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4/50/71

My Last Encounter with the Murderer of Jews, Degenhardt

X On Thursday, June 24, 1943, one of the first days of summer, it was warm and sunny in Częstochowa. I was both mentally and physically exhausted after a full day of hard work, and was getting ready, along with other forced laborers, to return home from the munitions factory 'Hasag ~~Polish~~ <sup>Peltony</sup> to the small ghetto.

X The procedure for returning to the ghetto was not simple. It involved a so-called ~~roll-call~~ <sup>"Apell"</sup> with unending roll-calls, under the command of Werkschutzleiter Klem and other representatives of Hitler's tyrannical authority. On that day, however, roll-call did not take place in the factory square, but rather in a large hall, in which the Werkzeug-Bau was later located. To everyone's amazement, Hauptman Degenhardt himself then appeared. He was, as always, impeccably dressed. He wore shiny knee-boots, white gloves, and had a riding-whip in his hand. He said something, I don't remember exactly what, but his cynical remark "Der schöne Mai ist vorbei" stuck in my memory. This meant that we could be prepared for the worst. He announced to us that he would read off full names, and those called were to leave the ranks and come forward.

The first name called was mine, Epstein. Next Szmulewicz and then Dawidowicz. Eight women reported together, and each had to show her identification. Four of them were then sent back to the ranks, and four were detained, among them myself and my cousin, Marysia Epstein. Two men, Józek Winter and Moryc Wojdyslawski, were arrested at the same time, sent to prison in Zawodzie, and shortly after, executed.

Degenhardt declared to us that we, that is the four women, would be interrogated by the Gestapo the next morning, and then

X sent to work at Hasag ~~factory~~ <sup>Peltry</sup> We were to spend the night at the  
 ghetto hospital. I Meanwhile the day shift was sent to the ghetto  
 and we were turned over to the ~~military~~ <sup>gendarmes</sup> police under the leader-  
 ship of ~~Meister~~ <sup>Meister</sup> Hochberg. Hochberg and the police rode on bicycles,  
 while we women had to run behind them for several kilometers as  
 far as the ghetto. For us, exhausted and having endured a full  
 day's work, it was worse than death...

~~At the Warsaw marketplace in~~ <sup>At the Warsaw marketplace in</sup>  
 front of the ~~barbed wire fence~~ <sup>barbed wire fence</sup> ~~surrounding the small ghetto,~~ <sup>surrounding the small ghetto,</sup>  
 Hochberg placed us in the hands of  
 the Polish police inspector Paruzel, and commander of the Jewish  
 ghetto police, ~~Parasol~~ <sup>Parasol</sup>. We were then taken to the ghetto hospital  
 on Jaskrowski Street. I Marysia Rotstein, wife of the engineer, Rot-  
 stein, was already there.

In the hospital we were guarded by the Jewish policeman, Mali-  
 niak, who, admitting that we had nothing to lose because certain  
 death was awaiting us, was afraid that during the night we would  
 try to escape. He asked us to have pity on his wife and children  
 and not to try to escape. I assured him that we would not, because  
 we had relatives in the small ghetto, whom we did not want to  
 expose to danger.

And so night fell--a painful, sleepless night, full of doubts,  
 self-examination, and apprehension of approaching death. Next  
 morning, on ~~Thursday~~ <sup>Friday</sup>, June 25, none of the ~~women~~ <sup>gendarmes</sup> appeared.  
 Each minute we waited was a sea of pain, indecision, and hopeless-  
 ness.

At ten o'clock in the morning Dora Gotlieb came running from  
 the Arbeits-Einsatz to try to comfort me, and assured me that the  
 manager of that establishment, Bernard Kurland, was doing everything

possible to have me released. She did not know why we had been arrested.

At dinnertime my brother Jakub brought me some food and tried to cheer me up, saying that Lt. Zopart had told him that unless Degenhardt appeared at three in the afternoon, we would be released. We were extremely impatient and our nerves were so on edge that we almost lost consciousness. There were moments when we lost our will to live, moments of indecision, and thoughts of suicide...

The tension mounted even more after the clock had struck three. Our fate had still not been decided. We didn't know whether for the time being we would survive, or what pain and torture might await us.

At five o'clock we suddenly heard rifle shots somewhere nearby, but we didn't know what had happened. Goldstein, the Jewish policeman who was guarding us, declared only that there was trouble, but didn't want to say more. As it later turned out, it was an underground Jewish organization fighting against the Nazis. The gunfire lasted until ten at night.

Again a night of uncertainty set in, a sleepless night, during which ~~nothing happened~~ *there was no end to tears...*

*Saturday, June 26, 1943*  
 At half past seven in the morning, Hauptman Degenhardt and Oberleutnant Rohm appeared. "Was machen Sie hier?!" they asked cynically, and ordered us to return immediately to the Arbeits-Einsatz. At first we were afraid to go out, in the fear that maybe the ~~men~~ *gendarmes* were waiting in the street to shoot us.

Finally, however, we went out, on our way to join the ranks at Bernard Kurland's labor pool. *Soon after our arrival at the Arbeits-Einsatz came* ~~indeed~~ a very excited Gestapo agent ~~who came from the police station~~ with a machine-gun in hand

Y who

*heatedly*

who began to argue with Degenhardt. As we later found out, he wanted to shoot us then and there. It turned out that after our departure they ordered Marysia Rotstein to go out into the hospital ~~courtyard~~ *backyard*, and there the military police shot her. But we, the four women, by some chance escaped that fate. Apparently death did not want us...

Shortly, the selection began in the small ghetto. Jewish men, women, and children were taken in freight trucks to the cemetery to be executed. Even today their desperate cries still ring in my ears: "Revenge! Revenge! Sh'ma Israel!"

Two thousand perished at that time. During the selection conducted by Degenhardt, I was chosen, along with a group of women, for forced labor at the Hasag ~~factory~~ *Pelzery ammunition factory.*

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That was my last encounter with the chief murderer of Jews in Czestochowa, Degenhardt.

Somewhat later, I found out that after the liquidation of the small ghetto, he was sent to Greece to fight the underground there. The Greek partisans apparently found out about Degenhardt's role in Poland, and sentenced him to death. There were also rumors that an attempt was made on his life--unfortunately unsuccessful.

Note:

Paul Degenhardt was the chief of the German ~~gendarmerie~~ *gendarmerie* in Czestochowa. He conducted special selections during the so-called "*Aktion*" ~~of~~ of September and October, 1942, in the small and large ghettos, sending ~~thousands~~ *50,000* of Jews to the gas chambers and to concentration camps. He liquidated the small and large ghetto, and ordered the latter blown up.

over!

*missed*

~~He has fifty thousand Jews in Czestochowa on his conscience.~~  
Degenhardt was imprisoned in Germany after the war, and after the trial in Lueneburg, in 1966, was sentenced to life imprisonment.