

KUTNO IN THE DAYS OF WAR

by Wolf MANCZYK, Karkour, Israel

1

I remember, as if it was yesterday, the first mobilization in Kutno. It took place on March 21, 1939. Even then, it was felt as if dark war clouds were gathering over our heads. The following Jewish soldiers were mobilized in the Polish army:

Zalman Kirsztajn, Meir Fast, Abraham Sztift, Hersh Kozak, Leibl Bibergal, Tuvia Hirsztberg, Moshe Welcman, Abraham Bennett, Maurice Szapszewicz, Zelik Lyfszic, Albert Kaj, Yurek Ogurek, Tsalel Grinbaum, Leibish Kanał, Yonah Rozenblum, Shiya Fajber, Wolf Nosol and others.

Some of them already did not return home. With the outbreak of war, Kutner Jewish youths fell in battle with the Hitlerite aggressor. This way perished Zalman Kirsztajn, Meir Fast and Wolf Nosol, in the defense of Sochaczew – Abraham Sztift, Leibel Bibergal, Tuvia Hirsztberg, resisting to the German army not far from Łowicz – Hersh Kozak, Abraham Bennett and others, fell on the battlefield.

Right after the Germans had occupied Kutno, the dead bodies of Sztifts, Bibergals and Hirsztbergs were brought into town and a joint funeral and burial was organized.

Some Kutner Jewish soldiers in the Polish army, such as Albert Kaj, Yurek Ogurek, Leibish Kanał, were captured by Hitlerites and later killed. Others managed to

escape to Russia after the collapse of the Polish army: Zelik Lyfszic, Shaye Fajber, Maurice Szapszewicz, while some were persuaded and returned to Kutno, where they shared the tragic fate of all: Shlomo Kowalski, Henech Chabus, Chane Blum, Shmuel Sobotka.

2

On September 15, 1939, the Germans entered Kutno, following the blow they received behind Łęczyca. As is well known, the Germans lost 14,000 soldiers in the battle behind Kutno (as reported by the Polish Ministry of Defense). No wonder that as soon as the Germans took over Kutno, they wanted to get revenge for their losses. They first expressed their sadism towards the Jewish population: arrests, forced labor, deportations, beatings, and insults. I was a witness to a "*lapanke*"¹: SS men surrounded the streets of Zamenhof, Tilne, Przeskok and part of Podrzeczna, entered Wajsbrod's confectionery on Zamenhof Street and detained six Jews: the writer of these lines, Zalman Zomer, Nachum Fuks, Yokel Cymberknopf, Sender Celemenski, Shmaya Olszak. We were driven out into the street, where there were 25 detainees, all taken away from Old Market, Kościuszki, Dąbrowskiego and Bema streets – to the house of the brothers Wyganowski and Dr. Kleinerman. There was installed the staff of the SS. We were locked in a basement, ostensibly to pump water to an elevated reservoir. I was in this group.

¹ TN: Polish for "round-up".

The work, however, was not done calmly. Every time, we were beaten, pushed, and insulted. There were some bloodshed victims. It's about 5 o'clock in the evening – police hour². We were sure that now people will be freed from the hard work and from the beating. Everything was still locked. The SS obviously wanted to keep us overnight and liquidate us. Nachum Fuks breaks out the window along with its iron bars – and he escapes first, then us. Jumping across a fence into a garden, then – through Fast's garden, and from there going home.

During our escape, I saw how the Germans had treated the pious Jews: Wyszynski, Zandberg, Lichtensztajn. They were beaten, their beards severed. It appears that they worked at the Wyganowski brothers' house.

3

In a few days, we were taken back to work. This time – in Szymanski's courtyard on Kościuszki Street, near the gymnasium Dąbrowski. Among us were: the painter Zundelewicz, Hershel Jakubowicz, Hersh Menche, Berel Goldszmidt, Tsalel Szyper, Sender Niewalkowski, Shalom Bagno, Kuczynski, Moniek Rasz, Pinchas Sztanke, Fishel Grinbaum. We were held there for two months. Instead of eating, we were beaten. The work in the field was a difficult one.

After releasing us, I decided to volunteer for the German employment service, which was in the town hall. This part was led by Yosef Szapszewicz, a well-known teacher at the *Powszechna* school in Kutno. As a professional, he sent me to work in the military barracks in Bema Street. But every day I had to report to him at the town hall. One time, upon arrival at the town hall, I fell into the hands of the Gestapo, who had just carried out one of her "*lapankes*". About 30 Jews were sent to a nearby courtyard behind Koło, not far from the later Chełmno death camp, where our closest and dearest perished.

The Germans appointed Yankel Bok as the leader of our group. Together with me were: Gajsler, Pieczysty, Pukacz, Y. Jakubowicz, Yukel Pakulski, Shaye Chabus, Płocker, Israel Markewicz, Mordechai Rusak, Hazenfeld, David Herszkowicz, Zalman Ogurek, Chaim Spielfogel, Shlomo Sznurnbach, Davidtshe Goldman, Shlamek Kuszmirak, Yonah Balsamowicz, Shayek Szulcz, Shmulik Elbaum, Moshe Goldwasser and some others. We were taken in small carts, accompanied by a powerful convoy, to the yard where we were arrived soon, for harvesting potatoes. The first few days were awful to endure. A Gestapo checkpoint was there and five murderers used to show up at our work, beating us, shouting at us, torturing us in various ways.

At night we were allowed to straighten the bones in the local school, on the floor, spread with a little straw. But not once did the assassins failed to come in the middle of the night, start beating and insulting us. After such a night, as it was not possible to go out to work in the morning, we were beaten and tortured again.

After two weeks of hard work and hardship, we were sent home. This is what the farm owner, Mrs. Nowacka, demanded. She asked the Gestapo to treat us better, to treat us humanely. The night before we left, she agreed with our representative in a big conspiracy, to pay everyone for the work done. Saying goodbye to us, she cried with tears in her eyes: "*Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła...*" As is well-known, this is the first line of Poland's national anthem "Poland is not yet lost".

The next morning, we arrived in Kutno and learned that the Germans in Holcman's Palace were giving out passes to Russia. I rushed out to get one.

4

A group of young people took the opportunity. I, Nachum Fuks, Yitzhak Tymyanko, Samek Falc, Israel Rotsztajn and others moved to Białystok. To tell the truth, we had already met with Laron in Zaręby Kościelne, which was occupied by the Soviets. At the Białystok train station, a plaque was hung for the Kutners, who had inquired about their arrival in the city and addresses. An entire Kutner team lived on Staszica Street. As was the custom among Jews, each with his own vision and ideology, fierce discussions were also held at that time, although it was clear that we were all fleeing death from the common enemy and needed to stand together, to save ourselves.

In December 1939, I decided to return to Kutno to be able to accommodate my wife and immediate family. Together with Yitzhak Timianko and Israel Rotsztajn, we arrived in our hometown, which was now foreign to us and devastated. Coming home to my parents, on the Sienkiewicza Street 36, I was told that my wife had gone to see me the day before. I left for Białystok the next day. On the way, stopping in Warsaw, I met Golda Zylber and took her to Białystok.

This is where I really met my wife and our joy was indescribable. Several Kutner families – Yosef Goldberg and Pola, Nachum Kenig with his wife, Zvi Lasman and wife, Moshe Moszkowicz and Gecel, Abraham Manczik, N. Fuks, the Strykowskis and Hoffmans from Krośniewice had moved to western Ukraine. After we were sent to Siberia, we were also a group of countrymen together: Yosef Goldberg, Pola Manczik, Yitzhak Goldberg with his wife, Itke Fuks, Nachum Fuks, Abraham Manczik. At the deportation we met additional Kutner families: Hirszbajn, Chaim-David and Eliezer Klingbajl, Fajber, Nachum Kenig with his wife Tsharna Rozenberg, who died there. Israelik Orner with his wife Esther Zlotak and her brother Yitzhak (he and Israelik also died in Siberia).

5

After the war ended, we were transferred to Ukraine, and in 1946, the repatriation of Polish citizens took place. I, along with another Kutner, settled in Wrocław.

² TN: probably the time when alcohol beverages are not served anymore.

In April 1946, at the Kutno cemetery, the unveiling of a memorial to our deceased martyrs took place. Then, that was an opportunity to meet up in town with the whole remnant of our community.

A Jewish committee functioned in Kutno, chaired by Dr. Finkelsztajn. He often went to Lower Silesia to visit the countrymen. In general, there was a large colony of Kutno

Jews in Lower Silesia. In Wrocław were: Yidel Praszker, Nathan Moszkowicz, Moshe Moszkowicz, Hershel Zandberg, Nachum Fuks, Abraham Manczik, Felek Klapper, Fishel Friedman, Mendel Żurawski with his wife Kolaszinska, Nachum Kenig, Alman-Korzeneg, Walter and others. Among those, the majority emigrated to the Jewish state.