

IN KUTNO GHETTO

by Pinchas OSOWSKI, Rishon LeZion

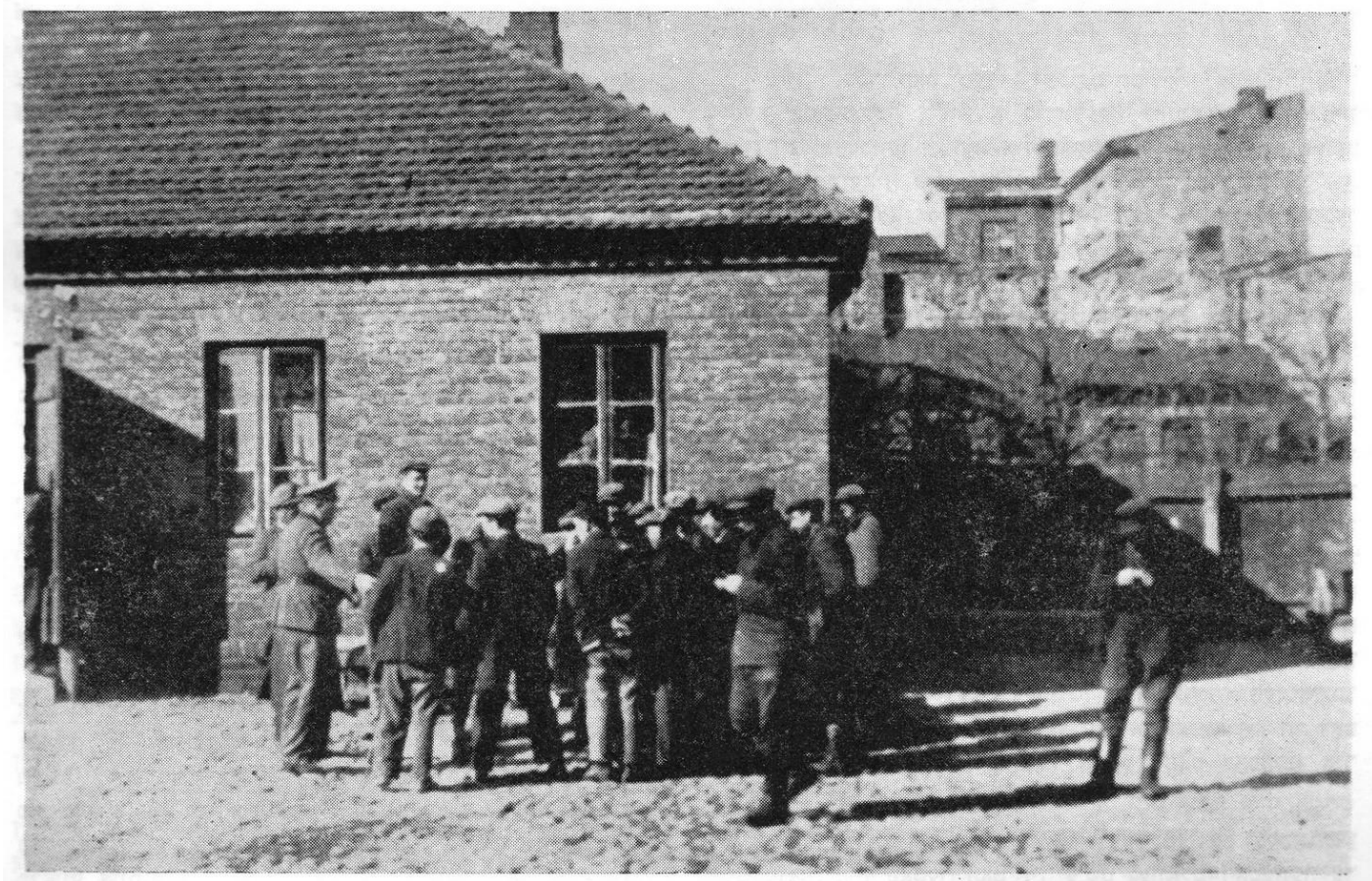
I was born in Kutno, in 1914, and lived at the Old Market No. 30. My father, Shalom, was a tailor and my mother, Ita-Rachel, took care of the housework and also helped with the income. We were seven children¹. Yonah, David, Shiye, Yosel and Chaim perished. My brother Eliezer, my sister Sara and I escaped from the German murderous hands. We all live in Israel.

1

When the war broke out on September 1, 1939, I was living and working independently in Kutno, at a carpentry shop. When the Germans entered the city, the

community decided that I should work for the occupier. My job was to remove from Jewish homes the furniture that Germans had confiscated for themselves. I did the work under their supervision and I was paid by the community. Working in the apartments of Szlajfer, Żelichowski and other wealthy Jews, I saw that the Germans were not content with furniture, but also robbed Jews of their jewelry, valuables and money.

In the first days of the German occupation, life went on comparatively calmly, although outbreaks of German terror and cruelty were not lacking. But Jews still had an



"Work office" for Kutner Jews

¹ TN: eight children, according to the list, including the author.

opportunity to work, to trade – although the fear of an uncertain morning did not cease to disturb everyone.

On a certain day in 1940, there were reports in the Polish and German languages that, in the course of tomorrow, the entire Jewish population, without exception, would have to leave the existing apartments, businesses, and the city in general, to relocate to the newly-established Jewish residence in the former half-destroyed sugar factory in *Konstancja*. You could take food with you for three days and different things.

This news struck like a thunderbolt the Jews who had risen early. They soon woke up the others and the sad news became known to everyone. There was no time to think. The German Land Office and the community had ordered numerous carts to carry all these bits of baggage and the people. But the whole shipment did not arrive. Thousands of unfortunate Jews looked as followers at a funeral, as they marched through the streets of Kutno in the direction of *Konstancja*, behind the carts that were loaded with things, while they themselves were laden with sacks and packs. This deportation needed to be completed by dusk. Hundreds of Jews had nowhere to put their bits of baggage on and had to drag them all the way to *Konstancja*.

2

The *Judenrat* immediately began its activities in the ghetto, occupying first a separate building, which later received the ironic nickname "House of Lords", due to the privileged position of its inhabitants. Earlier in *Konstancja*, a group of wealthy Kutner Jews, whom the Germans had kept locked in the "*tytoniówka*"² while they were plundering the well-furnished apartments for themselves, had occupied the best houses and dwellings. For hundreds and hundreds of common Jews, there was no corner in *Konstancja* where to lay their head.

At 6 pm, the ghetto was closed. No one was allowed in and out of the area, as it was ordered. Those who remained on the streets in the ghetto were welcomed under the open sky. More skillful people were able to set up a tent, a cabin, or a closet – and settled there. Later, bricks, stones, sheets, and wood were dragged together to form a stone-built apartment. So that they were now protected from rain, wind and cold.

It took several days for the Jews to adjust to the new conditions. On the second day in the ghetto, came carts with bread, baked by Christian bakers and ordered by *Judenrat*. Those who managed to bring iron bars with them had something to cook on. It was even worse for water. There were only two pumps in the ghetto. The queues for a little water were long. People had to wash themselves with the same water – and everyone felt the lack of it.

There was another problem with washing. In the long barracks where many families lived, without any partition, women could not hide themselves from foreign

people. Over time, such trifles ceased to matter. In those days, people were freed from a lot of shame...

The anti-sanitary conditions further helped to spread diseases in the ghetto. Open pits were used as bathrooms, screened only with a sheet – separately for women and for men.

In *Konstancja*'s "White House", the medical department was headed by the barber-surgeon Aspirsztajn, assisted by several nurses. The ward was later transformed into a ghetto hospital.

3

Initially the Germans allowed, during market days, peasants who paid a charge of 1 mark to enter the ghetto and conduct a barter trade there or buy from Jews various goods, clothing, shoes and things – in exchange for products, food and bread. The Germans tolerated such barter until the typhus epidemic broke out in the ghetto. This was an excuse for the murderers to hermetically close the ghetto and isolate the Jews from the outside world, which led to a very difficult situation. The *Judenrat* now needed to take care of feeding the ghetto on its own. A popular kitchen was opened, which distributed free lunches to those in need. In order to get this little soup, one needed to stand in line for hours.

The Germans offered horse meat³ to the ghetto, but the *Judenrat* rejected the offer. Later, when the famine became more and more intense and people agreed to eat horse meat – the Germans did not want to give it anymore.

A labor office was created in the ghetto, with was headed by Kibel, Wajnstajn and Manczester. Every morning, hundreds gathered in the office, waiting for work. From there, they were sent under guard, to the train, to dismantle and clear down old houses, clean streets and other hard and menial work. The wages were paid to them by the labor office.

One day, the Germans required a carpenter to work at an airfield. The employment office sent me there.

4

Arriving at the airfield in Chojne⁴, I soon became unwell because I saw a lot of young, German pilots and technical staff. I realized that I could expect only troubles and calamities. To my astonishment, the inspector of the airfield received me well, with a nice attitude and same for the other Germans, who did not bother me. Every Saturday I got paid the salary – 24 marks. The first Saturday I went to the aerodrome canteen with the earned money, to buy food. The foreman was afraid to sell to a Jew and to my great surprise, when I asked the inspector for a permit, he ordered him to sell everything I wanted and even provided me with a handcart, to bring back the products to the ghetto. At the ghetto gate, my joy was shattered as the police seized the handcart with all the goods and asked for a large ransom money in order to give it back. The next morning, at work, I told the inspector what had happened

² TN: Polish, tobacco factory.

³ TN: non-kosher animal.

⁴ TN: 5km south-east of Sieradz. There is still an airfield there, today.

to me at the ghetto gate. In my presence, he telephoned the ghetto guard commander and scolded him, asking why a worker was robbed of his belongings, which he allowed to be taken home. The commandant solved the problem. In the evening, returning from work, he waited for me at the entrance to the ghetto, took me to the watch, returned the products to the cart and told the policemen that I should always be allowed in with the cart.

Every day I ate at the field with the officers and never had to face any persecution.

Yom Kippur 1941, I came to my work on the airfield. On such a day the hands did not take to doing anything, and eating was of course not to be spoken of. I stood in a corner of the workshop, uttering the prayers that remained in my memory, mourning the great tragedy that befell us. During the lunch break, when I was supposed to eat, the inspector showed up and asked why I did not work and did not eat. I told him about our Yom Kippur. The temperamental German takes out his pocket calendar, searches for the holiday there – and does not find it. Full of anger, he explains that as long as the day is not marked on his calendar – it is not a holiday. He pulled out his revolver and threatened to shoot me if I do not eat. After I had a bite to eat, the German put back the revolver in its holster and declared:

— If today is such a day of prayer, then go home... You must not work.

I thanked him and left for the ghetto.

5

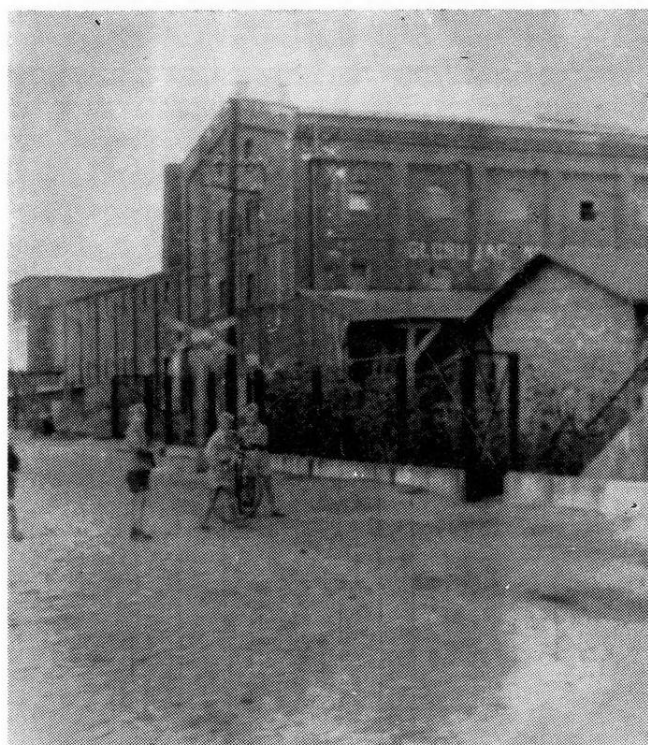
One Saturday morning, the Germans entered the ghetto and demanded a thousand workers. There was a panic because many people thought that the workers would not come back. Everybody started hiding. The Jewish police, however, helped to get the fugitives out from their hiding places and, in trucks, a thousand Jews were taken to Stara Wieś⁵, where an airfield was found. I was in this transport. The order was: pave a road with stones – but without any tools and instruments. There was a rush to get to work, as the overseers threatened to hit and even shoot.

Around 3 pm people had finished the work, but for the time being they were not allowed to eat or drink. When some officers looked at the work done, they were pleased. Each of us received a bun. We had to walk on foot to get back to the ghetto. The Germans commanded us to sing... Yiddish songs. This time it went very well, we went home to our families, who were certainly very worried about our fate. Even greater was the joy in the ghetto, when all came back in peace.

The winter in the ghetto was very difficult, especially for those who did not have a decent roof over their heads. Between two bricks they used to light a fire and then boil something, if there was any, and at the same time warm up. When I once noticed some burners with chafing dishes at the airport, I asked the commandant for

permission to take them away to the ghetto. He allowed me to do it. I gave away some burners, sold some of them.

The situation in the ghetto became more and more difficult. Cold, frost, snow – and less and less food. Then, the anti-sanitary conditions led to epidemic diseases. Because of typhus, the city doctor Jędraszko ordered to hermetically seal off the ghetto, not to let anyone in or out. Now the hunger has become even greater, as all sources of illegal trade and supply of goods had been cut off. A bit of consolation was the cultural activity of the youth, who used to gather every evening in a Sztajn's so-called café, sing songs there and spend time in a homely environment.



Entrance of ghetto *Konstancja*

I did not want to leave this isolated ghetto either. One time, when my inspector passed the city and accidentally noticed me standing by the ghetto wall, he came up to me and asked why I was not coming to work. I told him about the prevailing typhus and the interdiction to go out. He comforted me and promised to send me my daily ration to the ghetto as long as I would be there. This is exactly what happened!

But I did not want to leave the ghetto. The typhus has claimed hundreds of lives. In the beginning, when there were a few dead every day, everyone was buried according to the law of Moses and Israel. Later, when the disease took on an epidemic character and dozens of people died every day, mass graves were dug, the dead were placed on a cart and placed in a mass grave.

6

The typhus also reached the "Lord's House". Some members of the *Judenrat* succumbed to the terrible disease

⁵ TN: means "old village" in Polish. Spelled "Starowies" in the original text, but as it is within short walking distance from

Kutno it is probably an old village that is now part of Kutno, "Stara Wieś".

and one of them, Rabbi Yitzhak Kowic⁶, a very capable and devoted worker, passed away. All the Jews accompanied him to the ghetto gate without exception. His funeral was truly impressive, despite those horrible conditions. Only a few members of the *Judenrat*, accompanied by a German guard, traveled to the cemetery outside the ghetto.

To ward off typhus epidemic, the ghetto rabbi ordered an orphans' wedding⁷ performed, as Jews once did in a cemetery. Mordechai-Shmuel's sister, a confused maid, was ordained as the bride. The groom was a youth from abroad, who found himself in the Kutno ghetto. Under the canopy, the bride and the groom both stood, dressed entirely in black. The road to the wedding was decorated with vegetables, with even music being played. Several German officers came to attend the ceremony in the ghetto, in two horse-carriages. At the command of the rabbi, the congregation rejoiced under the canopy, laughed and danced. This was needed to help dispel the typhus epidemic from the Kutno ghetto.

7

With the deplorable situation of the Germans on the Russian front, the situation of the Jews in the ghetto worsened. The murderers began to ravage the area and before the large transports of liquidation, they used to enter the ghetto and have fun shooting at every Jew they found. A *folksdeutsche*⁸ policeman shot dead old Mamluk, Moshe the carriage driver and Yoel Rasz's wife⁹, who were standing with other Jews on the porch, not far from the ghetto fence. The case moved me to flee the ghetto.

Escape from the ghetto is easy to say. But how does one do this? The German assassins and their Polish aides had already made sure that more and more Kutno Jews would go to Chełmno and that fewer would leave *Konstancja*. I nevertheless tried turning to my inspector at the airfield, told him about the decision made. He only warned me about the dangers of such a step, but told the ghetto warden to let me through. When a wagon with potatoes passed by in the ghetto, I left *Konstancja* undisturbed in the empty wagon.

I managed to get to Krośniewice, where I met our townsman Moniek Nosol. Later, I moved to Gostynin, where I met some Kutners again: the Kowalski sisters with their brother, Chaim Honigsztok and his wife, Zelik Pietrkowski, and his wife, Noah Gurker¹⁰ – the usher of the municipality.

In Gostynin, Jews lived in a separate neighborhood, but not in a secluded ghetto. I found work with the carpenter Abraham Danciker (now in Israel), who worked for the Germans. I earned well and, thanks to this, I was able to help my family, who remained in Kutno ghetto, with packages.

In 1942, our carpenter's workshop was transferred to Konin. Going there, we passed Kutno. I saw how *Konstancja* emptied itself...

I later learned of the tragic fate of the Kutno ghetto, where my entire family perished.

Honor their memory!

(recorded by: Y. Elbaum)

⁶ TN: Yitzhak-Pinchas Kowic.

⁷ TN: also called "Black Wedding", in reference to the Black Plague, symbolized by a black canopy and the cemetery where it was set. The 'orphans' could also be poor or mentally ill people.

⁸ TN: ethnic-German, living in Poland.

⁹ TN: data mentions Freida Rasz, born Gurker, received a bullet in the heart 3 October 1941. She was married to Wolf (Ze'ev) Rasz. It could be a mistake but her husband could have Yoel as a middle name and commonly use it.

¹⁰ TN: see article on page 292 of the original book.