

THE LAST BATTLE OF THE KUTNO JEWISH SOLDIERS

by Zyskind BIBERGAL, New York

translated from the Yiddish by Shoulamit Auvé-Szlajfer

The month of March 1939 is forever etched in our memory: Chamberlain's accommodations; the real danger of the attacks of Hitlerism; Poland mobilizes the military reserve.

Silently, with hidden sadness, the Polish spring blossomed in 1939. As the sunny days shone, a kind of low-noise gloom hung in the air. People walked with their heads bowed, peeked around furtively, whispered, war or peace was the main topic of all conversations. Discreetly, day after day, the hour of confrontations and rivalries approached.

With the mobilization of the Polish army, our Jewish youth left Kutno. The 37th Infantry Regiment of the Polish Army was stationed in Kutno. With young people mobilized from the surroundings, a second group of the

37th regiment – reservists – was formed, which was stationed in Wągrowiec, not far from the German border.

As for our family, the eldest brother, Leib has been enlisted. He was mobilized in the 37th regiment, in Wągrowiec. During the last summer months of 1939 our family received no news. After the start of the war, in September 1939, when the country was paralyzed, the roads broken up, it was learned that the 37th Regiment of Wągrowiec had left the fortress and, by circuitous roads, had gone to defend Warsaw, which still opposed a strong resistance. On September 21, 1939, a young Pole whom we knew informed us that my brother had fallen in a village near Łowicz, not far from the plain. I did not pass the sad news on to my parents. I told myself that this terrible news would shatter the life of the family. But the Pole did not agree to remain silent. "I will not have a clear



The Rabbi Bornsztajn, the last rabbi of Kutno, during the swearing ceremony of the Kutno Jewish soldiers, in 1939, before their departure for the frontline.

conscience," he said. "I cannot keep such a terrible secret for myself. These young heroes who have been mowed down, including your brother, must be given a decent grave. We cannot allow dogs or crows to tear their bodies."

The Christian came to our house, to the house, and brought the sad news to my parents. The next morning, my parents, I and two other families drove to a location that was directed to us. One of the families was the Lipskis, who at that time lost their only son, the other family was the Osowskis, who also lost a son at that time.

On the road from Kutno to Łowicz, camps of victorious German soldiers were already stretched out. Armored vehicles, tanks, motorcycles and trucks flooded the roads of Poland.

We arrived at the place indicated, not far from the town of Łowicz. The local *sołtys*¹ gave us a metal plate with my brother's name on it, and the Lipskis and Osowskis also received small metal plates with the names of their sons. Everything was organized, with an inventory of fallen soldiers. In addition, various items owned by fallen soldiers were listed. The objects were handed over to the parents of the deceased, who came to pay a last tribute to their children.

There I received a photo of Abraham Sztift, who also fell in that battle. His parents had not yet heard of his loss.

— This is where they are!, said the *sołtys* pointing to a large pit. Several hundred soldiers...

Under a grove they lay like brothers in the pit.

"They fought like lions," said the *sołtys* sadly. None of them fled. All stayed to the last one. The Germans have evacuated their dead from the battlefield. The Germans lost many more soldiers in this battle. They fought for two days and three nights. On the last morning, as our soldiers were withdrawing from the fight, gunfire could still be heard in the surrounding fields. It was the last Polish soldiers who defended themselves. They did not abandon their fighting brothers, going together in battle until the end. The Germans used tanks, artillery and, in the end, planes. They were talking through microphones, carrying white flags, waving and shouting that Poland had already fallen, your fight no longer makes sense! Lay down your weapons, submit!

The German propaganda speech was answered with... bullets. The Germans drove the Polish soldiers out of the forest, surrounded them and, with the help of planes, wiped them out to the last. Before the battle ended, the courageous Polish soldiers drove the Germans back from the surrounding Polish fields and forests on several occasions. The Germans, however, brought in reinforcements, literally burning the surrounding forests and forcing the brave Polish soldiers out into the open. This is how the Germans fired at Jewish soldiers in Polish uniforms.

Between burnt forests, surrounded on both sides by a flat clearing, there were forever traces of bloody clashes and battles.

The narrow road that crossed the fields was used by the Polish army to approach Warsaw and help it defend itself. The main roads were occupied by the German enemy.

It was this narrow road that the soldiers of the 37th Regiment had to take. Littered there were lists of various names, broken weapon parts, stolen helmets. The earth was impregnated with the blood of children, who already would not see the light of day, after their short life...

They fell like ears of corn – mowed in the early morning, not having been able to feel the softness of the summer rays... Instead of joy, the parents buried in them eternal sorrow... And they, the poor parents, have still had the privilege of being able to bury their children. Among the mourners in tears, the worst was Lipski's heartbreaking complaint. His face was red as fire, his eyes rolled back, he couldn't even cry anymore and no words could come out of his mouth... He waved his arms around and walked aimlessly...

It was a sunny fall day, a light wind was blowing and shaking the branches of trees in the surrounding woods.

In my memory, I will forever engrave this unforgettable sorrow, but also this feeling of heroic human action and pride...

It was with these feelings that I, precisely at the time, left behind this part of the Polish soil and landscape...

Young Jews from Kutno on the fronts of WW II (1939-1945)



Ziskind Bibergal



Efraim Wachselfisz



Eliezer Jakubowicz



Anshel Freund



Moshe Pinchas Szpiro

¹ TN: historic Polish honorific title of a village leader.