

# FIVE YEARS OF LIFE IN HELL

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As soon as the Germans entered Kutno, in September 1939, they began to drive the Jewish population to work, accompanied by beatings, insults, laughs at the victims and also – the murders. The killers loved the "*lapanki*"<sup>1</sup>, which caught innocent people unexpectedly from the streets and businesses, in order to imprison them and then rush them to *katorga*<sup>2</sup>-labor.

Once, they captured several dozens of Jews and locked them up in a... church. We stayed there all night, not knowing what they were going to do with us. At around 8 in the morning, cars arrived at the church, on which the detained Jews were beaten up and taken to Łęczyca. Here, the murderous blows were again inflicted and we were returned to Kutno.

In July 1940, on a Sunday, they set out to deport all Kutner Jews to the ghetto. The allotted time – several hours. Although the surrounding peasants needed to provide wagons to transport the Jews with their belongings to *Konstancja*, there was not enough wagons. Most had to make the long walk by foot, carrying packs and bundles on their shoulders or with their hands. I did have a cart, but without a horse. I was expecting a horse until the last minute, but a German did not let me sit on the cart. I had to walk on foot to *Konstancja*.

Upon arrival, there was no room left in the half-ruined building of a former sugar factory, which had not been active for 30 years. With difficulty one could find a corner behind the very roof of the enclosure. When the days were warm, farmers would come to the ghetto and sell produce. With the onset of autumn, mud and winter cold, trade with the village virtually ceased.

The ghetto inhabitants were dragged to different hard-labors every day – and when this was not the case, all those who left the ghetto should return by nightfall to *Konstancja*. We were guarded by ethnic Germans<sup>3</sup>. If anyone approached the ghetto fence, they fired without warning. With the arrival of winter, as doctors and medicines were not available, diseases in the ghetto also increased. The isolation of the ghetto became even stricter, famine and various diseases caused many deaths. Only one barber-surgeon, Aspirsztajn, was available to help the unfortunate population.

The Germans often photographed and filmed life in the ghetto, or when we loaded on carriages the rubble from the former sugar factory. We have all felt the rope tightening around our necks. The decrees and persecutions intensified. Poverty and hunger prevailed in virtually every ghetto home.

## My flight to Żychlin

I did not want to stay in the ghetto. On a cold, dark night, I managed to bribe a German guard and on foot, I left for Żychlin, where my wife's family was. Arriving in the ghetto, the Jews felt that I wanted to buy or sell something to them. They did not recognize me: I was so frozen. It was not until I said who I was that I was introduced to my sister-in-law. Together, we decided to bring my wife and child from the Kutner ghetto.

In the morning, a member of the Żychliner *Judenrat* rode in a carriage to Kutno. He handed over to my wife our request that she try to come to Żychlin, and she managed to get a German officer, who was a "fixer" in the ghetto, to allow her to move to the Żychlin ghetto. We were together in the town for two months and it turned out that this might be how we would survive the war.

One day, the Germans ordered an *obławę*<sup>4</sup> in the ghetto to get manpower for work. I was also a member of the group requisitioned to Camp Rabe. We had to build a freeway.

## From Camp to Camp

My first camp elder was named Hart. A murderous sadist, who used to tie to a pole an arrested man that he didn't like and keep him without food and drink all day long. The punished had to let go his physiological needs under him. When the man was untied, he was usually half-dead.

In this camp, people had to walk six kilometers to work every day, and the same distance back after work. On the other hand, in the second camp where we were transferred, Fallenfeld, we traveled around the highway with a local train. There we have all endured the brutal fist and the sadistic tendencies of an SS *bafir*<sup>5</sup>. He used to beat people with the shovel mercilessly – and when it became hot, he cooled himself with a bucket of cold water, in order to deliver more blows.

In the third camp, Deutscheyer, there was also such a *bafir*, nicknamed "*Tygrys*"<sup>6</sup>. His real name was Metke. When he started hitting someone – and this happened to him very often – none came out alive of his hands.

After the construction of the freeway was stopped, we were taken to a fourth camp, where French prisoners of war were found. Here we were engaged in field work, chopping down trees in the forests and then cutting them down. We were later transferred to the Wiesengrund<sup>7</sup> quarantine camp, where we were no longer working. From there, the road led to Auschwitz.

<sup>1</sup> TN: Polish, "roundups".

<sup>2</sup> TN: Polish, concentration camp, hard-labor punishment, similar to USSR *gulag*.

<sup>3</sup> TN: people of German ancestry, whose families had settled in Poland.

<sup>4</sup> TN: Polish, raid.

<sup>5</sup> TN: probably an abbreviation for German "Block-fürher" ("Block Leader"), a task usually given to a SS corporal.

<sup>6</sup> TN: Polish, "Tiger".

<sup>7</sup> TN: between Berlin and Dresden, near the present Polish border.

### **In Auschwitz**

In closed wagons, like beasts, we were carried to Auschwitz. As soon as we were pulled out of the wagons, everyone was lined up. At that time, I did not know that this is how they send part of the transport directly to the gas chambers. For the moment, I stayed in the camp, for hard-labor and pain. At a long table, someone tattooed a number on my hand: 141154.

In the evening, some SS-men showed up and for no reason, they started beating us until we bled. This lasted a few days, until we were transferred to a new place, near a coal mine. Here we built the barracks and other facilities for the camp. When everything was finished, I continued to work with twenty other people on the ground, but it was much worse than underground, in the mine itself. We were led by a kapo who surpassed the SS for murders. He ordered you to bend over and hit the buttocks with a cane. My buttocks were black and blue from the blows, I could not walk or sit. When he rested, all was broken and stung. After spending a few weeks in the coal mine, I could not walk, I had to go on all fours. Of the twenty in my group many had disappeared, by the time. They had been murdered.

One day I was thrown on a trolley and taken to the camp because I could not walk. I was sure that now my end was coming. In the morning, I could not get up to work. I barely dragged himself to the roll-call. At that time, a number of people were selected in the crematorium. I asked to come along with them. They sent me to the hospital, from where I did not return. There, the service was only by Jews. My neighbor was a Jew from Kutno, Berel Balzamowicz. We were very happy and told each other our experiences until our arrival here.

When I felt a little better, I asked to go back to camp, because we knew that from the hospital, people were taken straight to the gas chamber. This time they obliged me. I dragged heavy stones and began losing my already weak strength. When they stood us up for the roll-call and started ordering "right" or "left", I was sure that this time my fate was sealed. The selection ended with choosing 293 inmates and me among them. We were crowded into an attic, where we laid for 44 hours without a drop of water, without food. Then, again a selection. 70 people unable to work were sent to their perdition. I and the rest of the group were transferred to "Buno"<sup>8</sup>.

### **The Front is Approaching**

In the "Buno" camp, a branch of the huge death camp at Auschwitz, we worked under the most difficult conditions. One day we were ordered to collect a few things, and we started marching. Of course, we were not told where we were going, but there was a feeling that the camp was now being evacuated due to the proximity of the front.

There could be no more fitting designation for such evacuation as "death march." The miserable camp

inmates, living skeletons, exhausted and tormented were driven on foot, on cold frosty days and nights, while their attire was not enough even fit for a cool summer night. Everybody who got off the transport or showed weakness was shot mercilessly. The murderers didn't refrain from hitting with their rifle-butts, the *nahajkas*<sup>9</sup> and the long whips. The whole way to Buchenwald was covered with shot and fallen participants of that terrible march.

We did not stay Buchenwald for a long time. They again selected about 400 men and drove us into closed wagons. On the way, American planes were attacking and the train was bombed and even shot from machine guns. Of course, they thought that it was an army transport. The guard ran and some of the locked-up people managed to break open the door – only then did the pilots see that it was camp inmates. But it was already too late. About 200 of us died in the bombing.

As soon as the planes left, the guard drove us into the wagons – another locomotive had to tow them away because ours had been destroyed – and we were taken to another camp. I think "Gurhartz". We had to remove stones from a huge tunnel on wagons. An underground airplane factory was inside the tunnel. From all my experiences in the camps, I have learned that one is worse than another. The same was true of the present camp. While the military was cooking potatoes there, our food consisted only of the peelings. People slept on the ground, covered with a little sparse straw. But it was full of lice and fleas. In the thousands, if not millions, they swarmed our bodies. More than once I have asked myself: how is it possible for a person to endure all this?

On Sunday, we had a half-day rest. The "rest" consisted in gathering all the dead bodies and burying them in a large tomb.

### **The Liberation**

We were however feeling the death throes of Hitlerism, which was receiving heavy blows on all sides. We were evacuated again. The death-marches continued. The Nazi animals were still as sadistic for the unfortunate camp inmates, even though their defeat was already obvious. People drove us without food and drink. I fainted. Luckily, I was in the middle of the column, not from below, because there the guard would soon shoot me. An order came: "Halt!" – and some colleagues lifted me up. Now people rested a little – and that saved me. I started to lick snow and somewhat refresh myself.

Not far from Wittenberg on the river Elbe, I weakened again in the march. One Jew from Warsaw supported me and carried me a little time. None of the guards noticed my weakness. As we approached the city, we hear a cannonade. One officer ordered the healthy to go out and comfort the weak, that there will be soon a forest where they may lay down to rest. He knew that the Red Army had to show up at any moment and that is why he became so good. The Warsaw Jew and I could not go

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<sup>8</sup> TN: Monowitz-Buna concentration camp, 2km east of Oświęcim (Auschwitz).

<sup>9</sup> TN: Polish, braided whip with a short handle.

further and laid down in the nearby ditch, completely resigned and desperate. A soldier approached us with a rifle and ordered us to stand up. I still do not know where I found the strength to get up. As a fact, we were entering city. The soldiers had disappeared. A German woman gave us both two bundles of red radishes. For us it was like manna from heaven. Then, a German baker gave us a bite to eat. It turns out that he was denounced for hiding escaped camp inmates, because the police arrived and detained us. Suddenly, bombs and artillery rounds began

to fall, the policemen fled and we spent the night near the oven, in the bakery. At dawn, the Red Army entered the city.

This happened on April 21, 1945.

I was in the German city for four weeks, until I regained my strength and was able to enter Poland. I thought I would find a living member of my big family in Kutno. Unfortunately, all had perished. I stayed with Opoczynski for about six months, then we left for Germany and in 1949, I emigrated to the United States, where I remain to this day.