

KUTNO AFTER THE LIBERATION

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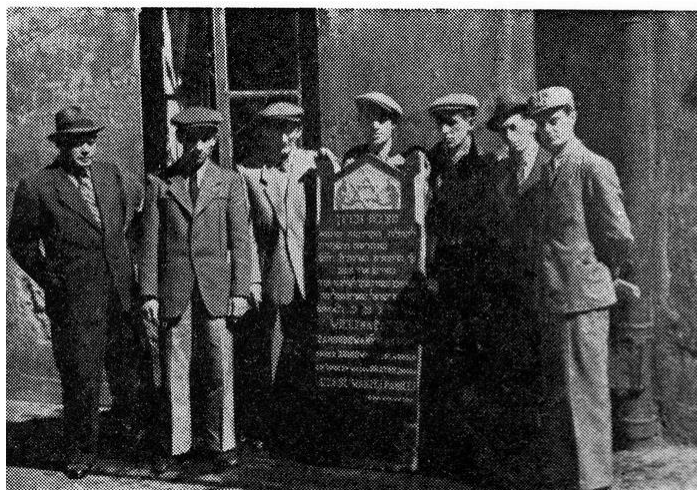
translated from the Hebrew by Thia Persoff z"l

The war is over, and I was left in the land of the living. Even today, after many years, I do not know from whence I have derived the physical and emotional strength to withstand all the tribulations, the diseases, the hunger, the agonies, and the endless persecutions, which accompanied me during those days of horror.

At the end of the fighting, I decided that I must visit the places where my family lived. First, I went to Łódź where I met my friend Mietek Wajchselfisz who was an officer in the Polish army at that time, and another friend, Yaakov Szwarc¹ with his wife Fruma. He told that now he saves Jews by smuggling them to Israel. In addition to Yaakov Szwarc who was in the "*HaShomer HaZair*" youth movement with me, I met more friends who were in this movement with me, and Zipora Zandelewicz and Azriel, Reuven and Miriam Mroz.

From there I went to Kutno, arriving there on August 15, 1945. I stood in the train station that reminded me of the horrific sights that I witnessed when I worked here with other Jews as porters and carters under the supervision of the German murderers. Mournful and depressed, I continued in my way through the streets of my town. In Sienkiewicza Street, I met Yanek the hunchback, who suggested I went to the Opoczinski family where I found my friends Balzamowicz and Jakubowicz. When we saw each other, we all started to cry bitterly, for the terrible suffering that had befallen us, and the joy in the renewed meeting. Each of us told what happened to him during those years of horror, of his suffering, his distress, and of his being saved. We all remembered our dear ones, and family members, who are with us no more.

Next morning, I went to the house of Dr. Finkelsztajn and his assistant Tola Stuczyńska (may she rest in peace). The doctor gave me the most terrible news; that no one of my family nor of my wife's, was saved, and that all of them were sent to the Chełmno death camp where they were burned alive² by the Nazi wild beasts of prey. I went down to the doctor's yard, where the "*HaShomer HaZair*" clubhouse used to be – the youth movement to which I owe so much, the one full of life and noise by Jewish youth. In my mind's eye, came to life pictures and scenes of Jewish youth thirsty for life, full of hope to build its future in Israel. After all, in this yard I spent days and evenings – the best years of my life; around me were houses of Jews, houses in which just yesterday sounds of children were heard, boys and girls whose whole future was ahead of them, houses that were witnesses to Jewish life, rich in culture and tradition of many generations, to grief and happiness, to sadness and to joy. Now I am surrounded by a large cemetery of Jewish life. A statue of a Russian soldier stands in the center of the street, but all signs of Jewish life were erased completely. It is as if Jews had never been in Kutno!



Memorial monument erected by the town's survivors after the liberation

I continue to wander through the streets of my town. My heart seems to stop beating, only endless people's images are moving in front of my mind's eyes: Here I see my dear parents, father is standing across of me, selling his wares, and here are the Kozak family, and Łęczycki, Lajchman, Kotlarz, Eizyk Szapszewicz, Blank, and many more. All of a sudden, my eyes are covered in mist, I do not



The writer when visiting in Treblinka after its liberation [probably Bergen-Belsen]

see anything anymore but red flames of fire and furious streams of blood attack me from all directions; Kutno my town is flooded in the blood of my family, your family the descendants of Abraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov... I reached the house where my brother David Lasman and his family had lived. I asked the new tenants if by any chance, they found photos of my brother and his family, but they answered me that all of them were deported to ghetto

¹ TN: see article on page 309 of the original book.

² TN: Chełmno exterminated Jews with exhaust gases of modified vans.

Konstancja, and not one of them was left alive. Indeed, he and his family will never return, but his house is still standing, with the furniture and all the household items within it. The new tenants have taken over everything. However, my brother is no more.

I could not stand the sight of the new Kutno anymore, the non-Jewish, the murderer. However, the faint hope was still flickering within me, perhaps some other family members were left alive; my sisters Chaya and Breina and my brother Efraim, who lived in Żychlin. Therefore, I went to that town. There I only found the brother-in-law of my brother Idel Kirsztajn and his friend Tamara Kowalski. They told me that my sisters and brothers were sent to Chełmno camp, where they were burned alive like many of their Jewish brethren. I returned to Łódź, but that city was like a cemetery of Jewish life that used to be so lively, full of

energy, enterprising and industrious. From there I continued my way to Berlin, the city that is cursed for eternity, but here I saw a bit of revenge for what the Nazi beast of prey had done to us.

I went towards the death-camp of Bergen-Belsen. With me were my wife Leah Blank and my little daughter who was born during the war. I am standing by the ovens that swallowed thousands and tens of thousands of innocent Jews, and around me are scattered clothes and shoes of young, old, women, and children. And common graves that fill the whole area of the camp.

I spent two years in Bergen-Belsen hoping to immigrate to Israel, towards a new life in liberated Israel that renews the nation of Israel in the land of Israel, for eternity.