

IN KONSTANCJA, GĄBIN, PŁOCK, STRZEGOWO

by *Lucia Stuczyńska*¹²

During the German occupation, I was in Kutno, in the Jewish camp *Konstancja*, in Gąbin, Płock and Strzegowo. The following description is based on personal experiences.

Hard times were experienced by Kutno Jews until the establishment of the camp *Konstancja*. But compared to what I experienced in *Konstancja* itself, it was nothing. We, as one of the few who have survived to this day, have been given the opportunity to fulfill the desire of the masses of Jews who wanted to survive, to be able to at least partially tell what they went through.

In the winter of 1939/40, the Jews lived with the constant fear of eviction. With a packed rucksack, they looked to the spring as a rescue, that a deportation in the spring would be easier to bear with the transporting and settling in a new place; and the mothers will at least partly avoid such tragedies as the mothers of Pomerania lived through, who had to throw the frozen bodies of their children from the open coal wagons, in which they were carried for a few days, without a drop of warm water, in those terrible frosts of the first war-winter. I saw myself such a thing on my own at the railway station in Kutno.

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² TN: listed as "Tola Puterman-Stuczyńska".

One train policeman ("*Bahnhof-SchuPo*"), seeing a package, quickly unwrapped it and from it there fell out a dead child of a few weeks, with a note "Bella Moszkowicz, Bydgoszcz". It seems that the shipment was from Bydgoszcz, and the wagons had stood the whole night at the station. The frost hammered and not one dared do anything to help the unfortunate...

In the spring, political change was also expected, with people believing in the rapid aid of England and America. Except for new troubles and disappointments, spring brought nothing with it. However, in the spring, three new hangmen became famous: a young Gestapo official, called "Black Genek", who was a specialist in plundering and torturing young girls. He stripped them naked and beat them. The second was an SS man nicknamed "redhead". He was an expert at beating men. He is especially remembered by me for a personal experience. Once, during a "*lapanke*"³ for work, he just wanted to get my father to work in his house, but he got an Elders' Council certificate as the sole butcher who ran his business, and so was exempted from forced labor. Without looking at the paper and clarifications, the "redhead" did not back off and struck my father, who at once struck him back and ran into the house. The "redhead" went after him and a fight broke out, which might have ended very tragically. I, hearing shouts, ran down below and into the midst, wanting to protect my father, because the "redhead" had taken out a dagger. At that moment my mother arrived. Hearing shouts, she ran into the house and with exceptional dexterity grabbed away the dagger and ran with it to the police. The "redhead" on the other hand went to the Gestapo and soon they came in two autos. They didn't take my father – he had managed to run away – but Mother, yes. She had just come back from the police, who had received her very kindly, taken away the dagger and said to her:

— Yes, we understand, but Jews have no right...

Then, the Gestapo detained my mother and beat her with an iron rod. With great efforts, I got her released, but she was in a terrible condition. She was bleeding, her back was black. This was still not enough for the "red head" bandit. With the help of a third famous bandit, Stumpfer Michael, stormtrooper and Gestapo chief for the Kutno district, he came to our apartment and confiscated the movable property. I opposed him when he tried to take the bedclothes from my still sick mother. I opposed this and angrily said everything I thought about the Germans, emphasizing that they were a nation of robbers and bandits. He let me say everything, just watching. After my speech, which contained much truth, he jumped at me... Everyone in the house was frozen in fear. The Jews, who had been carrying the furniture out, knowing of the German banditry, went discreetly out to the vestibule. They were sure he would kill me. I do not know what stopped him, he just gave me a slap in the face and shouted:

— This Jew is insolent...

I was lucky. When members of the *Judenrat* heard about the case, they were amazed that this typical "Jew-eater" did not kill me on the spot.



The PLOTKIN family in ghetto *Konstancja*

They were looking for my father, without success. He was well hidden and they got nothing out of us.

A few days later, the eviction began, the wealthy Jews were selected, placed in the "*tytoniówka*"⁴ and beaten, they were stripped naked and thoroughly revised, taking away the valuables. They were held there until they were released.

There were rumors about the establishment of a ghetto in *Konstancja*, but no one wanted to believe that in an old, abandoned factory and five residential houses, seven thousand people would be crammed. This simply did not sit well with understanding. Only the cruel mayor Schürmann, in the space of a few hours, convinced everyone of this horrible truth.

On Sunday, June 16, 1940, the Jews were ordered to leave their apartments and relocate. The pen of the most capable poet or writer would not have been able to describe that day. An unforgettable day. Desperate and destitute people were dragged along by SA, Gestapo, *SchuPo* and other bandits. A crowd of people, with none who did not get beaten. Roads with leftover Jewish possessions dragged through the streets; cries of children; women wailing and helplessly wringing their hands; bags and various pack were carried on the shoulders; here – a pot, there – a broken chair, a bed or something else. And this incessant shouting of the German murderers. This all made a dizzying impression. He who has not seen it, is not able to imagine it, even with the richest imagination.

³ TN: Polish, "round-up".

⁴ TN; Polish, "tobacco factory".

The worst, however, happened at the magistrate's office, where carts were distributed. People ignited the boards, stopped the horses, and cursed at each other – everyone wanted to be the first. It was understood that only those who arrived in *Konstancja* first would still have a piece of roof over their heads, and indeed so it was. Only those who fought with force, or the one who was really the first, got a place suitable for a beggar. The *Judenrat* had at its disposal two houses, one of which was designated as a hospital and offices, and the other was given to the members of the Council of Elders. The officials, as well as those who paid well, were also able to get in there. That is why the Bundists named the house "House of Lords". The hallways, attics, and cellars were occupied by various people.

What a sad picture *Konstancja* presented on the first evening. The strongest were lamenting. 95 percent were without a roof over their heads. The hungry children were asleep on the packs, after the experiences of that tragic day, under the clear skies. Near them, mothers, in various poses, offered a prayer, groaned in pain, or looked helplessly at their husbands. The men, too, reacted in various ways – with muted or outspoken despair. Curses, or words "when the day of payment will come" were heard, some clenched their fists, others behaved like the women. In the eyes of some, a firm decision was seen --- and the squeezed mouth probably confirmed it. It turned out that the glances tell that we really suffer, but we must help ourselves, we must be able to live in these tragic conditions. The desire to survive had such power that the signs of other thoughts could be seen soon in the morning...

In *Konstancja* there was a commotion like a beehive. The more energetic realized that if there was a decree to live here, one should be relieved. Some began to set up tents, while others began to remove debris from the factory, wanting to make a bed. Because a bed in the ghetto was the most necessary piece of furniture. On the bed people slept, ate, sat, dressed. Under the bed were kept the dishes, things, food and other necessary objects. Some others chose brick, because bricks and clay could be used to make a house. It gave more courage to those who did not take the initiative.

Soon after the first day, some people who had died of a heart attack were taken out. The conditions of water and toilets were miserable. One well and three toilets for seven thousand inhabitants. After a cup of water, they went back in line, until the evening. Only a few days later, several open toilets for men and women were set up, free of charge.

In the ghetto a life was established. The trade began. You could get anything, provided you had money. And those who did not, had to come to the kitchen, which was organized by the *Judenrat*.

The illegal trade developed thanks to "*łapówki*"⁵, who took over the watch, which were called "*Boleks*",

through the mediation of the Jews, which were called "*bramkarzes*" ("gatekeepers"). From the crumbling pig-stalls, we organized candy shops⁶. People were going to work. There were those who had something to eat, but most of us still suffered from hunger due to the difficult conditions. Two or three times *Konstancja* received, from "Joint" help, condensed milk and poultry fat. The milk was given to the children and the fat was distributed to the kitchen. During a few weeks, life in the ghetto returned to normal.

The Jewish youth was divided into two groups. One was composed of Bundists and their adherents, mainly of the working-class circles; the second, from the previously studying and learning youth. They became interested in cultural entertainment. It is a strange thing that, despite the general reconciliation, the youth have formed two camps and the differences have been clearer to the eye, more than before the war. While in the organized club ("*światlica*")⁷ in the tunnel of the factory, we gathered to read books, recite, have conversations, discussions, etc., the Bundist youth on the hill in *Konstancja*, arranged a lively radio, criticized and pointed out the shortcomings of the *Judenrat* in song, recitation, jokes, stories and presented first-class anecdotes on the subject of life in the ghetto. Their performances were called concerts and were often attended by the Jews.

Everyone had to wear the "patch". In addition to the members of the Council of Elders, the patch was carried by the Jewish police, the officials, the paramedics and even the cooks of the cheap kitchen. At the end of the summer, construction began on a school and an orphanage. We provided building materials and the "*Bund*" needed to build. From now on, the collaboration began.

The school was built, but was not used for its intended purpose. A terrible typhus epidemic broke out in the autumn months. The school building was taken over for the sick, because one hospital was not enough. The ghetto was closed, no one was allowed in or let out. The trade stalled. The German forces provided only bread. Meat and fats were illegally supplied to the ghetto by my mother, Eva Stuczyńska and the Pole Zenon Rzymowski. My mother was an "Aryan" living in the village. At night, after bribing the "*SchuPo*", they delivered the goods through the barbed wire of the ghetto.

It got worse. The winter has been a disappointment for everyone. The epidemic made several victims every day. There was hunger, cold, overpopulation. All of the tents moved into the factory building, which was also crowded. In the blocks, without ceilings, three stories high, where the wind blew freely with snow, people were freezing. More and more often they heard: "That one has red behind the ears", that is to say, that any day he will, from exhaustion, drag himself to the other world. Our youth has set up a hospital-kitchen so that the sick would not suffer any hunger. The girls showed a lot of energy,

⁵ TN: Polish, "bribes".

⁶ TN: in Polish in the original text, "*cukiernia*".

⁷ TN: Polish, "common room".

here. They collected money from Jews. Provisions were provided by my mother, because until I became ill, I headed the provisions department. Other girls cooked or washed. Beyond that we had tours of duty in the hospital. In the spring, the epidemic became even more violent for a variety of reasons. Everyone saw the death before their eyes.

It occurred that people lost their senses or otherwise attacked in insanity. I will never forget the picture I saw: a woman, walking dead, terribly injured, ran into the "House of Lords" and threw herself on the beds in some rich apartments, or grabbed people, shaking off lice on them and at the same time laughing, crying and groaning, wishing everyone what you expect – from dirt and hunger. At one point, she started to have convulsive seizures and, shaking in pain, stepped out, onto the steps of the "House of Lords."

Starvation in the streets, which carried away the sick and the beggars, was a common occurrence. The constant topics were: this one died, that one was sick.

In May 1941, someone denounced my uncle Leon Stuczyński and his accomplices, for delivering food to the ghetto, and they have all been captured and taken to the village. My mother managed to escape to Gąbin. The detainees were sent to Włocławek and hanged there. The ghetto ceased to receive fats. From day to day, the situation became more tragic. In such conditions, it was impossible to live and in June 1941, fleeing this life, we escape to my mother's in Gąbin. We were certainly the first to emerge from hell.

We lived in Gąbin and thanks for working on the post, we sent parcels to the closest addresses – because sending was very hard. Later, that too ceased.

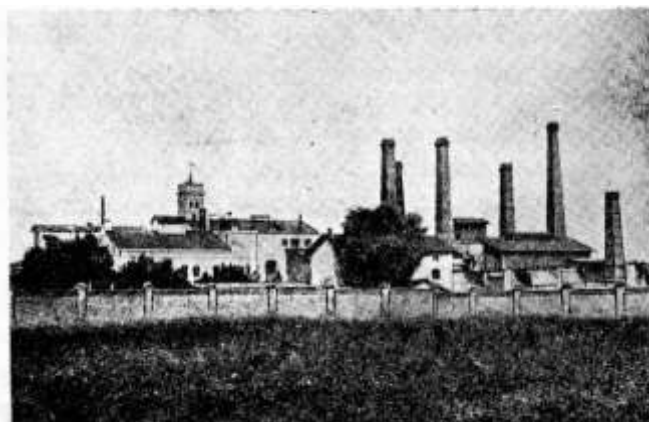
From *Konstancja* arrived more and more desperate news. In the winter of 1942, two weeks before the liquidation, we moved from Gąbin to Strzegowo and settled there as "Aryans": five children aged 4 to 16 and the mother. My father, due to his poor Polish accent, had to stay in the ghetto.

The liquidation in the Strzegowo ghetto began eight months later. I wanted to gain time. At the very beginning of our settlement in Strzegowo, my mother fell into the hands of the Gestapo, and she was locked up in the Płock prison for transferring Gąbin and Gostynin's hidden Jews to Strzegowo and Mława. She had been denounced by Kazimierz Banasiak of Płock, a chauffeur who worked with the Gestapo. The investigation has begun. Three times I was in the Gestapo in Płock. I was also taken to the ghetto to see if some Jews would recognize me. Despite the torture, they did not get anything. In their eyes, we remained "Aryan". I was released to take care of the children. I was 16 years old at the time and had the audacity to go to the Gestapo chief and get permission to see my mother in detention once a week, although no one from outside was allowed to enter in the detention center.

It was difficult to have a mother in prison, a father in the ghetto and play alone the role of an Aryan and support

four small children, including one boy. I was successful. There were moments, however, when I started doubting that I would continue to succeed. This was a difficult role for a 16-year-old girl.

My mother was sent to Auschwitz. We have maintained only a letter contact. Upon my request for her release, I received an answer that I, an Aryan, would never



The sugar factory *Konstancja*

be forgiven for helping Jews. They did not accept either to take me and set my mother free. I had contact with my father until the very last moment; I provided him with everything he needed. Protected him from deportations, twice I took him out of the car: one time, with a piece of cloth on my head and a patch on my back, I played the part of an underprivileged woman, because not far away stood the Germans, who knew me as an Aryan. So that I might not be recognized, I gave a bribe to the transport guard; a second time, when money did not help, I played for the captain the role of an angry German woman, whose husband was at the front line and here they were taking away from her a good worker. He was let out again. Later, those in the ghetto who knew me said that the greatest American hit-movie did not leave such an impression on them as this one. A "German" daughter liberating her father, a Jew...

In December, the Strzegowo ghetto was evacuated. My father did not want to save himself. He said he wanted to die immediately with everyone, rather than carrying a perpetual death-sentence on himself. I was amazed that in a letter from my mother, I received a greeting from my father. I did not believe it, thinking that my mother only wanted to comfort me. As it turned out, the transport from Strzegowo was taken straight to the crematorium. They only left a few men to work, among them my father. My parents used to meet in the toilets almost every day.

This life is strange. My father was deported to Germany and later returned. My mother managed to escape from a transport and, thanks to the Russians' quick occupation of the village where she was hidden, she escaped.

A few weeks after the exodus of the Strzegowo Jews, I got a job in the local magistrate as a translator and bureaucrat and worked until the arrival of the Russians. With the earnings, I sustained myself and the children...