

THE SHOAH ERA IN FRANCE

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translated from the Yiddish by Shoulamit Auvé-Szlajfer

In the Holocaust, where a third of the Jewish people disappeared, about one hundred and twenty thousand Jews from France were also taken, and among them, a significant number of our compatriots from Kutno, Krośniewice, Łęczycza and Dąbrowice. As one of them, who found himself in the murderous clutches for four years and endured various abuses and persecutions in the Nazi camps, I want to tell my story throughout this disastrous period, as well as my tribulations with compatriots whom I have met on my long path of torment. Unfortunately, many of them perished. May these few lines be a memorial to them for their little-known battles.

1

The advance of German troops towards the gates of Paris caused great panic in the French capital. Everyone started to flee. In this exodus, dozens and hundreds of people, young and old, have wandered on the roads looking for a safer place to flee, to escape this terrible enemy. In this great panic, many were lost, families were separated. Paris was occupied by the Wehrmacht. After the signing of the armistice between Pétain's government and Germany, the French population gradually began to return to the capital, but the situation for the Jews was quite different. The mere thought of falling into the murderous clutches of the Hitlerites overwhelmed them. Many stayed in the provinces. Those in the occupied zone searched for various hiding places and lived in constant fear.

Meanwhile, a "miracle" had happened with the German occupation army in Paris. Instead of terror, looting and murder, they behaved like gentlemen towards the civilian population. Their refinement had gone even further. So much so that you could see Nazis and soldiers in Jewish cafes. They even chatted with the Jews: if we imagined they were just big capitalists, we're wrong – proof was, they were allied to the Russians... They even showed uniforms and boots produced in the Soviet Union that they wore. And when they said Germans treat Jews badly, that's nothing more than Anglo-American propaganda...

Many Jews believed these words, told others about them and began to come out of hiding. Some have even written to their relatives and friends in the provinces that you can come to Paris, the Germans behave correctly. It got to the point that some Jews even started to trade with the Germans and supplied them with certain items, which were lacking in the market.

It wasn't until early 1941 that the Germans began to show their true colors. In addition to some anti-Jewish

decrees, a census was ordered of all Jews – and more precisely in police stations, where the stamp "Jude – Jew" was affixed to every identity card. Then a large number of naturalized Jews had their French citizenship revoked and then Jews were banned from entering certain establishments and public places. Jewish merchants were no longer allowed to trade and had to hand over their



The "yellow patch" in France

businesses to Aryan administrators. Jews were still allowed to ride the subway – only in the last carriage. Jewish children were still allowed to go to school – but sat on separate benches.

May 13, 1941. Five thousand Jews of Polish origin receive the so-called "*billets verts*"¹ with the order to report at 7 a.m. at certain assembly points for a check. A panic sets in. We ran to neighbors and friends to ask for advice. To say one's piece. Nobody knows what to say. The optimists believed they only wanted to check their papers, no reason to be afraid. Others felt they wanted to bamboozle the five thousand Jews and shouldn't go there. But on the "*billet vert*", in fact, there was a threat of incurring heavy penalties against the whole family if the required person did not show up. So, we went to the place indicated...

There the men were ordered to gather to one side and the women accompanying them were told to bring various items from home for their husbands to be sent to a labor camp. When the women returned with parcels and

¹ TN: French, "green notice".

suitcases, the Germans ordered them to write down the names of the recipients and no longer allowed them to approach the men. Weeping women were beaten and chased away with sticks and rifle butts.

And that was just the beginning – a terrible beginning!

2

I found myself among this first group of deportees. In the morning, buses arrived and took everyone to the train station. As we drove through the streets of Paris, the French watched us and didn't know what was going on. Only a few of them, poisoned by Hitler's propaganda, openly expressed their satisfaction at this sight, while the majority accompanied us with looks of sympathy. Late at night, we arrived at two camps: Beaune-la-Rolande and Pithiviers². I was stranded in the first camp.

After we were dispatched to the camps, an injunction was issued that all Jews must wear a yellow Star of David. It then turned out that French people, who had never known which of their neighbors or acquaintances were Jews – recognized them because of this yellow patch... There were cases where some French people voluntarily wore the yellow Star of David, to demonstrate being a Jew did not shame them. There were also some who traveled with the Jews, in the last metro wagon.

In August 1941, the first major roundup of Jews took place in Paris. Thousands were arrested in the streets and in their homes. They were sent to the infamous Drancy³ camp – the first hellhole for Jews on French soil. Unfinished buildings were filled with captured Jews. All connections with the outside world were already severed. The food was in very small quantity and the one given to us was of the worst quality. The sanitary and hygienic situation was also unbearable. Epidemics and deaths became a daily phenomenon. Executions were also starting to happen. The Jews of Paris were aware of the situation in Drancy, the atmosphere became depressing and people were afraid to go out in the streets. Rumors were growing that convoys were leaving from Drancy with Jews, to an unknown destination. We never saw them again. (Drancy effectively became the transit point for French Jews, who were deported to Auschwitz, Chelmno, Treblinka and Majdanek).

July 16, 1942 was one of the most tragic dates for the Jewish community in Paris. During the night, the assassins entered Jewish houses and from there, by force and brutality, dragged men and women, old people and children, the sick, half-asleep and scantily clad. The cries and howls of the unfortunate people tore through the dark night and mingled with the murderous orders of the Germans⁴. The detained Jews were taken in police vans to the big "*Vélodrome d'Hiver*"⁵ stadium and crammed into a huge crowd. Thirty thousand people were confined in one

place. In this hell, some people went mad and not a single dead person was evacuated. Those who endured this time in the stadium still remember today with horror these appalling scenes.

After that, these unfortunate people were then taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Most of them perished in the gas chambers or by other bizarre lethal methods, at which Auschwitz excelled.

3

... Late in the evening, we arrived at the Beaune-la-Rolande camp, where we were crammed into barracks with wooden bedsteads on three levels, on which were placed straw-filled straw mattresses. In the dark, we threw ourselves on the bedsteads and immediately fell asleep, out of exhaustion. When we woke up in the morning, we asked ourselves, silently or aloud, to ourselves or to each other: "Where are we? Why have we been brought here?"

My nearest neighbor on the bedstead, with his appearance, aroused great pity. You could tell he was a poor, depressed man. With his Lithuanian Yiddish, he told me that just yesterday, very early in the morning, his wife had given him a basket to do some shopping in a store on his return from work. He was caught in one of the streets of Paris. He didn't understand what was happening here and burst into tears... I tried to calm him down and encourage him, tell him to hold on, not to give up.

I left the barracks. I noticed that there were several dozen huts over a large area, surrounded by barbed wire. French guards guarded the place. We saw different Jews, from all strata of the population, of all classes. Nearly two thousand were brought here, to the Beaune-la-Rolande camp.

At first, it was difficult to find a common language and way of understanding with such a diverse audience. Then little by little, after getting to know each other, we began to organize life together in these new conditions. We chose ourselves a barrack leader who would be responsible for establishing and maintaining a certain order and, at the same time, would be the link between us, the administration and the camp guards.

We were totally isolated from our families. The food we received was only enough to leave us in a state of chronic hunger. We had only been in the camp for three days and the questions "why?" and "what awaits us here?" were on everyone's lips. Suddenly, we were greatly surprised by voices coming from the other side of the barbed wire. It turned out that our women in Paris had found out where the first convoy had been sent and they came there. Only the guards wouldn't let them in. They stood at a distance, waving their hands, shouting but we heard nothing. We answered back by shouting only one word: "Bread!" The women of course heard it and they went to the city, brought bread. Then, they sent us fresh

² TN: small towns, about 90 and 75 km south of Paris.

³ TN: in the northern suburb, 5 km out of Paris limits.

⁴ TN: in fact, only the French police participated to this roundup. They used mostly civilian buses and not police vans.

⁵ TN: covered stadium inside Paris, close to the Eiffel tower, mostly used for cycling events, in its last years of existence. It was destroyed in 1959, 50 years after its creation. The roundup was given the name of the stadium.

and delicious rolls over the fence. This at least quenched our hunger.

4

Some time later we were allowed to write letters. From the information we received from Paris, it became clear that there were varied and strange rumors about our arrest: while some claimed that we had been arrested for black-marketing, others claimed that we were to be hostages... This is how the weeks and months went by, without any noticeable change. After some forceful interventions, we obtained permission for our wives to visit us. The meetings took place in large barracks, which were on the other side of the fence. Naturally, this was happening under the watchful eye of a guard.

Then we also obtained permission to receive small parcels. This created an awkward situation, as some received nothing and others received modest parcels. Therefore, we gathered the provisions in each barrack and distributed them among the neediest.

One day, I found my compatriot Zalman Bild. We were very happy, especially since we learned that there were other compatriots there, whom we then often met: Nisan Frenkel, Benjamin Piotrkowski and his brother Wolf, Trojanowski (Zalman Bild's brother-in-law) and Henech Sztajn.

Zalman Bild took a great interest in me, came to my barrack every day, asked me if I needed anything and often brought some cooked food (there was a small electric stove in his barrack). In the evening, he came to see me, offered me a glass of tea. He was like a blood-brother to me.

In the meantime, there was no prospect of a quick end or any other change. So, we started to think about setting up an associative cultural life. Two groups were formed: one of Yiddish speakers and one of French speakers. While the first group brought together the older generation, the second group brought together the younger elements.

The camp administration allowed us to create a large hall in one of the barracks. So, we set up a library and people enjoyed reading books. Very often conferences were held on literary and scientific themes. Along with us in the camp, there was a group of intellectuals. Among the young people, too, there were very competent and intelligent people. Kadi Birnbaum, 19, son of the famous artistic couple Birnbaum-Zewkina⁶, particularly stood out. The young man was, both physically and intellectually, very brilliant. On his initiative, young people formed a choir, a theater section and a sports club. He gave lessons, held lectures – truly one of a kind. Unfortunately, he was among the first victims when we were transferred to Auschwitz⁷.

Among Yiddish speakers, a theatrical circle was created, led by renowned Jewish artists from Paris. Very serious plays were often performed in the camp. A choir

of 50 men studied and interpreted the most beautiful songs from our folk treasure. The conductor of this choir was our compatriot from Kutno, Nisan Frenkel. He was truly a scholar of music and himself played the grand piano. The choir did a lot to boost the morale in the camp and as a result, Frenkel was highly esteemed by all and everyone gave him recognition.

Life in the camp had barely begun and no one really believed that the war could be survived this way. The news we received from Paris did not bring too many high hopes.

5

It had been a year since we arrived in Beaune-la-Rolande. At the beginning of June 1942, rumors spread that we were going to be moved from here, presumably for a labor camp in Germany. German officers appeared and inspections in the barracks became more frequent. Everyone sensed that painful surprises awaited us. The crowd was becoming restless and confused, the evening storm was spreading through the air. In the letters that we were still allowed to write home, we said goodbye to our loved ones and at the same time we asked them not to lose heart, to take care of the children, to take care of the house... We gave them hope to be together again, though the worm of worry and fear was gnawing away our hearts.

On June 26, came the order to prepare for transport. We were allowed to take all our things, except money. On June 27, we were already crammed into freight cars, where it was difficult to breathe or make the slightest movement. When we passed through French villages and small stations, as soon as the train stopped, the French would bring us water or food. But as soon as we entered the abominable German soil, everything changed. The wagons were hermetically sealed. Besides the crushing pressure and the stifling heat, there was an open barrel in each car for physiological needs. The stench was unbearable and those who had time to take something to eat on the way were unable to put it in their mouths. People fainted or fell unconscious.

This is how we traveled for some 24 hours.

Suddenly, the train abruptly stopped. A mob of SS men started dragging us out of the cars, hitting and kicking mercilessly. We didn't even have the time to take our things with us. With savage howls and blows, we were herded into a large square, lined up in rows. The camp commander arrived on horseback. He talked to us in this way:

— You, accursed Jews! You are here in the Auschwitz extermination camp. You can't get out alive from here. Here Uncle Roosevelt cannot help you...

After this speech, an SS officer with a big stick in his hand began to call out the freshly arrived people. Each named person had to run to the other side and the officer also hit him with his stick on the head, on the back or wherever he could. If some Jews had the same name and

⁶ TN: Israel Birnbaum and Esther Zewkina.

⁷ TN: according to Yad Vashem testimony, he was deported on transport #5 on 28 June 1942 and died of typhus in Auschwitz.

they would suddenly start running, then the sadist would get angry and start punching right and left.

After this "reception" a gang of Poles came up to us and started taking watches and rings from our hands. Then we were forced into blocks where the *kapos* ruled. They brutally ordered us to put all our belongings in boxes that were in each block and threatened us with the worst if they kept even a piece of paper on us. The hardest thing was to separate us from the photos of wives, children, parents. We had kept them as relics and now all of that had to disappear forever. By abandoning a photo, we had the feeling that a limb was cut off from us.

6

For three days, we were harassed with exercises, with running back and forth, with calls, haircuts and various disinfections. Then we were sent to the Birkenau (Brzezinka) camp, three kilometers from Auschwitz, where the gas chambers and crematoria were located. We were up for several hours, when the time of the first call arrived. In the evening, when the work commandos returned from their work locations, each group carried with it several dead. It left a terrible mark on us. We had wondered why they had left us standing and waiting for so long: so that we could see and understand what was waiting for us here...

A few days later, some German sadists decided on an "entertainment": they selected strong men among us and ordered them to wallow in the mud, one on top of the other. Among the men was also our compatriot Zalman Bild. He was then sent to another camp and I never saw him again.

Nisan Frenkel and I were assigned to a work commando. We were driven to work while it was still dark outside. We had to walk to get there and work at a brisk pace. We dug holes, loaded wagons with stones and then unloaded them. The heat was terrible and we had not been entitled to a single drop of water during the work. More than once I have seen exhausted Jews approach the guard posts and demand that they be shot – they could no longer bear the terrible thirst. Precisely in such cases, the assassin did not want to shoot them so quickly...

Once our *kapo* wanted to hear someone sing. He asked who knew how to do it. Those who were with me in Beaune-la-Rolande pointed the finger at me. The *kapo* decided that I would be his singer and for that gave me better food and also favored me. Nisan Frenkel asked me to ask the *kapo* if he could also sing for him. The *kapo* told Frenkel to come and see him, listened to him, but didn't want to hire him.

When a group of tailors was selected from the camp to be part of a convoy, Nisan Frenkel was also among them. But instead of tailoring, they were sent to do hard labor. Some time later, part of the group was brought back to our camp, sick, broken and exhausted. Nisan Frenkel was among them. He could barely stand on his swollen legs, desperate, not wanting to eat. In a low voice, he said to me:

— Why do I still have to torture myself? My wife and son are no longer alive. At the moment convoys arrive from Paris every day...

He spoke often and a lot of his son, told me about his great musical abilities, he dreamed of seeing him become a virtuoso. A few days after this conversation, Nisan was taken to the gas chamber, after a selection. His wife and son shared the same fate.

After spending a few weeks in Birkenau, one fine morning, on the walk to work, I saw a desperate elderly man running from side to side. He had just arrived at the camp. I had the feeling that this man was known to me. Approaching him, it was no longer difficult for me to recognize in him a compatriot, a Jew from Dąbrowice, whom I remembered well from my youth when I left the city. This Jew had married in Kutno with the daughter of the barber Włoski, had settled in Włocławek and ran a



A group of Kutners in Paris. Most of them were murdered.

sewing workshop there which had a good clientele. In the 1930s, he moved to Paris. A few days ago, he had arrived at Birkenau with a convoy from Paris.

When I asked him if he was Moshe Chojke from Dąbrowice, he burst into tears and answered with a question "Who are you?" Learning who I was, he took me in his arms and asked me to take care of him. I managed to keep it in my workgroup for a few days. Then he was taken away. I haven't seen him again...

Also in my block was Warcki, a brother-in-law of Zalman Bild. He was getting weaker day by day. Once he was brought home from work because he could not walk with his swollen legs. He sat down next to me and couldn't even utter a few words. He tried to chew the small piece of bread again – and he fell down while eating. It was the end.

7

Before leaving Birkenau, I learned that my brother Simcha had arrived in a convoy from Paris. I was also told that he was looking for me. In the morning, an acquaintance brought him to me – but he didn't recognize

me... My appearance had changed so much during those eleven weeks in Birkenau.

After meeting my brother, I was sent to Auschwitz. Luck smiled on me and I worked in a sewing workshop. It helped me a lot to overcome these dreadful times. At Auschwitz, I met Benjamin Piotrkowski. He was also lucky not to have to go to work with a commando. He continued to work in the block. He had no news of his brother Wolf. I also met the Sztajn brothers there (Henech, Mordechai and Chaim) who got there with the convoys from France.

From Krośniewice, I met Pinchas-Lazer Hoffman and his two sons Moshe-Hercke and Zachariah; the two brothers Moshe-Leib and Israel Strykowski. And from Dąbrowice – Leib Chelminski, Michael Chojka, David and Leibish Brzustowski.

In September 1943, I was included in a convoy of French and Belgian Jews who were transported to Warsaw to clear the ruins of the ghetto. Packed into well-guarded wagons, we left for Warsaw. Suddenly someone shouted loudly that it was Yom Kippur eve. Spontaneously, I began the "*Kol Nidrei*" – and I sang this prayer until the end, as if I were standing in front of the lectern of the synagogue... The guard asked who had sung and began to walk towards me. Everyone stiffened with fear, they were sure that I would pay with my life for the Yom Kippur prayer. The guard, however, knew who had sung. Coming towards me, he handed me his bottle and allowed me to drink, first asking me if I was thirsty.

The dreadful journey to Warsaw lasted three days and three nights. The camp where we were installed was located in Gęsia Street. There were also *kapos* who had come with us from Auschwitz.

The job was to clear the ruins of the bombed and burned ghetto after the heroic uprising. We also participated in some construction work. In bunkers and hideouts, we found items and food, which had been hidden there for bad times, in the hope of enjoying them later. If we came across human beings, they were living skeletons. They were starving.

In the empty ghetto, once, a woman and a boy were detained. The Germans interrogated them, they wanted to discover other Jewish hiding places – but the mother and the son knew how to keep quiet. They were both shot.

In the destroyed ghetto, there were still many whole walls. When the guards weren't watching, I slipped behind such a wall and more than once discovered a whole room in disrepair with shelves of books and pictures of rabbis, which still hung on the walls. I thought of the occupants of these apartments, the devout and sincere Jews who used to sit day and night before a book and study. It was their greatest happiness... I once again glanced at the paintings and my heart ached with pain. The Polish Jewish community was no longer – the jewel of the Jewish people. It was all ashes and dust...

As winter approached, I felt that the frost and cold would finish me off if I continued to work outdoors. I managed to get a job in the garment industry where I

worked for several months. Later I was transferred to a job in a hospital, where I stayed until I left Warsaw.

8

In July 1944, as the Soviet army approached Warsaw, the order was given to evacuate our camp. The trains weren't running as well as they had a year earlier. We suspected that the Germans wanted to kill us on the spot. We were no longer working, only the calls took place as before and the guard became stricter. Finally, we hear the order to set off. We know that the evacuation will be done on foot. The 300 patients in the hospital were shot. 400 of our commandos stayed behind to clear the dead.

The evacuation of Warsaw had begun. Equipped with two blankets and a few provisions, we walked out of the Polish capital, accompanied on both sides by SS men, at the head of which was a young hoodlum, a former camp commander in Warsaw. The heat was great and quenching our thirst was not allowed. Due to weakness and exhaustion, part of the prisoners could not continue. Those who fell were immediately shot.

After a rest in a field, we were ordered to stand up and count ourselves. The killers took every opportunity to count us, wanting to know how many were already dead. But now I had a hard time getting up. I felt my last minutes were near. Two colleagues picked me up energetically and supported me. After the roll call, I fell again, but luckily the Germans didn't notice. My friends picked me up again and helped me walk. Throughout this horrible march, the assassins made sure that we had nothing to drink. On the way, we passed close to many rivers and, even during breaks and particularly next to a river, it was strictly forbidden to quench our thirst. Some risked it – they were shot on the spot. Those who jumped into the water did not come out alive. It happened not far from Łowicz, on the bank of the Bzura River.

Once, we were told to stop on a large piece of land that I recognized well. Yes, we were now near Kutno. Suddenly, a flood of memories from my childhood arose, I saw my parents, my sisters and brothers, friends and loved ones again. The tumultuous years of my youth in the village and then in Kutno came back to me. Memories of my early childhood, of the streets, of the Jews, float around me as I am reminded of the Shabbats and the holidays. What had become of all this?

The SS guards had gone somewhere, only the *kapos* were watching us. But they wouldn't let us near the water either. We were sitting or lying down, exhausted and dreaming of a little water. Someone had the idea of digging the ground with a piece of wood and was amazed to find that the wood had become damp. No doubt – there was water here. He dug a little more and was able to drink at will. Others approached to take advantage of the treasure, but the *kapos* did not tolerate any crowds, so everyone started digging and not only did this allow them to drink, and even wash. After so many days of wandering without water, this discovery was a miracle for us.

In the meantime, the SS thugs arrived and announced that we would now continue by train. We went

back to the field to wait for the train. At that time, a downpour fell and we were all soaked. Finally, the wagons arrived. Upon boarding, a Jew tried to escape. Although it was dark, the fugitive was spotted and shot.

We all had already boarded the train. But the train did not leave. It was suspected that because of the partisans who were active in the area, the Germans were afraid to travel at night. At dawn, our train continued on its way towards its distant destination. In the wagons we dried off a bit from the rain and the blankets were hung on the walls to dry. As night fell, a group of Jews from our car agreed to flee. Thanks to darkness, they slipped under the covers, broke the window panes and began to jump from the moving train. A large number would surely have succeeded in escaping, had it not been for the treacherous conduct of a peasant who first offered hospitality in his home to two fugitives and immediately went to denounce the "guests" at the nearest guardhouse. The two Jews were picked up and delivered to the nearest train station, where our convoy was stopped. We were counted and recounted in the cars, until it was found that eleven people were missing. The Germans horribly beat the two Jews who had been recaptured and threw them into a wagon, the occupants of which were punished with three days without food or drink. Arriving at the Dachau camp, we saw the tragic consequences of this punishment: some lost their minds, some died in the wagon, and others were so weakened that they were unrecognizable. I felt that now my end was approaching.

With strong blows we were ordered to get off the wagons. In one place, hot water was distributed. With my last remaining strength, I dragged myself there and by chance saw a familiar *kapo*, who agreed to give me some

water. It gave me new courage and I didn't want to submit to the assassins, but survive them.

9

We were detained in Dachau for 15 days in quarantine. Later, we were transferred to a camp deep into the forest. By the way, we called it the "forest camp". There was still nothing there. First, we had to set up camp. Then, building underground factories. The work was carried out at a very rapid pace. We worked in two shifts, one day and one night. However, we had recovered strength after the 15-day quarantine. We were guarded by German civilians, some of whom were no less brutal and sadistic than the S.S. When one of my hands started swelling, one of those Germans threatened to shoot me if I didn't keep working. An acquaintance of mine took me into the hospital and I worked there until I was released.

On May 2, 1945, we were liberated by the Americans. On May 23, I was already in Paris and, to my delight, I found my wife there with the three children. Generous Frenchmen hid them and, thanks to this, they were saved from Hitler's clutches. A large part of the Jews of France is indebted for their lives to the human behavior of a lot of French people.

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This is, in short, my account of the fate of the Jews in France during the Second World War, through my personal experience. I have endeavored to convey the most important details of those grim days and also the memory of all my countrymen encountered on the roads of suffering and pain, and who died from all the sorts of violent deaths that the Nazi assassins invented for our people.