

## CHEŁMNO – THE DEATH CAMP

*translated from the Hebrew by Thia Persoff z"l*

*The book "The Wars of the Ghettos" [pages 594-598] relates the story of the German death camp Chełmno, where the Jews of Kutno and its surrounding area met with their cruel demise. The book was edited by Yitzhak Cukerman and Moshe Basok, the Yitzhak Kacnelson Ghetto Fighters Building, and published by the Kibbutz Meuchad Publishing House in the month of Nisan, 1954.*

### 1

At the end of December 1941, the town of Koło was attacked by German army units. The Jews were rushed out of their homes into the *Judenrat* that was in a building next to the synagogue. When trucks arrived, the Jews, with their families and their bundles in their arms, came out of the building. At the exit, an S.S. officer was sitting at a table. He held a list of all the Jews of Koło, and each person called was ordered into the truck. About 40 people were loaded onto each truck, and the baggage was loaded onto a towing truck. The guards, and also the members of the *Judenrat*, said that the people would be taken to work on the railway line. The two trucks carrying Jews were driven by Germans. During the day about a thousand people were evacuated. Among those escorting them was the *folksdeutsche* Siuda from Kościelec, who at the time was serving in the military police. He told the Jews "Do not be afraid, you are being taken to the Barłogy station, from there you will be travelling eastward". The townspeople knew him and believed what he said. Each truck returned 10 to 12 times during the day, which gave strength to our assumption that, indeed, the Jews were being driven not far from Koło.

I was not among the evacuees, because at the time I was registered in Bugaj, Koło district, and so was not on the list of the Koło Jews. I brought to the truck my father, my mother, my sister with her five children, and my brother and his wife with their three children. I helped them pack their belongings and load them onto the tow truck. I was glad to witness Mr. Goldberg, the owner of a lumber mill in the Koło area, after his son was evacuated, making an effort to implore the German authorities to appoint him the administrator of the Koło station. They promised him the job.

By chance, one of the days, a boy came to the *Judenrat* building, and said that the Jews were not being taken to Barłogy but to Chełmno. He saw it with his own eyes. To that, the Germans replied that there they are only sorting the Jews, the strongest being chosen for work in the west. Thereafter, the mood was relaxed. The sick ones were evacuated last of all; the drivers were ordered to drive slowly and carefully. The "action" ("*aktzia*") in Koło lasted four to five days.

At the beginning of January 1942, I was taken, together with another fourteen Jews, to the police station; I was accused of being guilty of aiding the escape of my nephew Mordechai Podchlebnik.

On the Shabbat at four in the afternoon a truck arrived and in it fifteen Jews from Izbica. At the same time a passenger car arrived and in it was an SS officer known to me from the time of the "action" in Koło (he was the one erasing the names from the list in his hand, of those entering the trucks). We, and the Izbica Jews, were loaded on the truck and driven to Chełmno.

We reached the park area near the palace in Chełmno. The whole area was newly fenced with wooden boards, approximately three meters high, so close together that nothing could be seen inside.

The gate opened up and the truck entered and stopped near the palace. While entering the yard, I raised the tarpaulin a bit and noticed a pile of used clothes. We disembarked. We were led to a cellar between rows of S.S. urging us with screams and rifle butts. They counted us, and then locked the cellar door behind us.

Throughout that week nothing happened; we were locked up in the cellar with nothing to do. A container that was placed there for elimination needs was taken out by one of us under heavy guard. One thing I could discern; heavy guards were posted everywhere.

There were many things written on the cellar walls. Among them, there was one in Yiddish: "All who enters here – will never leave alive". No more would we delude ourselves about what was to befall us.

On a Monday morning 30 of our men were taken to work in the forest. Ten men, including me, stayed in the cellar. There was a small window in the cellar, but it was completely covered by wooden planks. At eight o'clock a truck came to the palace. I heard a German voice addressing the arrivals. One of the things he said was "You will go to the east where there is work available in many places. All you have to do is wash up and change your clothes to the clean ones that will be given to you". We heard applause. After a short time, we heard bare feet running in the cellar's corridor near the area of our incarceration, and we heard German voices: "Hurry, hurry!" Apparently, the Jews were being transferred through the corridor to the inner courtyard. All of a sudden, I heard the creaking of a closing door, shouting, banging on the side of the truck, and then the truck's engine being started. After six to seven minutes, when the shouting stopped, the truck left the yard.

At the same time, we, the remaining ten Jewish laborers, were summoned upstairs to a large room on whose floor were laid, all in mess, men's and women's clothes, coats and shoes. We were ordered to move them out quickly into a different room, which was already loaded with clothes and shoes. We organized the shoes in one pile, and as soon as we finished the job, we were rushed back to the cellar. Soon another truck arrived, and we repeated the work as described. And so it went on the whole day.

In the evening, when our friends returned from their work in the forest, they told us that they buried the Jews of Kłodawa in a mass grave. They took the corpses out of large black painted buses, in which the Jews were put to death by poison gas. The corpses were wrapped in white, and inside the car were strewn towels and bars of soap. This strengthened my assumption that after the Jews took off their clothes, they received towels and soap and were taken to the cellar as if to bathe. Three or four from the group of the forest laborers did not return that day; they were not satisfactory, so were shot right there.

On the next day I, too, was among those going to the forest. As I went out, I noticed large vehicles standing at the edge of the yard, their backs towards the palace. Their doors were open, and boards were positioned onto them, for easing

the entrance into them. I noticed that on the floor were wooden grates, like the ones found in bathrooms. They put us thirty laborers into two vehicles, one for passengers, and one for loading various things. We were driven to the forest behind Chełmno, with thirty S.S. guarding us. In the forest, a pit had been dug – a big mass grave for killed Jews. We were handed pick-axes and shovels, and ordered to dig and lengthen the pit.

At eight o'clock in the morning, the first vehicle arrived from Chełmno. When its doors were opened, a dark smoke erupted from it, and we were forbidden to approach it, not even to look towards the open doors. However, I noticed that the Germans took off from the vehicle at full speed. I could not determine the kind of gases that came out of the vehicle, as we stood quite some distance away, and the smells did not reach us and we did not use gas masks. After three to four minutes, three Jews climbed up to the truck and threw out the corpses; inside the vehicle the killed had fallen on top of each other in a haphazard way, filling about half of the space. Some were holding their dear ones in their arms; some of them were still alive, and the S.S. men hastened their end by pistol fire. Some were shot in the head,



Chełmno memorial stone, erected by the Polish Government

and some in the neck. After all the corpses were unloaded, the vehicle returned to Chełmno.

At noon we were given food, and then ordered to come out of the pit without the shovels, and stand in a circle. The S.S. men were already standing in a second circle. We received black coffee and the food that the Jews had brought in their bags. That night, after work, Krzewacki from Kłodawa and another Jew whose name I don't remember, hanged themselves. I wanted to do the same, but was persuaded not to do so.

While riding to work I noticed that one of the windows could be opened. I told my friend Winer from Izbica about it, and suggested a plan for escape. We decided to carry it out the next day; during the ride to work we would jump out through the window and escape to the forest. The

next day we were separated. I was put in a truck and Winer in a bus. I decided to escape by myself. When the truck was already in the forest, I approached the escorting guard and asked him for a cigarette. When I received it, I moved back and my friends encircled him, one after the other asking for cigarettes. With a knife that I had concealed on myself, in a sudden, quick motion, I sliced through the tarpaulin and jumped out of the vehicle. They were few shots after me, but they missed me. I was glad that there was no bus behind us, so that they shot only from the truck.

The fact of the missing bus made me assume that Winer had escaped, causing the bus to stop. As I ran in the forest, some citizen riding a bicycle tried to stop me by shooting with a pistol, but I escaped and sneaked into some threshing area and hid in the hay pile. In the morning, I heard people's voices near the threshing area, standing and discussing that the Germans are searching for Jews who had escaped. After two days without any food, I sneaked out of the hay and went towards Grabów. On the way I went to a farmer's home (I do not know his name). He gave me a farmer's hat, I shaved and he showed me the way.

In Grabów, I found Winer from Izbica.

From Grabów I went to Rzeszów, and my ties to Chełmno were cut. Winer was lost; it seems, in the area of Zamość, in 1944.

Michael PODCHLEBNIK

2

When the Soviet armies came closer, the annihilation of the last Jews started. They were taken five at a time, ordered to lie down on the ground and were shot in the neck. This time the Jews revolted; one of them, Mordechai Żurawski, a knife in his hand, had burst through the guards and escaped before their eyes, and they could not find him. A few Jews, tailors, broke through a door that led downwards, and when two Germans opposed them (one of them Lentz), they were killed by the Jews. Machine-guns were directed towards the opening of the cellar and started shooting inside. At that same time the store room went up in flames.

So were the last Jews in Chełmno annihilated.

Mishtshak ANDRZEI

3

The liquidation of the camp had started in September-October. The furnaces were destroyed and the heaps of ruins were scattered along the forest paths. The "Death Vehicles" were transported to Berlin. The number of laborers in Chełmno decreased continually. One day, sixty laborers were reported to have been transported to a different camp, but in reality, all were killed. Later we found their clothes in the place where they were killed. In Chełmno the laborers were housed in a store room, the tailors and shoemakers were in an area upstairs, those that worked in the camp and the forest were downstairs.

On the night of January 17, 1945, Lentz entered the store room and called five men to come outside. A moment later five shots were heard. We knew that all of us were lost, that one by one we would be exterminated. With a wooden plank in my hand, I knocked on the ceiling to alert the tailors

1	2	3
משה	שלום	אברהם
יצחק	דוד	יעקב
חיים	מנחם	נחמן
מרדכי	אריאל	אוריאל
אריאל	אוריאל	מרדכי
מרדכי	אריאל	אוריאל
אוריאל	מרדכי	אריאל
מרדכי	אריאל	אוריאל
אוריאל	מרדכי	אריאל
מרדכי	אריאל	אוריאל
אוריאל	מרדכי	אריאל
מרדכי	אריאל	אוריאל

List of the last Jews who worked in Chełmno

and the shoemakers upstairs. I decided to escape, no matter what. With a knife in my hand, I stood by the door, behind a blanket partition. When the fourth group of five was taken out and the door was being closed, I stormed the door with full swing, and apparently knocked down Lentz who was closing it. I ran with all my strength, while hitting out with the knife to the right and left. I was like a madman. Later I found out that I lopped off one guard's nose, and another's ear. Though I was hit hard with the butt of a guardsman gun, and I was shot at, one bullet hitting my right thigh, I continued to run. While climbing and going over the fence I injured my right hand severely, exposing the bone. While

being pursued, I ran towards the forest. Lying down in a ditch, I heard the voices of two guards riding bicycles, alarming the local people and notifying them of my escape. When they had gone, I got up and ran until I reached the village of Umień. I hid in a threshing area for a night and a full day. During my run, I looked back and I saw that the store room was going up in flames, and heard the sound of shots from there. Before my escape, I had got rid of the chain binding me while still in the store room, by cutting the chain's links with a large barbed wire fence cutter that I had saved.

Mordechai ŻURAWSKI