

"Opfer fuer Hitler"

ANNIHILATION OF THE REMNANTS OF THE JEWISH INTELLIGENTSIA IN CZESTOCHOWA

On October 19, 1942, after the liquidation of the large ghetto in Czestochowa, when on Hauptman Degenhardt's orders 50,000 Jews were murdered, a small ghetto of survivors was established.

A new Judenrat was organized and headed by "prezes", (chairman), Leon Kopinski.

The most important office in the ghetto was the "Arbeitseinsatz", the labor placement office, which was headed by Bernard Kurland.

It was he who appointed me manager of the office which was in charge of all apartment repairs in the ghetto.

Only certain workers and those employed in the Arbeitseinsatz, Judenrat, kitchen, hospitals could remain alive in the ghetto. Each person had to carry a valid identity card issued by the Arbeitseinsatz' office. My signature was one of those recognized and accepted by the Germans.

Anyone without a valid work-assignment identity card was subject to immediate execution.

At the same time that the small ghetto struggled to exist, there remained in the Aryan sector a group of skilled Jewish craftsmen who worked exclusively for high German officials and their families. We called their quarters outside the ghetto "The White House".

When in early 1943, this group of elite Jewish prisoners was merged with our small ghetto, the wealth these craftsmen brought with them caused friction between chairman Kopinski and myself.

Kopinski insisted, these wealthy newcomers were to have preference over the needy, but poor, of our ghetto. My opposition to this is the background to a terrible episode.

Like a thread unraveling, a trivial event led to a poignant story.

Kopinski's favoritism of the wealthy "White House" craftsmen brought an old Jew - emaciated, weeping - to my office. His requests to have his kitchen stove repaired went unanswered for weeks.

Incensed, I ran to Kopinski's office, threw my keys on his desk and resigned my office.

I was now without a valid work permit.

I was now living on borrowed time. It was March 18, 1943.

At the hospital on Jaskrowska, I begged a friend, Doctor Kagan, for a medical certificate.

With this permit I could exist a few days more...

On March 20, 1943, a family friend, Doctor Lipinski, together with two other physicians, visited me at my apartment and, at the risk of his own life, gave me another medical certificate testifying to my illness.

I had gained another few days of life...

Within two hours of this reprieve, shouts and curses of the Jewish and Polish police were heard throughout the ghetto. All doctors, lawyers, teachers, the entire Judenrat - all Jewish intellectuals - together with their families - were to assemble at the main ghetto gate.

The Germans announced that the Swiss International Red Cross had obtained Berlin's permission for all of the Jewish intellectuals to be taken to "NEW PALESTINE". They were to leave immediately.

I gave my sister, Tamara, who did not have to report to the assembly, my medical certificate and asked that she show this to Kurland, the head of the Arbeitseinsatz, in order to excuse my absence.

She was advised that Kurland could do nothing but that she might show the certificate to the German Lagerfuhrer, Oberwachtmeister Ueberscher.

Ueberscher - who knew me personally - and who was under orders to create no special sense of urgency - waved my sister away.

Degenhardt dismissed the matter by saying loudly before the assembled intellectuals, "if the Rechtsanwaltn Epstein was sick and unable to attend, then she can stay here and not go to New Palestine".

His indifference in this matter seemed to show the assembly that the Germans were quite sincere and that my absence meant that I would be a loser of some good event given the Jews by the Germans...

(cont'd)

Even Kurland, head of the Arbeitseinsatz, was unaware of anything amiss. Seeing his wife and 19-year old daughter among the assembly, he asked Degenhardt if he, too, should join the group.

Even though Kurland had not been ordered to the assembly, Degenhardt acceded to his request.

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

After a short time, the group was told to march from the ghetto.

Along the way they were turned into a courtyard.

Suddenly - by prearrangement - large trucks with armed "Schutzpolizei" appeared.

The group was forced into these vehicles.

The trucks roared away with their human cargo...

Then, ominously, they turned onto Olsztynska Street, the street leading to the Jewish cemetery. Now it became clear that "New Palestine" was to be execution pits...

Many jumped from the trucks, among them Kurland and Maurycy Kopinski, brother of the "prezes" with his son.

Werkschutz and Schupo (Schutzpolizei) killed many of the escapees...

At 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 year old daughter of Doctor Winer, who on that very day celebrated her seventh birthday together with her parents and friends.

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 mesmerising them...

For a while, none of the henchmen was able to raise his weapon.

Eerie silence prevailed...

Suddenly, Lagerfuhrer Ueberscher 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 a drunken stupor, Ueberscher was later heard complaining of sleepless nights because of this incident. The image of this little girl with a white bow in her hair was pursuing him like a shadow...

Among those who perished were Doctors Kagan and Lipinski who saved my life but could not save theirs...

A "Totenkommando" was left behind to bury the victims. It is from them and from Kurland that I learned the terrible 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 the "Purim Aktion".

By a miracle, I was the only member of the group slated for death that day to survive.

Why, I really don't know. Maybe to bear witness to what had happened...

This "Opfer fuer Hitler" Aktion took place simultaneously throughout the "General Government", an area of German-occupied Poland. On that day perished the remnants of the once-glorious Jewish intelligentsia of Poland.

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