "Judenrat" was organized and headed by "prezes" (chairman) Leon Kopinski.

The most important office in the ghetto was "Arbeitseinsatz", a labor placement office, located at the exit to Ryneczek Warszawski and headed by Berland Kurland. Also, two hospitals were established, one on Garncarska St., headed by dr. Ignacy Szperling and another on Jaskrowska, managed by dr. Kagan.

Most apartments in the small ghetto were plundered by Germans and Poles alike during a previous evacuation and in a run-down condition. ~~Many~~ ^{Many} repairs were needed.

I was appointed manager of the office of all the repair shops in the small ghetto. Each shop had its own foreman. .

My office and some repair~~sk~~ shops were located in the basement of a building on Kozia St.; there were also many other repair shops all over the ghetto.

In the ghetto could only remain those working in the offices, various craftsmen, as well as people assigned to other tasks. All had to carry at all times ^{a valid} ~~an~~ identity card issued by the Arbeitseinsatz. Anyone apprehended without it, was shot on the spot.

All requests for repairs had to be reported to my office by the occupants themselves. Each day, at 8:00 am all repairmen had to report to my office for assignments which I signed "adw.E.Ep" (adwokat Estera Epstein).

This was satisfactory and recognizable to the Germans.

On the average, repairs took little time, but the worker was protected for the rest of the day and could do whatever he pleased.

There were also some, non-craftsmen, referred to me by Bernard Kurland who were coming in working clothes, complete with tools and I gave them fictitious work orders...

Under the pretext of inspecting apartments to check the work in progress, I could move freely around the ghetto. Several times a day I called at the Arbeitseinsatz to obtain from Kurland, who was a member of the Jewish "underground", confidential information ~~concerning Jews~~ on events concerning the Jews in the ghetto and in the factories in the "Aryan" sector.

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In case of impending danger, I immediately ran to all the work shops to announce that "dł/bal iz gedekt", what meant in ghetto language that an "Aktion" was in progress.

Older men were instantly leaving the work shops, hurrying to hide in bunkers, younger ones ~~XXXXXXXX~~ rushed home to put children, the sick and the infirm in pre-arranged hiding places.

Many lives were saved this way, if only temporarily...

Such^{an} action on my part brought me once quite an unexpected reward:

After the liquidation of the small ghetto, a group of ~~xxx~~ still remaining inmates, including myself, was brought on June 25, 1943. to the Hasag - Pelcery ammunition factory. We had to sleep there on bare concrete in an empty hall...

One of my former workers, a carpenter, noticed me there. "Pani mecnas", he said, "you saved my life many times in the small ghetto. For that I'll make you now a bed!"

Next day he presented me with a hammered together bed and a straw mattress, so that my sister Tamara and I could sleep in relative comfort.

What a luxury in those times...

Now let's go back to the story.

In the "Aryan" sector, a building belonging to family Franke, Aleja 14, corner Wilson Street was on Degenhardt's orders, occupied, together with their families, by highly skilled Jewish tailors, shoemakers, seamstresses, embroideresses and other craftsmen, working exclusively for high German ~~officia~~ officials. Jews ironically called it "The White House".

However, only after a few months, Degenhardt ordered a relocation of all those "favorites of destiny" into the small ghetto.

The task of finding for them suitable living quarters fell to "prezes" Kopinski. In his zeal to please these "lucky" people, Kopinski frequently intercepted my workers in the streets and redirected them to apartments of the former "White House" inhabitants.

My workers usually had nothing against it, as those people were very well off financially.

Bitter complaints started to flood my office, that inspite of repeated requests for urgent repairs nothing was being done. I was also repeatedly accused of not dispatching workers to assigned jobs, which, of course, was untrue.

I eventually went to Kopinski, and after much haggling, he agreed that my workers have first to take care of my orders because of the urgency and may spend the rest of the day working for Kopinski. I also told my workers that I don't have anything against them making money "on the side", but that repairs in apartments of poor, sick, old people and where are small children come first.

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However, inspite of this apparent agreement, all my repeated protestation fell on deaf ears...

One day, and I remember it well, Thursday, March 18, 1943, came to my office an old Jew, tall, emaciated, with a flowing white beard. He complained that inspite of his repeated requests to have his kitchen stove repaired nothing was done, that his apartment was full of smoke and he was unable to boil water for a glass of tea. ~~Tears~~ Tears were running down his cheeks..

His dignified, patriarchal stature vividly reminded me of my father who just perished in Treblinka's gas chambers...

I tried to justify myself and even showed him copies of work orders for his apartment.

After he left, I ran to Kopinski's office, threw my office keys on his desk and told him that I can't any longer put up with such unfair treatment of the poor people while he takes away the workers to please "the gentlemen of the White House". Kopinski was dumb struck...

From Kopinski's office I rushed to the hospital on Jaskrowska, where I told dr. Kagan the whole story and begged him to give me a medical certificate, that I am ill and need bed rest.

Dr. Kagan, an old friend of my father and who has known me for many years, luckily agreed to my request.

Having resigned my position and not being ~~assigned~~ ^{assigned} to other duties was in the ghetto tantamount to a verdict of death...

I went home and stayed in bed. Unexpectedly, on Saturday, March 20, 1943, at 1:00 pm, arrived dr. Lipinski accompanied by two other physicians. Degenhardt warned him, he said, that issuing a false medical certificate may cost his neck...

Dr. Lipinski, a long-time friend of my father, and who has known me since childhood, issued a certificate signed by himself and his two colleagues.

Same day, at 4:00 pm, in the streets of the ghetto resounded calls of the Jewish, and later on of the Polish police, to assemble at the main entrance gate.

I immediately handed my certificate to Tamara and asked her to show it to Bernard Kurland at the "Arbeitseinsatz". Upon her arrival, Kurland told her, that he can't do anything in this matter, but advised her to approach Lagerfuhrer, Oberwachtmeister Uberscher who was at that time at the exit to Ryneckek Warszawski. Uberscher just glanced at the document and told Tamara to go back home.

As I learnt afterwards, Degenhardt did not come like on any other day to the "Arbeitseinsatz", but issued his orders from the office of the dreaded "Schutzpolizei" - gendarmerie, located in one of the stores on Ryneckek Warszawski. This is why Kurland was unaware of happenings in the ghetto.

Eventually, all members of the Judenrat, physicians, engineers, teachers, together with their families, assembled on the square. When Kurland came and noticed in the crowd his wife and 19 years old daughter, he asked Degenhardt if he too should join.

"Certainly", he replied cynically, "you'll make a list of all present for a transport to New Palestine".

Approximately six weeks before, posters appeared ^{at the office of} ~~aa~~ over the small ~~ghetto~~ ^{the Judenrat} announcing that the Swiss International Red Cross obtained permission from Berlin to take all of the Jewish intelligentsia to 'New Palestine'.

Jewish intelligentsia in the small ghetto learning that Judenrat members already registered, did likewise. I too was among them.

In this way Degenhardt obtained a complete list of all the ~~prospective~~ prospective "emigrants".

Uberscher reported that "die Rechtsanwältin Estera Epstein" (myself) was sick and unable to attend and handed the certificate to Degenhardt.

Degenhardt, to avoid panic, feigned indifference: "If she does ~~not~~ not want to go to New Palestine, that's her business," he said.

Few hours later, the crowd, escorted by armed 'Werkschutz' entered Warszawska Street and from there into the court yard of Weiselfisz's ~~house~~ house on corner of ~~Stary~~ ^{Nowy} Rynek.

Before long appeared large trucks with armed Schupo's (Schutzpolizei) and all had to get in.

From there, the entire convoymade a left turn around the church of St. Sigmund and continued across Stary Rynek and the bridge on Zawodzie toward Olsztynska Street. Only then it became clear to all that this was just a bluff, that instead of going to 'New Palesine' they are ~~destined~~ ^{destined} ~~to die on the Jewish Cemetery...~~

Many jumped off the trucks, among them Kurland and ~~Kopinski~~ ^{Mankes} with his son. Werkschutz and Schupo's shot and killed many of the escapees...

On the cemetery, all were herded into a small, vacant house, forced to strip naked and then escorted single file or in pairs to the edge of a huge, freshly dug mass grave... There they were shot, one by one...

Last victim was Lili, seven years old, the daughter of dr. Winer (a cousin of my sister-in-law, Gutka Epstein) who on that very day celebrated her seventh birthday together with her friends, parents and other physicians and their families.

The murderers stripped Lili of everything, leaving only a large, white bow in her locks. Her large, blue eyes gazed with puzzlement at her executioners, as if memsmerising them...

For a while, none of the henchmen was able to ~~h~~ raise his hand. Eerie silence prevailed...

Suddenly Lagerfuhrer Uberscher lunged forward and exclaiming:
"Fuer das Vaterland!", fired the fatal shot.

Little Lili was the last of the one hundred fifty seven victims of that massacre.

In drunken stupor, ~~Degenhardt~~ ^{Uberscher} was later heard complaining of sleepless nights because of this incident. The image of this little girl was pursuing him like a shadow...

On the Jewish cemetery perished at the same time my two colleagues, lawyers, dr. Szymon Pohoryle and Jeremiasz Gitler; also dr. Kagan and dr. Lipinski, who saved my life but could not save theirs...

A "Totenkomando" was left behind to bury ^{most of} the victims. It is from them and from Bernard Kurland that I learned ~~all~~ these tragic details...

An unknown hand laid on the fresh grave a chip of a desecrated tombstone, inscribed:

"Jewish Intelligentsia of Czestochowa,
Purim, May 20, 1943".

We named it "Purim" Aktion.

And so, like by a miracle, I cheated death on the Jewish cemetery...

---This was the so called "Opfer fur Hitler" Aktion which took part simultaneously all over the 'General Gouvernment' in which perished the remnants of the once glorious Jewish intelligentsia.