

THE ESCAPE BEFORE DEATH

by Arie WEISBROT, Haifa

When I was a child, I studied in a "*cheder*", in my small town of Kutno, which was behind the bathhouse next to the poultry slaughterhouse. Many were my teachers: Moshe-Mordechai z"l, Yehuda Noah Zandberg z"l, Yechiel Węgrówer and others. I especially remember Mr. Yehuda Zandberg, who managed to vividly and plastically illustrate the stories of the Bible, until life stood before us, as if we ourselves were partners in the events of the narrators. I lived the exodus of Israel from Egypt as if I myself were coming out of a house of slavery, crossing the Red Sea and migrating to the land of destination.

But I understood the exodus from Egypt as daydreaming or dream and I could not imagine that only a few years would pass and hold the forerunners of another exodus – not to the land of freedom and redemption, but to exodus – deportation and expulsion from home, where my parents and I lived – to the land of annihilation, torture and destruction.

When the Nazi authorities in Kutno issued an order that the Jews had to leave their homes and concentrate on the ghetto they had set up in the sugar factory on the way to Krośniewice, the whole city became one big madhouse. Despair, loss of advice, madness and hopelessness gripped everything. People – parents of children who only yesterday were omnipotent in the eyes of their children – ran through the streets without knowing what to do, how

to handle the new reality. Everyone wanted to get a cart to transport the few movables to the new deportation site, everyone wanted to be the first in the ghetto, assigned to the Jews of Kutno. Arriving at the place we caught a large warehouse, which had no partitions and no windows and doors. The children were amused by the new situation. They ran around all the rooms, climbed on the roofs and went down to the basements. But the parents understood the situation very well, though they too could not imagine the horrors that awaited them in this place. From the very first moment the problems arose: where to cook? How will they get water? Food? And the main thing – where will all the Jews who were deported settle into the ruins of this factory, which is already, in the first hour full and crowded with Jews.

Indeed, the situation became more and more unbearable day by day. People lay in every corner of every building and in the open air. Wherever they went they took with them their meager possessions, which were packed in sacks or bundles. They also believed that one day they would return to their homes and that they should keep some of the property – the fruit of a working life.

At first the entrance and exit to and from the ghetto was free, we could still trade with the Christians, we went out to work – who to the train station, to a cigarette factory, to clean the city or any other job that came up. In the



The deportation to the ghetto

evening we returned to our "place of residence". Kruk and Weisbrot cafes, a bakery, shops, a hospital, a bathhouse, a water-pump, a toilet, and a general restaurant for the neediest were also established in the ghetto. But needy, we were all – and so we stood in line from morning until noon, in order to get some thin soup, which reminded me of Mother's laundry water. But seeing also the manager or the principal Klapper in line for a colorful soup, with a kettle made of crystal in their hands and waiting for their dish, we completely forgot about the taste and color of this soup.

However, these seemingly "comfortable" conditions did not last long. With the advent of winter, life in the ghetto became a hell multiplied by seven. Indescribable troubles, suffering and anguish began to haunt us, one after another. First the ghetto is closed – there is no going out and no coming in.

There was a growing hunger in the ghetto. People fell in the street from exhaustion, because not even a slice of dry bread came to their mouths for many days. The queue for the public kitchen grew day by day and he could not answer and provide a soup plate to anyone who demanded it. And to the hunger for bread were added the many diseases due to the rains and snows, for many slept in the open air during the summer months, but with the coming of winter the weather destroyed them. People had pneumonia and typhus. Many died, and only before them did the gates of the ghetto open. To the rest of its inhabitants, it remained closed by lock and key. Trade with the Christians also ceased, both because the gates of the ghetto were locked and because the Christians no longer had anything to trade.

It is easy to imagine that against this background quarrels, conflicts and fights arose. Shouts, cries and blows were not uncommon in these conditions.

It should be noted, however, that not everyone has been severely harmed in this way. There were also among the ghetto residents, who lived in slightly better conditions. Kruk and Weisbrot's cafes were still open and people visited them and ate there to satiety and drank various drinks and thought that evil would not get them.

My father, who worked in the village of Sójki¹, as a shoemaker, would send me some food supplies by the milkman who provided milk to Stuczyński, but as the situation worsened and the milkman stopped visiting the ghetto. Mom was at a loss, she had nothing to feed us. My sister Ryvka became ill with typhus and my brother Kalman who was seven years old asked my mother for a slice of bread and she could only give us the tears that kept flowing from her eyes. But her tears also dried up, only her sighs increased, but they did not shake the sky. Is there greater sorrow than the sorrow of a mother when she sees her children asking for bread and is helpless!

I, the eldest son, decided to go out to Dad to the village and see what had happened to him. My mother, brother and sister z"l accompanied me to the western fence where the ghetto sewer went through and I went out to the other side. From the outside, armed Germans guarded and

would shoot without warning anyone who tried to escape from the ghetto. Indeed, as I was only a few meters away from the ghetto fence, the Germans began firing at me constantly. I still managed to get to the main road. Here, naughty non-Jewish children started chasing me, demanding money and throwing stones at me. I still managed to avoid them and reached the road that leads to the Jewish cemetery. Here I rested a little and made my way towards the village of Sójki. The Germans ran everywhere, walked the streets and roads and no one stood in their way. When I came across one of them, I pretended not to see him. Full of terror and fear I finally reached Dad. Seeing me he burst into tears of joy, for I stand before him alive and whole. He knew very well what a dangerous road I had to go through. I told him all the stories about us, the mother and his children, about our sufferings and troubles. But Dad's situation was no better than ours. He, too, lived all the time for fear of the Germans. They would often visit the village and he did not know what his fate would be in an hour. He spent his nights in the stable and there I also slept with him at night. The next day, my father told me not to return to the ghetto.

Thus, the decision was made and I did not return to my good and dear and faithful mother, to my sister Ryvka and my brother Kalman, and to the rest of the family and friends I grew up with.

I decided to go to the village of Kłodawa, for my family. On my way, I was forced to go through Kutno. The city was full of Germans, here was a German riding a bicycle and a Jew ran in front of him and I did not understand the meaning of this and I again pretended I did not see them. I arrived at our synagogue. Christian children were playing around, among them I knew the sons of the German Hoffman. Unfortunately, they also knew me and started chasing me with knives. Suddenly, I saw Christian boys who had recently been our neighbors before the ghetto was established. They saved me from the murderous Benny Hoffman, to whom my former neighbors had promised many other Jewish boys in my place. This way, I escaped the hands of the little killers.

I was "free" to continue on my way. I passed through the Jewish streets, which were so familiar to me, where I grew up, rejoiced and cried. Now death-silence all around. Everything was bleeding, everything was frozen and dying. As if ghosts had taken over our streets and neighborhoods. Where has the rich life, full of action, initiative and vigor gone?! Where did the Jews disappear for their trade, their craft and their buying and selling? The angel of death in the form of the German-Nazi celebrated his full victory, which even the most horrible antisemite had never dreamed of. The houses, the shops, the workshops – everything is destroyed, destroyed and their Jewish owners are no more – a cemetery, death and destruction all around. I could no longer bear the sight around me. I escaped from here as if haunted by the invisible angel of death. I went out, as mentioned, towards the village of Kłodawa, for my family.

¹ TN: some five km north of Kutno.

Near the tobacco factory, which bordered the ghetto, Jews were standing by the fence, they looked at me but did not speak, so as not to draw the Germans' attention to me. Here my conscience began to torment me again, for I had left my dearest mother, sister and brother and fled and left them in their suffering and troubles. I can never forgive myself for this act!

When I arrived in the village of Kłodawa it was Saturday night. Here in the village of life, things were still going well, the Jews went to the synagogue wearing Shabbat clothes. At home, Shabbat candles were lit on the tables and Jewish families ate their Shabbat meal, as if the world of yesterday still existed. They did not know the exploits of the Germans and did not even imagine the magnitude of the atrocities they were also preparing for the Jews of the village of Kłodawa. But I wept bitterly and told them about the horrible reality, about the murders, the hunger and the fear in which the Jews of Kutno live, who are only a few kilometers away from them. For a little while

I took them out of their still peaceful world, because they did not know what expected them.

I learned that, the day after I escaped from the ghetto, several Jews had been shot dead, among them the youngest son of the shoemaker Buksztajn and the son of the old Ercbajn² (Altkreiner), and the troubles did not stop here either. As a foreigner in Kłodawa I had to go to work on behalf of the community in the place of one of the family members with whom I stayed and in return I received alimony and accommodation. However, even this situation did not last long. One night in 1941, the German police woke me up and took me to a labor camp until I reached Buchenwald, where I was released. In the morning I was transferred with other young people to Koło and from there to Nowe Miasto labor camp near Poznań. I then began to migrate from labor camp to labor camp until I reached the Buchenwald camp, where I was released. In this camp I met many people from Kutno. There is no need to say much about the Buchenwald camp, because labor camps felt great to many of us.

² TN: according to our data, the surnames of the people murdered were Perek, Nosol, Buksztajn and Ertman. The latter is probably the "Ercbajn" mentioned here.