
ACTION IN THE GHETTO

1

“Over the noise in the wagon could be heard sounds of crying. Soon we were all crying. On the outside, the Gestapo men were laughing at first and then warned that if we did not stop the noise, they would shoot into the wagons. It got quieter. Our cries were not only for our bitter destiny but for the destiny of the whole Jewish people.”

In the city of Radom, where I lived, two ghettos were established in April of 1941 on the order of the German occupation forces. The two sections set aside for the ghettos were in areas far apart from each other: the larger one comprised the old part of the city close to the center, and the other lay in a distant suburb called Glimce. Both were dark and dingy run-down neighborhoods with no streetlights. About 12,000 inhabitants were in the large ghetto and about 8,000 in the smaller one. Fear descended on the people in the ghettos as they gathered in their dark, crowded apartments to ponder what it all meant and what the future might bring. Stories circulated about German actions in other cities—mostly unconfirmed rumors, since there was no direct outside contact.

Violence against Jews continued as before the establishment of the ghettos. People were arrested or rounded up at random and shot. In February 1942, the first large action took place when a number of prominent Jews of the city were arrested. Among them were members of the Jewish administration of the ghetto as well as several industrialists. For several weeks, no word of their whereabouts reached the ghetto. Only much later did we find out that they had been sent to a place called Auschwitz.

On April 27, 1942, a Jewish policeman told my wife that a number of empty boxcars were standing on the ramp at the railroad station, indicating that a larger action may be planned by the Germans. He assured her that we had nothing to worry about, since the records I kept for the ghetto administration and the

factory where I worked were in perfect order. When I came home from work later that evening, my wife told me that an action was expected sometime soon. I reassured her that we had nothing to worry about, but my heart was gripped by fear. Who knew whom they will grab this time and what is in store for anyone? That night we could not fall asleep, lying awake, thinking. Earlier, my wife had told Joseph Blas, our neighbor and friend, what she had heard about the impending action. He laughed at her for being the bearer of news of doom and apparently went to sleep untroubled.

About three o'clock in the morning, we were startled by sounds of distant gunfire. Never before had we heard such sustained shooting. It went on and on, sometimes coming closer, at times more distant. As we finally dozed off, we were awakened again by a volley of shots that sounded very near. An added sound was that of hand grenades going off, and occasionally, human screams.

I got out of bed and looked out the darkened window, but it was totally black outside. Nothing could be seen. We knew that something terrible was going on out there. What? To whom? Overwhelming terror, uncertainty, and helplessness gripped us. Of course we had known in those two and a half years that, as Jews, we were in danger individually and collectively. What we did not know was when it would come and whom it would hit. We were like ostriches with our heads in the sand, denying the reality, for what could we do to escape?

But now all the Jews in the ghetto lay awake, everyone pondering whether his time had come; maybe this time the Germans were coming for him. At about four o'clock we heard the knock on our door—faint at first, then a bit louder. I got up, went to the door, and asked who it was, thinking that it might be our neighbor Blas aroused from his sleep by the shooting, wanting to discuss what was going on outside. A strange voice answered instead: "This is the Jewish police. Please open the door." My heart stopped. There, in addition to the two Jewish policemen, stood the Chief of Gestapo, *Sturmführer* Scheggel. I knew that his presence meant danger. The two policemen remained at the door while the Gestapo man entered the room. He asked me to identify myself and then asked the same of my young son, my wife, and my daughter, and ordered them to stay in their beds. He ordered me to get dressed, say goodbye to my family, and go with him.

As I was saying goodbye to my wife and children, the Gestapo man smiled as if to sneeringly ask, "You think you will see them again?" At the time, I suffered from an inflammation of the sciatic nerve and had to use a cane. He allowed

me to take my cane, and I left my home accompanied by Scheggel and the two policemen: a prisoner, under arrest.

As we came out into the yard, there stood my neighbor, Blas, accompanied by two more policemen. Scheggel ordered us all to line up single file, with Blas and me flanked by two policemen each, and to move forward. We went out into the street, and after barely a few steps, we heard a shot. There in a pool of blood lay the policeman Glatt, who had been bringing up the rear. The Gestapo man was shouting angrily as he put his gun back into the holster. Glatt tried to get up and run, but Scheggel drew his gun again and fired. We were made to start walking again. In the eerie darkness, Scheggel pointing the way with a flashlight, shouting orders to hurry, it seemed that he was leading us to the gallows.

Around us were sounds of shooting, screams, and, oddly, laughter. In the darkness, we could see nothing. Shortly we arrived at the Old City Square, which was filled with policemen, prisoners, and Gestapo. Another Gestapo man ordered us to lie on the ground face down, warning us not to move or look up. Anyone who made the slightest move or raised his head would be shot on the spot, he warned. We dropped to the wet ground as ordered. Every few minutes, new victims were brought to the square. Although I could not see the people near me, I became aware of some I knew well. After a while, we were ordered to get up and get into a black truck, which I had noticed when we arrived at the square. We were hit and pushed as we boarded the truck, and everyone tried to get as far into the truck as possible to avoid the blows. Nobody spoke. The truck stood there for another half hour, perhaps waiting for more arrivals. But none came. As the truck moved through the streets of the ghetto, we could see bodies lying in the streets and on the sidewalks. As we moved out of the ghetto, I saw non-Jews standing in their doorways laughing.

Among us in the truck were my cousin, Shaya (Isaia) Melchior, and a stranger from the ghetto of Warsaw who had left there to escape the terrible hunger. He was so terrified that he could hardly speak. The truck drove through the Aryan part of the city where everything seemed quiet and normal. As it was daybreak already, people were going about their business on the way to work, as if they knew nothing about what had just happened in the ghetto.

As the truck moved through different areas of the city, we could not make out where we might be taken. We feared that it might be something worse than

being shot. Suddenly the truck entered the courtyard of the building that housed the Gestapo Headquarters, a courtyard many entered but no one ever left alive.

Quickly, using sticks, the Gestapo men chased us out of the truck and into a wooden barrack that was standing in the middle of the yard. There they ordered us again to lie on the floor face down. More people were being brought in and they too had to lie on the floor. The barrack was full, so we were practically lying on top of each other, pushing and shoving in utter terror. Some had diarrhea brought on by the horrendous fear and had to relieve themselves on the spot, afraid to speak out. We were quietly praying for an end to this terrible, interminable ordeal.

About nine o'clock, the order was issued for all to stand and line up in rows, facing the wall. Quickly, fearfully, we lined up as instructed. The only SS man in the barrack then sat down at a table and called each of us forward to ask our names and addresses, after which we were ordered to return to our place in line. As he called the names, I became aware that my brother Itzhak was also among the prisoners, as well as several cousins and many friends. Also arrested were the chairman and vice-chairman of the Council of Elders of the ghetto. As I was called, I decided that it might be dangerous for me to walk with a cane, so I put it down and, with difficulty, I walked unaided. The sheer terror of the situation improved my physical condition.

Somewhat later (I lost sense of time), another SS man entered the barrack and called the names of the chairman and vice-chairman of the Council of Elders, Blas, and me. Fleetinglly, I thought maybe they were calling us to set us free. Instead, the SS man led the four of us to the second floor of the main building, to the office of Sturmführer Scheggel.

The first to be called in was the chairman, Joseph Diamant. Through the door we could hear the questioning inside: Did he have a lover and where did he spend time with her? What restaurant (there weren't any in the ghetto) did he eat in on this day and that? Every time the answer did not satisfy the SS men, he was fiercely beaten and finally thrown out of the room.

After the chairman came the vice-chairman, Meryn. As soon as he crossed the threshold, one of the Gestapo people near the door hit him in the face and he fell to the floor. The Gestapo man kicked him with his boot and his glasses fell off. As Meryn tried to stand up, unable to see without his glasses, groping to find them, he was again kicked to the floor. We could hear laughter inside and a scream from the Gestapo man, "You Shit-Jew, when you come to me, you must take off your shitty glasses!"

Meryn did not find his glasses. Distraught, he gave answers to the questions asked by the captors that they apparently did not like, for they beat him continuously. He moaned but did not scream during the interminable interrogation. Finally, beaten and with a bloody face, he was thrown out of the room, accompanied by obscenities and laughter from the Gestapo men inside.

Next went Joseph Blas. My time was coming and I was terrified, for undoubtedly I would get my share of beatings. The session with Blas did not last very long, and he only got hit a few times when the answers he gave were not to the liking of his tormentors. He was quickly shoved out and I entered the "execution chamber." Immediately, I got hit in the face so hard that I fell and could not get up. Screams and laughter sounded from all sides. I finally managed to stand up. There in front of me was Scheggel, telling the Gestapo man not to hit me. Scheggel and the interrogating officers asked me if I knew that bread, meat and other provisions were being sold in the ghetto for marks. Did I know who was behind this activity and did the Council have anything to do with it? Since I kept the books of the Council's distribution section, they said that I must know what is going on. I had no time to plan and thought it futile to try to fix the blame on someone else. I was already in this predicament; what good would it do to involve anyone else? I said that the Council's distribution department gave provisions to people with ration cards and was not involved in any black market operations. A hit in the face signified that Scheggel was not satisfied with my answer. Scheggel sat down again and started questioning me about my private life: what is the name of my mistress—according to him each of us must have at least one—where do I spend my evenings, what restaurants do I frequent, do I eat meat, and on and on.... he asked these questions in rapid fashion and with a vicious grin, then sat back waiting for my answers.

"I have no mistress. I have not time or money for such things," I said. "I have my wife and children and am very busy with my work. I work half days at the tannery and half days keeping books for the Council's distribution department, and I am also in charge of administering the orphan home and the old-age home. I am so busy that often I do not get home until very late when the streets of the ghetto are dark and dangerous. Even though I have permission to be out after curfew, I am sometimes accompanied home by German police patrolmen who don't believe my explanation."

At that point, one of the Gestapo men at one of the desks in the room said that he remembered checking my papers on one such occasion and did not arrest me at the time because he was in a good mood. (Our lives depended on

the mood of an SS or Gestapo man). I also told them that I did eat some meat since I received a supplementary ration from the factory of 500 grams of meat per week. Scheggel was very interested in this statement and left the room to confirm its accuracy. When he returned, apparently satisfied that I was telling the truth, he no longer hit me, but took me by the shoulder and led me to the door and, with one shove, threw me out.

I was very glad to be out of there and grateful for the moderate beating I received. The four of us waited another few minutes outside the door of the office until a Gestapo man came out and led us down to the yard and into the barrack where all the other men were. The guard called me over, handed me a sheet of paper and a pencil and ordered me to write a note to the Jewish Council to send food. I was afraid that this might be some trick so I wrote simply that several hundred arrested Jews needed some food, hoping that the people at the Council would know what to do.

Later in the afternoon two horse-drawn civilian carriages arrived with several Jewish policemen and two large kettles of soup. Sturmführer Scheggel and several of his aides came in, sought me out, and ordered me to distribute the food equitably like in the distribution department. Everyone obligingly laughed. Soon two lines were formed, plates (brought along by the Jewish Council) were distributed to all, and I gave out the soup.

Everyone received a liter of soup and there was still some leftover. The Gestapo men watched carefully that everyone came forward to get the soup and no one hid. One warned me to take a full portion for myself and eat it all. Scheggel himself supervised the distribution of the leftover soup.

The Jewish policemen left with the empty kettles. No one was able to talk to them, but we knew that our loved ones in the ghetto would at least find out where we were.

In the evening, we were again loaded onto the black truck, destination unknown. We speculated that we were being taken to Firlej, where Gestapo prisoners were usually taken for execution. The truck was indeed going in that direction, down Warszawska Street. But when we approached the prison building, the truck suddenly turned into the gate and entered the prison grounds. Several other vehicles arrived with people. When we got off, we realized that we were all from the Gestapo barrack. We were counted and then led into the showers. After the showers, back into the trucks and to the Gestapo barrack. There we had to stand on our feet all night.

More people were being brought in, this time only non-Jews. It was pitch black in the barrack. We tried to find out from the new arrivals what was going on outside, but they did not know anything about happenings in the ghetto because they had already been in prison for some time. They knew only that there had been an action in the ghetto, a number of Jews were shot to death, and others had been arrested. According to them it had been a random Gestapo operation without any specific goal of finding people guilty of any transgression or crime.

It was a very long, hard night, standing tightly pressed together, fearfully listening for sounds outside, without sleep. It was very still with only an occasional sound of a train nearby, since the Gestapo building was near the railroad station.

At daybreak, the door to the barrack swung open and Gestapo men chased us out into the yard. We were quickly assembled into rows of five and soon the order was given to march. Before we started, our hands were tied with string behind our backs. After the events of the previous day and night, there was a sense of hopelessness and helplessness among the people of our group. Out on the streets, city life was normal. People were going to work, as if nothing unusual were happening. Nobody even looked at us, although passersby probably knew some of us. The familiar streets and buildings were now distant and strange as I looked at them, probably for the last time. I will never walk these streets again, I thought. We are surely being taken to a strange and distant place, to a certain death, and nobody will ever know what happened to me. I said this to my friend Joseph who was next to me.

The street was now full of people. We were still wearing civilian clothes, and it was just one step to the sidewalk to mingle with the human traffic. Maybe nobody would notice, and we could save ourselves. But Joseph begged me not to try because the Gestapo would take revenge on the remaining prisoners. They would look for me and surely find me. Then they would certainly execute me. I would also jeopardize my family; if the Gestapo arrested my family, what would I have accomplished? My friend's logic was correct. What right, I thought, do I have to try and save myself only to condemn others to pay with their lives? In fact, the lives of my wife and children were dearer to me than my own.

Soon we arrived at the railroad station. There were the boxcars that we had heard about in the ghetto a few days ago. We did not know at the time what they were there for. Now we knew. Where will they take us? If to death, why do the Germans have to transport us—can't they finish us off right here? The guards rushed us into the wagons without even counting us. I thought that to be a bad omen. At this point there was no escape. The doors were closed; we could no

longer see the city where we had lived all our lives, the city we were now leaving forever under such circumstances. We were looking in the dark for a hole or crack to cast a last glance and say a last goodbye to the past and all the dear ones we were leaving behind.

Over the noise in the wagon could be heard sounds of crying. Soon we were all crying. Outside, the Gestapo men were laughing at first and then warned that if we did not stop the noise they would shoot into the wagons. It got quieter. Our cries were not only for our bitter destiny but for the destiny of the whole Jewish people. Outside sounds told us that cars were arriving. There were shouts and orders being given, people running, commotion. Soon a strong jolt meant that a locomotive was attached to the wagons. A whistle, doors opening and closing, and then the train started to move. It was heading south towards Skarzysko.

Some of the people in the wagon speculated that we may be transported to Germany to work; others thought we were being sent to another prison. Everyone had an opinion, but no one knew the facts. I was lost in the tragic thoughts of where my destiny was taking me and rebellious thoughts of protest: why should this be happening to us? I resolved to fight on and not willingly go to the slaughter. How to do it? That I could not figure out. I thought of breaking down the door of the boxcar and jumping out, but how? No, I must wait for an opportunity.

Suddenly the train stopped. We were at a station.