

Stanislaw Smajzner

Extracts from the Tragedy of a Jewish Teenager



Stanislaw Smajzner After
His Escape From Sobibor

1. Opole Ghetto

Precisely on the 10th May 1942 with spring in full bloom, the last fearful summons came. All the hundreds of refugees who had escaped up to that moment, would have to go to the notorious place and at the same hour as before. They warned us very seriously that no-one should try to oppose them or try to hide, since those who did so would be immediately shot down. They added that , as of that day , our community would be extinguished, and for that reason it would be useless for us to stay. They gave us some other orders and threats and at eleven o'clock next day, the ill fated square was filled by those Jews who had been left behind, each one with his bundle at hand.

Among them were my parents, my brother my sister, my nephew and myself. In our group was also one of my cousins from Wolwonice, Nojeh Szmajner. It was then we learned about our destination, although we did not know why we were being sent. Rows and columns were made and we left the ghetto of Opole for the last time. Outside the gate we saw a large number of carts, since we already been counted, we left and in a few minutes we were far from the town, crossing fields covered with multi-coloured flowers and leaving Opole Lubelskie behind.

We were now facing something imponderable. I later learned that only the members of the Judenrat and of the Jewish police , as well as the privileged elements who orbited around that organisation , were not part of this transport. They had been solemnly promised by the Germans they could continue in the town. So as soon as the last Jew had left the ill-fated ghetto, they went back to the square to talk to the Nazis, as if to render them an account of the good job they had done. The latter put them all together and immediately shot them, regardless of the pleas and begging of their perplexed collaborators.

Such was the sad end of those who had always tried to excel in their fidelity and total subservience to their unfeeling masters, who gave them indisputable proof of the deep scorn they felt for them. This has been, still is and always will be so.

2. Journey to the Unknown

In the carts on the front rows were the old men, the invalid, the women and the children. The men followed on foot. I was placed on one of the first rows, the third or the fourth, with my brother my cousin and my nephew. All of ours took long strides to be able to follow the same rhythm of the animal – drawn carts, as our escorts would not let us get far from them. The long train thus formed was led in the direction of Wolwonice. The Germans accompanied us in cars, on bicycles or on horseback. We were deadly silent and the only sounds which could be heard, were those of the trotting horses and the hum of the motors, the shrill sound of a whistle or a command shouted in German or Polish. Once in awhile this monotone was broken by the crack of some firearm and we were frightened.

A few minutes later a whisper passed along the column, from the back to the front until the news reached the ears of those walking on the first rows. The Germans were shooting all those who could not follow the others and right there, on the dusty road. For many of us the worries and the pains, which seemed endless were finished. Some tried to look back so as to see what was happening, but terrible shouts from the soldiers made them change their minds. After we had walked some kilometres I saw something, which filled me with the utmost horror.

Right before me an elderly man started to slacken his pace due to his pitiful physical condition. When one of the Nazis noticed he was limping, he came near him and jumped off his bicycle thus throwing it to the ground, so furious was he. Not wasting a single minute he elbowed his way through the crowd at the front and rudely pushed the unhappy Jew away. The poor devil, already weak, fell heavily to the ground, while his aggressor got hold of a rifle and sent a bullet through the nape of his neck. Then he mounted his bicycle again and rode away as if nothing had happened. As the whole awesome scene took place before my very eyes I could watch it down to the least details. I was so appalled that I doubled my efforts to avoid the same happening to me and all those around me did the same.



Shlomo - Stanislaw Szmajzner

After we had been walking for about three hours we came to a village, the name of which escaped my memory, but which I believe was called Kiwuel. We heard a long whistle followed by a shout - which ordered the disorientated crowd to come to a halt. It was the time for rest, not for us though, but for our escort. They did not let us sit on the ground and in some way we succeeded in lessening the effects of our tremendous stress it was due to the rest the Germans took. At this stop something disturbing happened and it deeply hurt the feelings of us all.

A few minutes after we had stopped some of the carts were taken away from the convoy and driven to places far away from where we were. We then heard a series of shots followed by total silence. We later learned that the Germans had selected exactly those who were better dressed and killed them. They had then called some Polish peasants from the neighbourhood and sold them the clothes of their poor victims. The peasants were then told to get the clothes off the dead bodies and most certainly this command must have been given with smiles on the Germans faces. The Germans came whistling back and said that from now on there would be lots of elegant people in the village and that was all the comment they made.

As the gang which kept us, had already had lunch and some rest, we proceeded towards Wolwonice, which we soon reached. We went by the town and turned towards Nalenczow. On leaving Wolwonice the road had a steep downward slope followed by another steep upward one which could very well be known as the 'Death Climb'. In this sadly notorious place there was a horrible slaughter in front of us all.

Notwithstanding the steep climb we were forced to go on walking as fast as we had walked down. In order to make us do that the men with the Swastika whipped us without ceasing. Many of us could not hold on any longer and started to lag behind. They were summarily taken out of the files and shot without any warning. We were already used to these barbaric Nazi shows but we had never witnessed at close quarters such a gruesomely revolting scene, without being able to do anything to help our brothers. Dozens of Jews were killed in that way by the sole reason that they were exhausted by the long painful journey.

Meanwhile all those who could still walk silently watched the carnage. From the front carts, women and children looked at the spectacle of death with eyes, made glassy by the violence of what they saw, clouded by the tears which welled up without stopping, while their throats could not hold back the sobs which broke uncontrollably. Countless Poles who passed by on the road instead of stopping to try and help us in some way by giving us some food or water or even a small gesture of tenderness or pity, would only come near us, to stare delightedly at the vandalism which was performed there. This did not happen only once, before we reached Naleczow, an incalculable number of men were shot dead by Nazi bullets, thus littering the road with bodies.

These despicable Polish gentlemen of their own will were immersed in their own indignity and in their own carelessness. Their country was the victim of the worst abuse, and the tradition of pride and fight, moulded in the reaction against the Russians in 1920, was being trodden by Teuton boots for almost three years. They were the ones who could somehow oppose tyranny because they were relatively free and could get weapons. However, they opted for the role of obedient and flattering lambs instead of doing what we the Jews, lacking everything, had done in the heroic Warsaw ghetto where thousands of brave men had fought the Nazi troops and tanks, without any weapons for three weeks.

Finally, with large spaces in our ranks, we arrived at the station of Naleczow. They caged us inside a plot of land surrounded with barbed wire, as if we were animals, without water or food. Eating and drinking to their hearts content, the German jackals delighted in sarcastically staring at us, while we sank in the pain and worry which the death of so many of ours had caused us. Only then could we check the tragic account of casualties, we gathered in small groups made up of several families that existed there with the aim of counting how many were no longer with us. Nearly all the families had been deprived of some loved ones who lay on the long road from Opole Lubelskie to Naleczow.

I saw many Poles come near the wire fence to sell bottles and pitchers of water. Taking advantage of our anxiety they were demanding and would only give us the water in exchange for a gold wedding ring, a watch or some other valuable thing. Many Jews had been able to keep, through all those long months, precious belongings hidden from the plundering Nazis. However, in a few minutes, they had to hand them all over to the voracious Poles for little more than a carafe of water, which should never be denied even to a dog.

I came then to understand that they had gotten used to making money out of the misfortune of others since the former groups had passed that way some time ago. They belonged to the same class of toadies who had

taken delight in the unhappiness, which assailed us over the long walk to Naleczow. They tried to exchange water for gold, nuzzling in the murk of their own misery, instead of doing the same thing that their countrymen in the Polish Brigade had done only a little earlier in Torbruk, when they helped in the epic defence of that military stronghold in the African desert, against the long and unsuccessful first attack of Rommel's troops.

It was May 11th 1942 and when night fell most of us were hungry and thirsty and the only thing we heard was the weeping of our women and children. Some chanted the Kaddish – the Jewish prayer for the dead – for those who were gone forever. And thus we spent the night, all of us lying on the ground in the open air and although we were absolutely worn-out with tiredness and suffering we could not sleep.

Before daybreak the guards entered the enclosure to put us in rows once more. When this was done, we were led to the station platform under strong escort. When we got there we saw a freight train waiting for us: all its wagons were totally closed and had very little airing. They had sliding doors which were locked from the outside.

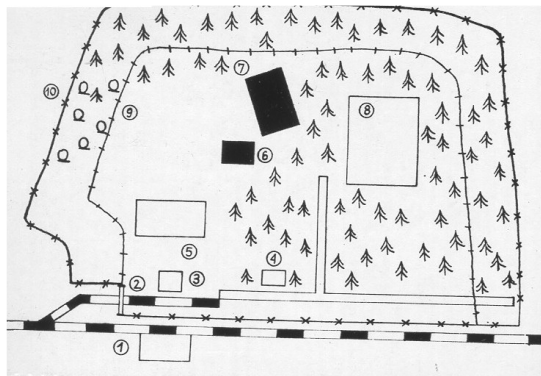


Diagram of the Sobibor Camp

Shouting and pushing, they threw us into the wagons until they were saturated with Jews. A minimum of one hundred people were put inside each one of them under conditions which would not be proper even if the cargo had been swine. When the whole bunch of people was crowded inside the cattle wagons we heard a shrill whistle, and then the train whistle which preceded departure. With the train at full speed the constant shaking of the wagons made the situation inside reach a state of unbelievable panic and despair. I have no words to exactly describe what happened in that hell. Children were stifled to death, thrashing about frantically, trying to breathe some oxygen which would keep them alive. Old people were trampled and pressed in all possible ways, women some of them pregnant were suspended in the air, without ever being able to set foot on the floor, as they were crushed by the heavy crowd which oscillated from one side to the other, like a pendulum, following the swing of the wagons which ran very fast.

The almost total lack of air made the heat become torrid and the thirst unbearable. There was no water or toilets and many relieved themselves right there. Dizziness and fainting came in quick succession and the turmoil got worse by the minute and no solution was found to all of that.

Once in a while the train would stop but we did not see or were told anything. In these short moments the only hope we had was that they would open the doors and let us breathe some air which we so badly needed. However, this did never happen. Another whistle, another train whistle and the convoy would continue its ruthless course. Each minute the number of corpses grew at our feet, although some of the dead were held upright by the pressure of our bodies, so crowded were we. The smell of sweat, urine and feces mixed in a nauseating odour which actually transformed the wagon into a sewer.

The day before we had travelled from Opole to Naleczow . We had been up the whole night, near the station. Now we faced unprecedented ordeals, unparalleled up to that moment. Thirst tormented us more than hunger, and a single drop of water would be more precious to us than a diamond of the same size. We were not able to even squat and whoever tried it was trampled. We had to stand and the sea of filth grew bigger at our feet, and we went on and on like this for the whole day, locked inside the wagons, as if we were real

beasts, in a stifling nauseating place, filled with dead bodies and putrid air. To add the finishing touch to the gruesome picture once in a while we would hear shots fired by the German soldiers who were on the outside of the convoy. They did that to make our terror even worse. Some of us tried to open the door with the help of knives and pocket knives but with no success, since the door was very strong, and was tightly closed. Many came to the point of using their own nails. In a desperate attempt to rip the boards off the side of the wagon, to get some air to breathe.

The only ventilation we had come through a small window closed by iron bars intertwined with barbed wire, and the air was not enough for the needs of a hundred people. We could do nothing with pocket knives or nails, the heat was increasingly more stifling and the air more difficult to breathe. I do not believe that even the slaves dragged away from Africa by the slave traders ever suffered so much, with the only exception of the length of the trip. The human mind cannot accept that this could have ever been done, in the middle of the twentieth century, against rational beings, when these medieval methods had already been banned for a long time before the Nazis made them come to life again.

Our family gathered somewhere inside the wagon and all of us made superhuman efforts to stay upright. Some were young and were successful, but my father and especially my mother could only manage it at the cost of tremendous exertion. Many times only the pressure of the crowd did not let them fall. Uncontrollable revolt still fills me when I remember them and what they had to suffer due to the bestial inhuman Germans.

There was nothing to make us believe there was any hope of things getting better because the war was taking a course, which might lead to unpredictable results. On the Pacific the Japanese, were at war against the United States and they had already seized a large portion of China and South Eastern Asia.

A few days before our tragic trip they had captured the last pocket of American resistance in the Philippine islands. In Africa, Rommel was completing the siege of Torbruck. In the following month, the important citadel would fall in their hands and the victorious German- Italian troops would invade Egypt and would head for the Suez Canal. Simultaneously, on the Russian front, the Wehrmacht would start its second largest summer attack against the Soviet forces and would besiege the strategic industrial town of Stalingrad. The Russian army was withdrawing and did not seem able to curb the progress of the German armoured divisions. Most of continental Europe was under German domination, excepting Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the Iberian countries. Everything made us believe that victory would smile on the Axis.

In Germany and in the occupied territories, the persecution against the Jews had resumed and great names already pontified in the malign profession of sweeping Israelites off the surface of the Earth, such as Julius Streicher, Heinrich Himmler, Martin Bormann, Baldur von Schirach, Artur Seyss- Inquart and so many other murderers which mounted, under Hitler's inspiration, a real Death Autarchy. They thought their crimes would go unpunished and they started specialising in the most efficient system of mass murder.

Enthusiastic about the successive triumph of their armies and as they thought they would win the war, the Germans had built immense extermination camps in Poland among which the most remarkable were Sobibor, Belzec and Treblinka.

3. Sobibor

It was late afternoon when we noticed that the noise made by the train wheels on the rails had slowly

lessened its speed. Next, we heard the squeak of metal caused by the brakes and the train stopped. We soon noticed they were manoeuvring the engine and suddenly the wagons started to be pushed instead of pulled. A few seconds later we stopped again. We were all silent, since we were worried at the continuous comings and goings of the engine. We felt that it was finally separated from the rest of the convoy and was going fast away from the place we thought should be a railroad yard. Some more minutes went by while we waited for the results of all that fluster.

We were all filled with intense anxiety and only whispers were heard, broken at times by the cry of a child, immediately silenced by its mother. All of a sudden, the door was opened. All the other wagons were opened at the same time and we saw dozens of SS soldiers, whom we already knew very well, waiting for us along the whole long convoy. Scattered among them were approximately as many soldiers and this fact surprised us since they were a novelty for us. They wore special uniforms of which the most remarkable element was a black cap with a skull emblem right in front. They carried wooden truncheons; whips and guns were in their hands. Their uniform was different from that of the Germans and it was forest - green in colour.

They had been recruited in Ukraine among those of German descent and many of them also spoke German. Some Ukrainian Russians also succeeded in joining the army, by claiming they had Aryan blood. This way, they joined up in order to escape the Nazi yoke. They had been assigned to relatively independent units and they had their own hierarchy. In spite of that the Commander in Chief was a German SS officer. Their object was to perform auxiliary tasks for the Germans, such as guards and sentries in Concentration Camps in the countries occupied by the Reich.

We thought our misfortunes had ended on arriving to our destination and we eagerly wished for some fresh air and for freedom, as little as it might be. We felt the compelling need to rest our tired muscles and bones after the pitiless journey. We had gone without water, food, light and pure air for hours, together with excrement and corpses. For all these reasons, our eyes were fixed upon the door which, once opened, showed us the deadly view of a gang of criminals with their sombre threatening look. Thus, all our anxiety had been in vain. We immediately heard violent shouts and curses, followed by an incisive command – "Outside quickly."

This was the reception the bandits gave us making the hopes of the most optimistic turn to pessimism which was already latent. The Ukrainians and their German masters, using the whips in an indiscriminate way, instigated the immense human cargo to make us leave the crowded wagons, hurriedly and violently. We had hardly had time to breathe and we were forced to hurl ourselves disorderly out, like an excited herd.

We stepped on each other and pressed against one another, walking over the bodies, which hampered our way and slipping on the foul slippery paste which covered the whole floor of the freight car. On their part, the soldiers never stopped shouting and whipping us, so as to deliberately increase the tumult, while we were unable to attempt even a single rebellious gesture against all that. Our reasoning abilities were dulled by the din they made and we could not even get any orientation as to where we were at that moment, since we could not find any point of reference.

At the exact moment when the crowd left the wagon and even before we had all come out, I had the opportunity of seeing, with my own eyes, a man in an elegant uniform.

He wore grey trousers, which characterised the German Army, a perfect white jacket and a cap handsomely placed on his head. He was using his pistol to shoot at the Jews who were coming out of the train, and he

was accompanied in that by, an extraordinarily tall officer. Not to mention some others who were practising their marksmanship on defenceless targets. Due to this solid attitude, dozens of ours lay there, at the very moment of arrival, by the side of the wagons, on which they had come. The aim of this monstrous scene was to impose, right away, terror and obedience on the Jews, thus discouraging them of any rebellious act.

As soon as the wagons were emptied, we were impelled towards a long corridor flanked by two fences made of barbed wire. There were guards all around us, urging us to walk as fast as possible, in spite of the state we were in. At the end of that passage there was an arrogant Nazi officer accompanied by two Ukrainian soldiers holding their truncheons. This corridor was the stage of an unforgettable scene for the sophisticated cruelty, which was practiced there.

The three criminals stood at the end of the corridor, positioned as to form a triangle, with the higher- ranking officer, a little behind the two guards who stood on either side of him. Both of them had a menacing posture, with their fearful truncheons and their vicious faces. Meanwhile, the mass of Jews was coming by fits and starts and, when they came within reach of the morons they were violently separated – the men to the right and the women to the left, with the beast-like sectarians fiercely wielding their cudgels and hitting everyone pitilessly.

The picture we saw was very painful, with whole families being separated: mothers were separated from their children and husbands in tears: young people were driven away from their parents and siblings: babies were deprived of their mothers love.

As we were being separated according to our sex, we were thrown into a larger yard, located at the end of the corridor. This area could not hold us all and we had to be pushed and pressed to one another until it became totally saturated with people, because about two thousand of us had come in our transport.

The cursed SS were waiting for us at the entrance to the yard, which looked like a football field. They did not intend to waste any time, since they immediately aligned the women into four rows and made them start walking towards a gate, behind which lay the unknown.

As soon as they had disappeared behind the gate, which was noisily shut, the Nazis focused their attention on the men. They put us also in rows of four and we waited for the command to march. This did not come immediately though and we had to stand where we were. In the commotion generated by the disorderly exit from the train, when no one could understand anything amidst the running and shouting. I had been close to my brother, to my nephew and to my cousin Nojeh. From that moment onwards we never separated for a single minute and now we were together. The same did not happen to my father, with whom we lost all contact during the bedlam resulting from the human avalanche which had been hurled out of the wagon.

If we had not been able to find him then, we thought it impossible, now, to try to locate him, since we were all grouped and under the strict surveillance of the Germans. With all the men already in formation, there suddenly appeared a giant German officer, with a disdainful look in his eyes and whom I thought to be the leader there. Actually roaring, he started to select us according to our aptitudes. Thus, the farmers were selected first, then the physically stronger, as well as those who seemed to be most able to resist. Next, the carpenters, the mechanics, the tailors, and then other professionals until all of us had been subdivided into diverse groups according to the most useful professions.

As no goldsmiths were called I was very surprised and daringly left the files of those who had not been called and addressed the officer. When I got close enough to him, without waiting for him to say a word, I tried to be very courteous and clever and told him I was a goldsmith and that my profession had not been included on the list they had called. The huge German was perplexed, as if he had paid no attention to my words or did not believe I was actually a goldsmith. As soon as I finished talking I took off my back the small tool bag I always carried and showed him its contents, as well as a monogram, I had engraved on my own money wallet. This small proof of my professional skill was enough to make this brute a little more accessible and believe what I had told him. He finally decided I was to be taken from the files and I took advantage of the opportunity to add that I had three "brothers" who also manufactured jewels and whom I would like to have with me.

He nodded his agreement and my "brothers" joined me. Before he could go on with his work I still found a little courage to tell him that my old father was in that crowd, although I had not been able to find him. The German then said we might be able to find my father next day. Thus ended that short but profitable dialogue.

The reader must surely have noticed how often I have mentioned, from the very first chapter, my tool bag. It is, apparently a detail not worth being mentioned so persistently. Up to now, when I write this chapter, my small bag has not done anything to deserve having been mentioned so many times in the story. It is true that, with the tools I kept in it, I escaped a lot of unpleasant situations and was able to help myself and my family. I have always been able to find some kind of job which would bring me some profit, one way or the other. Besides this, because of it I was able to avoid performing many unpleasant tasks for the Nazis, which would not be useful to me in the least. For all those reasons and because of the way I felt about its immeasurable worth, I always took good care of it and kept it at hand, now more than ever. To anyone less aware of this, the exaggeratedly frequent allusions might even be considered psychotic. However, as the facts are presented the reader will understand the support my little bag came to give me. Thanks to this support I am alive today, and may possibly be alive in the days ahead. Without it, my odyssey would never have been told, and the memory of it will always be kept in my mind.

Next, the giant ordered us to wait for him and left the yard. I was very pleased at the outcome of my boldness and my lies, through which I was able to keep my brother and my relatives with me. While we waited, we could see a group of men disappear behind the same gate the women had gone through a few minutes before. Soon afterwards, a boy came to us and, without a word, joined our small group. Frightened at the possibility of the presence of the stranger bringing us some kind of problem, I heatedly protested. I told him to go away, as the big boss had said only we were allowed to stay there, to which he retorted he had been given the same command. No alternative was left but to accept him, much to our dislike. The others who had been selected had already been taken away by the guards and so we stayed there alone and afraid of what might happen next. The boy who joined us was a painter who made plaques and signs.

The officer returned at long last. He beckoned us to follow him and started walking to a nearby shack. He violently kicked the door open and told us to go inside. He told us to stay there, not to leave the shack for anything and not to let anyone come in. Soon afterwards he went away. The room was rather large and it was very dark inside, since night was falling. Even so I noticed that in one of the corners someone was moving. I rubbed my eyes and tried to focus them on what I thought must be a man, while my heart started beating out a rhythm. Terribly frightened I shouted – "Who is there?" "I am also a Jew " – a muffled weak voice immediately answered. We went closer, somewhat calmer now and sat on the floor, beside him. He was a young man. We then began to talk about our misfortunes and we soon learned that he too was a painter of direction signs. We were all extremely tired, hungry and thirsty, however, the heavy nervous

tension made us sleepless, and we continued our lively discussions.

He told us he had come in a transport previous to our own. He had come with a large number of Jewish refugees from different Polish small towns, such as Choddle, Jozeow – on the – Vistula and some others. He added that, on arriving, they had the same reception that had been given to us. The Germans had separated first the women and then the men, all of them absolutely frightened at the unbelievable conditions of the trip and by what had happened when they had left the train.

Both groups had disappeared in the same way, behind that gate. Only a group which had been told to clean up the yard had been left behind. Notwithstanding, on the following day, they had also vanished behind the same gate which, according to him, led into a long corridor that ended no one knew where. He told us also that he did not know what had happened to his companions and that he had been told to paint arrows, and panels to identify the station, the camps, the bathrooms etc.

We were still talking when the same German soldier came in and we all became anxious. To our great surprise, he told me to go and get some food and pointed at the kitchen. In spite of the almost total darkness, I saw a bucket and picked it up before I followed the Nazi. When we got there I was open-mouthed. I was face to face with a mountain of cheese, salami, and varied cans, which filled the room next to the kitchen in total disorder. I felt as if I could hurl myself upon it.

The SS told me I could pick up anything I wanted to eat. I did not move, for I thought he was joking. He insisted, but my mistrust did not let me pick up any of those delicacies, although I eagerly wanted them. The officer again insisted. Very humbly and timorously, I finally grabbed a piece of salami and with my head bowed went back to the kitchen to get some coffee. Unfortunately the container I put it in belonged to the painter and must have had some kerosene in it because its precious content was spoiled. Even so each of us drank a little of it, because our hunger was irresistible.

While we talked after we had eaten, the young painter told us he had come with his family but he did not know anything about the fate they had met. Everything indicated that the Germans were using some kind of psychological method, through which they made the thousands of Jews who arrived believe that there was nothing wrong with the place. We were under the impression that every transport that came was always the first one, since everything was neat and tidy with no evidence of the enormous contingents which had come before. Night was passing but we could not sleep. The painter showed visible signs of terror and nervousness, because he shook all the time. Our digressions covered all the main topics of that enigmatic place.

We ceaselessly wondered – What was there behind the arrows which pointed at No1, No 2 and No 3 ? What would it be like behind the plaque which had the word Bath printed on it ? What would there be behind the famous gate? What could have happened to our people? And thus the questions went on repeating themselves, while the answers floated in the air, until the first signs of a new day full of doubts and affliction started to appear. When the thirteenth of May started, I noticed through a small window we had in our room, that something strange was happening.

A group of fifty to sixty men had come into the yard. At first I was elated because all of them were Jews.

Among them I immediately recognised a close friend of mine from Opole who had come in the same transport as I. We waved to each other while the other men cleaned the place of what had been left there the day before. His name, unforgettable to me to this day, was Abraham.

When the cleaning up was finished, they vanished from sight, and we again talked about what would soon happen to us. Around the yard, the scenery was tyrannical- fences of barbed wire and sentries loaded up to their ears with arms, in the corners, guards leaned over the parapets of high towers armed with machine guns. This landscape was not at all invigorating, and our disillusionment was great. We were now sure that we had fallen into a perfect trap and we clearly perceived that there would be no way for us to escape, due to the strict watch the Nazis kept and by the equipment they had.

Long hours went by and we did not see or learn anything. No Jew was to be seen for us to at least to be sure he was alive. Around noon, the same officer came again. At the sight of his frightening appearance we immediately stood up. He asked us straight away – “What is it you need to be able to work?”. I informed him we needed tables and chairs. The shy tremulously asked for the material he needed. Next, the officer told us to follow him. He took us to a large shack. There the painter got wooden planks, paint and some other implements he needed to make the numbered plaques, which would identify the diverse quarters existing in the camp. As for us, we got the furniture I had asked for and which was necessary for the work of a goldsmith. I must point out, though that only I was a goldsmith. My brother, nephew, as well as my cousin Nojeh, which I had said were my brothers too, knew nothing about the job.

However, I asked for enough material for us all so as to justify what I had told the Nazi officer when we first got there. In the above mentioned shack, there was a large quantity of used clothes and bed sheets, including excellent blankets. We did not let the opportunity slip through our fingers, since we had very few warm clothes, and no blankets. Our first night in the shack had been spent on the floor and we had not been able to go to sleep.

I told the SS that we had no beds and he said he would supply us with some bunks, and he told us to pick out the bed sheets we needed for our personal use. Before he left, he warned us never to go near the barbed wire fences, under any circumstances, since the sentries were under orders to shoot , without any warning, at those who tried to do so. He added that even if we were called by a German to go near the wire fences, for us not to do so, as the invitation would only be a trap. We later learned that the bandits frequently used that dirty trick to kill Jews. It was enough for them to wish to do so and they did it without further hesitation, just for the fun of it.

The officer came again later on. This time however, he had another officer with him. The latter was much shorter and was neatly dressed in a white uniform. I soon recognised him as the officer in a white jacket who had been practicing his marksmanship on the Jews, when we arrived. The first one, whom we already knew, although we did not know his name, introduced him as the Commander –in – Chief of the camp. He went on praising him as the highest authority in that place and as the absolute master of everything, which was done or undone. His power extended in an unquestionable way, over all sectors, and he actually could be considered the master of life and death of all those who were there.

After the flattering description, they sat down and told us to do the same, thus starting a pleasant and even cordial conversation, as if this were the most natural thing for them. We felt much more at ease and we even

imagined that we were in a friendly, merry place, such was the courteousness with which they addressed us. The Commandant asked me a lot of questions referring to jewels.

He wanted to know how they were made and how could I, who looked so young, be able to manufacture them. He took some more time on the second question, asking me slyly about how some of the tools were used. Maybe he suspected I did not really possess all the skills I had boasted of, or that I had been lying. Even so, he did not lose his temper and accepted all my arguments even though he tried to delve into all the subtleties of my profession.

When the dialogue was over, they got up and the leader told me to wait for his orders. We then learned his name. He was Franz Stangl. The other one, with whom we had talked many times before, was the cursed SS Scharfuhrer Gustav Wagner, a most important authority, the leader of Camp Number 1.

Franz Stangl was, at that time, extremely vain. He was always perfectly dressed and his snobbery came to the point of being absurd. He regarded himself as being all powerful, and he actually was. His countenance reflected a lot of arrogance, in spite of some kind and tender traits. He doubtlessly looked snobbish. He was always well groomed, his Hauptman's high ranking police officers uniform was always shiny and well-pressed, and it fitted him beautifully. His build was 1.74m slender height. He usually wore a cap which showed that he still had all of his light-brown hair. He looked thirty years old and healthy. He always kept his white gloves swinging on one of his hands and his boots were like mirrors, clean and shiny. He had the air of a superior man, a peculiar characteristic of all Aryans who revered their ancestry. He was always smiling, friendly and happy, although at the cost of the unhappiness of others. He spoke slowly in a soft voice which betrayed his unshakeable calm. The words he pronounced sounded mild and affable, showing how well bred and refined he was. His appearance was that of a University lecturer due to the mixture of attitudes that he deliberately presented.

The other one, Gustav Wagner, was a giant nearly two meters tall. He had a huge body, must have weighed more than a hundred kilos and was as strong as an ox. His main peculiarity lay in the fact that he had extremely long arms, which went down to his knees, in an absurdly disproportionate way. He also had a severe deformity in one of his shoulders, which was much narrower than the other, and this made him walk with a strange gait, always leaning towards the right. Besides his way of swinging his body right and left gave him the appearance of an orang-utan. His face was like a skull made in granite, so rigid was it. His eyes were such a dark green that they could hypnotise anyone who looked fixedly at them. However, they were lustreless like those of a dead fish, with no life or sparkle. Some moments later in comes Franz Stangl again, and he gives me my first job. I was to make a monogram for him. He sat down and explained what he wanted it to be like.

After I had listened to him attentively I argued that the gold I had available would not be enough, given the weight the valuable jewel was to have. The gold I declared I had was that of the jewels we had kept carefully hidden since we had been taken away from Opole. As a matter of fact, with the exception of my tool bag, these were the only valuable objects from which I never parted. We knew how priceless they would be in times of danger and I took good care of them. They represented a very small part of what we had once had, but even so, they could still be extremely useful. As I was terrified at the mysterious disappearance of my parents and my sister Ryrka behind the sinister gate, I thought that was the right time for me to offer the little gold in my power to be used in the monogram, even if the quantity would not be enough.

However, Stangl did not worry about that. He promised he would send me the proper amount of bullion I needed to make the ring to his taste. I took advantage of the pleasantness of our talk to reiterate that my parents were also there and we would like to see them since we missed them very much and we were not used to being deprived of their company. In effect, a constant torture afflicted me as to their whereabouts. I knew that what I had seen on the day we had arrived was not encouraging. However, I still ardently nourished the hope that all of them were alive, working in some other quarter of the camp, which seemed to me destined for concentration or forced labour. Formerly when I had been looking for them all over Poland, and before I had met them again in Wolonice, I had spent long sad months searching for them, but I was absolutely sure they were still alive.

Now, everything was different. I had been separated from them only twenty-four hours before, but a strange worry tormented me ceaselessly, due to what I had witnessed the day before and their sudden mysterious disappearance. The Commandant heard everything with his head bent, but with his whole attention. Then turning to me with an air of generosity he assured me I had nothing to worry about and that I would soon be able to see them. He assured me that all of them were well but their work was a little bit harder than ours. In spite of that, he added there was no reason for me to be worried or afraid. Furthermore, he declared that all the Jews who had come in our transport had already had their baths, changed their clothes and were working on the farm, and that they were happy and well taken care of.

Stangl paused for a minute and then went on, adding that nothing would be missing to our little group. We would always have enough material for us to work with, plenty of good food, not to mention comfortable beds to sleep in. He finished by promising me, upon his word as a German officer, that my brothers and I would soon meet our parents who were in Camp 3. I then dared to ask him where we were. The answer came right away. He looked at me very firmly and said – “We are in a labour camp and its name is Sobibor. Sobibor was a small hamlet. It could not be called a village. It was only a meaningless hamlet. My companions and I had never heard its name, nor did we remember it, even straining our minds and trying to think of our Geography lessons in our good old days at school.

Its name and location were not on the map of Poland, as I could verify some time later. Perhaps a very minutely detailed railroad map might carry it, since it possessed a train station, even though it was a very small one. The ‘labour ‘ camp with the same ill-fated name of the station and the hamlet, was on the outskirts of the hamlet. Soon afterwards, Stangl left. From that moment on I felt relieved by the comforting and soothing words of the German. I tried to make my companions understand that everything was different in that place from what we had supposed. In truth, those Nazis seemed different from the ones we had known before. We would work in comfort and we would not lack anything. We would make up, as of that moment, a group of six young Jews, trusting and happy. I plunged back into my thoughts which always had a halo of optimism. The mention Stangl had made of my parents filled me with renewed hope, given the sincerity he showed in his explanation. I was fully convinced that I would soon see them and I no longer worried about them, since they were working on the farm and were well taken care of. I firmly believed that all these things were true and the Germans I dealt with were good, understanding men.

I felt relief at the wonderful perspectives which emerged. Nothing seemed to hint at the torments and anguish which had surrounded us in the ghettos, where we had suffered so much under the yoke of the Nazi henchmen. If it were not for a slight doubt which still hovered over us because of what we had witnessed when we got there. We might even have concluded that we were in a colony where vacations would alternate with reasonably humane work, without the continuous siege that hunger had laid on us for such a long time.

In the early afternoon I received a large quantity of rings. I immediately noticed they were used, old - fashioned jewels by their mere look. I did not think of their origin and started to melt them right away, with the help of my equipment. When I had finished melting the bullion I began my delicate work but I had first thought of a way to make the Germans believe in my supposed brothers skills. As they knew nothing about the art of making jewels, I made my brothers help me, while my nephew and cousin sharpened the tools, pretending they were really working.

If they kept idle, they would run serious risks because, at any moment, another German or a Ukrainian could show up, in which case, fatal consequences would be coming not only to them but also to myself. The leaders of the camp would never forgive me for trying to betray their good faith. With that in mind, I took all the necessary precaution, since I had no intention of ruining everything.

It soon got dark, however, I went on working to finish Stangl's monogram. While I worked, some Officer would occasionally come and watch me. I came to the conclusion that they were led by curiosity to see, with their own eyes, how the work was done. In such moments I gave them undeniable proof of my skill and devotion, and took a long time chiselling any unimportant facet. They were fascinated by that and paid me the most elaborate compliments as the beautiful jewel emerged from the block of gold. Some came to the point of asking me to manufacture something for them and I always said I would.

I immediately promised them I would do their bidding as soon as I possibly could. When we had to stop because we were too tired to go on, we ate something, as night had fallen. We were astonished at the abundance and variety of the food we had been given. Our table was rich as we could never even have dreamed of and we ate to our hearts content, a thing we had not been able to do for such a long time. Then we went to bed.

In my bed, before I fell asleep, I thought that everything led us to believe that the main figures in the camp liked us and they seemed perfectly happy with our performance. This mirage, no matter how well-based it was, allied to the hope of seeing my parents again, acted like a balm on my worried mind and my exhaustion was slowly conquered by an irresistible torpor. Soon after daybreak I resumed my work to finish the monogram and the procession of curious people proceeded in the same rhythm as before. There came the praise and my promises to attend to them all in their wishes. My "brothers" pretended to perfection that they were experts at something, they actually knew nothing about. They would awkwardly take hold of a chisel and spend endless hours doing nothing. Thus another day and another night passed, with no extraordinary event happening.

On the following day, I finished the jewel and sent a message to Stangl telling him his ring was ready. He promptly came to my goldsmith workshop. The man was beside himself with happiness. He was ecstatic and he felt fulfilled. He was not able to hide his surprise, since he had a light smile on his lips, at my having succeeded, at my early age, in making what he had ordered me to, in such a perfect way.

He was so enraptured at the sight of the jewel that he nearly came to the point of complete euphoria, such was his loquacity in praising the ring. He was totally absorbed in his happiness when in came the brutish Gustav Wagner with some other officers. When they saw the monogram they immediately started to praise it as warmly as Stangl had done and they did not mince words in praising it. I was really flattered and my happiness was shared by my helpers.

I was soon asked to make a ring for Wagner too. His followers were more modest and asked me to make them rings, plaques and other valuable trinkets. Some of them, however, wanted monograms, because of their enthusiasm about the one I had manufactured for their leader. I did not know whom to serve first and I inevitably found myself in a dilemma since the giant was more insistent and his appearance filled me with great terror. Incidentally, none of the other officers tried to go before Wagner, either, perhaps due to the danger he represented.

As soon as they left, my companions and I started dreaming about the laurels of our victory. We were sure that our lives would have a pleasant sequence and that with our reputation growing among the elite of the staff of officers in the camp, we would be able to lead a decent life. We hoped we would be able to improve my parents and my sisters living conditions, by bringing them over to us or going to them. We even tried to forget what we had seen some days before.

Perhaps these Nazis were not as cruel as we had thought they were. Maybe the camp was not as harsh as it seemed at first sight. Who knows but that Sobibor would not be as unknown as we had thought this far? We might even, someday stroll along its unknown alleys, on Saturdays. Maybe we were going to live and we might regain our freedom soon.

Perhaps all this would still happen. Perhaps all this would be no more than mere day-dreaming since, as the days went by, the usurpers of our freedom and the owners of our lives progressively lubricated the devilish engine which they had dared to create.

4. Message in Sobibor

I decided, of course, to make the monogram for Gustav Wagner, with the utmost priority. The man was Commander of Camp Number 1, he had been the first to ask, and above all, I feared his disappointment because he looked ferocious. As to the others, I did not know who to serve first. The requests were many and I was still confused. In the afternoon, when I was already starting on the task, a Scharfuhrer came to our workshops. His name was Bolender and brought very good company. It was a huge St. Bernard dog, which answered to the name of Barry. At first I thought it was tame. It did not bark at me, but stood quietly by its master. I was absolutely mistaken, I later learned it was a fierce watchdog.

Bolender was an officer with the SS, he was tall, stout and of elegant bearing. He was characterised by his manifest austerity and the constant use of a goatee which gave him an imposing aspect. He was one of the leaders in Camp Number 3 and one of the most important figures in Sobibor. He approached me, threw a quick glance at the piece I had started to chase and then addressed me. It was soon evident that I was facing a very brutish man because he ordered me in a very rude way to make a gold inlay in the handle of his whip. He also ordered me to fix a coin to the upper end of the handle. He had hardly finished talking when he threw on the table a handful of gold. It seemed to me that the Nazi did not know what he was doing for the quantity of bullion he had brought was excessive. Before he left he ordered me to send my nephew, early next morning, to Camp Number 2 to fetch the coin, because he would be there then, although he worked in Camp Number 3. I put away the material Bolender had brought and went on with my task for the rest of the afternoon and evening to be able to finish Wagner's monogram, as soon as possible.

As the lights had been turned out, I worked by the light of an oil lamp. During the day another levy of prisoners had come to Sobibor, much larger than ours, as I later learned. However, as I supposed I was in a labour camp, I did not pay any attention to the fact, assuming that the Germans needed a larger number of

men for the activities in the camp.

Soon after daybreak my ingenious nephew headed for the place Bolender had told him to go, without any suspicion. In order to get there he had to cross the yard where the rows of men who had come in the latest levy were waiting. By then the women had already left towards the mysterious gate and had disappeared behind it.

He passed by the rows of Jews and went to the same gate through which he would reach the assigned place. He opened it and entered a long corridor which led to Camp Number 2. When he got to the end of the corridor he found himself inside a place which could very easily be taken for a giant corral, surrounded by boards so well juxtaposed that it would be impossible to see from the outside what was going on inside it.

The side of the corral nearest to the end of the corridor had a door which was guarded by a Ukrainian soldier. My nephew went up to him and said he was to meet Bolender, who had ordered him to be there at that hour. The brutal sentry did not pay any attention to him but opened the door and pushed him inside. Next he made the boy undress to the skin without giving him the opportunity of explaining anything, heedless of his protests. Perhaps he acted like that because he thought the boy was part of the levy.

In the meanwhile I had finished Wagner's monogram and was starting to work on Bolender's whip. I was engrossed in my work and was already starting to worry about my nephew's delay when the door was suddenly opened. It was the boy coming back seized by indescribable panic. He was trembling and his face was ashen with terror. He was not able to say a word and he was obviously out of his mind. He sank into deep depression and he did not make even a simple gesture to justify his attitude. He was obviously deranged.

His nervous attack lasted for the rest of the day and during the night the others and I did all we could to make him tell us what had happened and what had shocked him in that way. All was in vain for he would not tell us anything. Only at daybreak were we able to see him relax and come to himself again. He then started his unbelievable report.

He told us that as soon as he had undressed inside what was known as Camp Number 2, he had found himself face to face with a tragic scene, never before seen or imagined. He saw a multitude of women, some of them naked and others in the process of undressing. Among the latter, the most reluctant to do so, had their clothes torn off their bodies by the brutal guards, while the others were forced to undress with whiplashes, rifle butts and blows of every sort, not to mention the shots which were fired at them. At the same time, the loud noise made the place even more terrifying. There were shouts, weeping, and laments mixed with begging for the Germans not to continue their nameless cruelty. The Nazis and their Ukrainian sectarians answered with shouts, curses, orders and blows.

He continued his petrifying description and told us he had witnessed right there something which would only be compatible with the times when Barbarian tribes roamed over Europe. Children of all ages were torn out of their mothers arms and held by the legs were twirled and violently thrown with their heads against the walls falling dead to the floor. It was mass infanticide, impossible to conceive of in our modern age.

Amid the savage scene he had witnessed he had been able to see very clearly that one of the chiefs there was Bolender. This man, apparently perfect for the task which he performed with the utmost pleasure, looked more like a jackal than a human being. His activity was feverish and he was resolute not only in emitting orders but also in taking active part in the practice of vandalism.

To finish his report my nephew added that, by mere chance, he had been seen and recognised by the criminal who then called him. Bolender had next, amidst curses and rude words, taken out of his pocket a gold coin for twenty American dollars. He had next handed the coin to the boy and ordered a guard to lead him out of that place. Before he did that, though, he severely warned the boy not to go any place whenever a new levy came and to tell his companions to do the same. He also told him not to mention to anyone, under any circumstances, what he had seen there.

Although this final prohibition had also meant us, my poor nephew had not been able to control himself. He told us everything he had seen with his own eyes and we could hardly believe him. At first I myself thought it was somewhat unbelievable and the scenes I found stronger I attributed to his morbid mood. Little by little, however, I could notice that his emotional balance was gradually returning and the details were unchanged. I finally understood the whole tragedy and all of us then came to accept it without reservations.

We had cherished the hope that we were safe in a labour camp and we now melancholically saw our expectations crumble. Out of our frail belief we tried to get some power which would deceive us and so help us to keep our spirits high and trust in our survival. We had to go on fooling ourselves because our wish to live was superior to all the rest. To do that we extracted from the entrails of pessimism a little optimism. We tried to find an ephemeral comfort in the words Stangl had said a few days earlier when he told us that all newcomers had a bath, changed their clothes and then went to work on farms. Although they beat and maltreated the women to force them to undress and bathe, why did they kill the little children – I wondered in horror. The impact caused by the news was tremendous. The painful impression we had had on the day of our arrival and which had been fading in our minds was born again, this time more terrible than ever. Terror seized us once more because we realised we had been caught, in an enormous devilish trap. The concept we had begun to form about these Germans underwent a radical transformation, and their sheep's clothing fell off and was replaced by the coat of wolves they actually were.

In short, nothing was left to us but to wait for the future and we went back to work. Soon afterwards, the calm which was slowly coming back was ruffled once more when suddenly the giant Wagner broke into the makeshift goldsmith workshop. He immediately asked about his monogram. I told him it was ready to which he asked what I was doing at the moment. I told him I was finishing the task Bolender had assigned me.

The huge officer's face changed. He furrowed his brow and his appearance became heavy with hatred and indignation, although he did his best to look calm, maybe because his order was ready. He took the jewel in his hands and without praising it, warned me that, from that moment on, I should never manufacture anything without asking for his permission, no matter who ordered me to. I should never receive a single gram of gold from anyone and I would not make as much as a tie-pin. While I shyly stared at him the corpulent Scharfuhrer went on shouting, I am the Commander of Camp 1, and without my explicit orders nothing can be done here!. Learn that I and nobody else is in command here, you will regret it bitterly, if you do not obey my orders. Completely frightened I put in – and if the others beat me if I do not do as they tell me? The Nazi barked – Tell them to talk to me.

He left the place in a hurry and I was left absolutely aghast at the nerve-racking situation, as I found myself in a dead alley. A few minutes later in comes Bolender to see whether the whip had been made the way he wanted it. As I had already finished it I handed it to the German. He could not hide his admiration at the beautiful engraving and at the large twenty- dollar coin. He was very proud of it and deemed the work magnificent and worthy of his position as an executioner. He did not save any praise which would label my work as being worthy of being shown at an art exhibition and presented me with a bottle of vodka.

I thought the Nazi was ridiculing me and I refused the offer which I thought was permeated with hypocrisy. I told him I had never tasted liquor to which he angrily replied – Drink. I had no choice but to obey the order so I immediately took a swallow since a mere wish of the Nazis was to us an unquestionable command. I grimaced when the strong liquor went down my throat and the scoundrel was smiling sardonically when he left the room, doubly happy, for his valuable whip and for the cruel act he had just performed.

I was doubtlessly in a very embarrassing, perilous situation. If I manufactured any piece of jewellery without the consent of Gustav Wagner, I would be severely punished or even killed by him. On the other hand, if I refused to manufacture anything for the other innumerable officers, I might be beaten or even murdered. I was afraid of both possibilities and I did not have the slightest idea about how I should act. It would be much better if they did not come to me for anything, but how could I avoid it?

If I did do it I would find myself in a most wretched condition. Whatever the circumstances I would never win since none of the bandits would be the least lenient. This threat obviously went for my companions too. Ours was a cruel quandary and the question insoluble. The only thing we could do was to trust our luck.

And our good luck did not abandon us. Next day, Wagner came in and told me – I have talked to Stangl and decided to have a ring made for each SS Scharfuhrer. He then sat down and explained what he wanted the rings to be like. They must be made in silver, with a gold badge. This badge would be in relief and consist of two letters Y. The YY would be placed in such a way that one of them would be in the normal position, representing life. The other would be engraved right beneath it, in the inverted position meaning death. It would then be the symbol of life and death, which incidentally suited the functions of their future owners.

All of us already knew that the life of the Jews who entered that cursed camp was in the hands of those malefactors and hung from a slender thread that they would cut whenever they so decided. When Wagner finished his explanation he urged me to work diligently and affirmed that the necessary material would come to me very soon, and then he left. That massive order spelled relief to all of us. It released me from the very serious plight I would be thrown in, if I ever had to refuse any requests from the other officers, unless some extra work appeared, which would really complicate things for me. Besides, this also meant we would go on living. For me to learn more about each of the SS officers, I cut a small board into which I hammered as many nails as the number of rings I was to make. As the officers came in I would measure their fingers and hang the string with their names attached to it on each of the nails. The board hung on one of the walls and thanks to it I was able to not only make all the artefacts so as to please their owners, but also learn the names of nearly all the torturers in Sobibor.

They began to come a few at a time, and the number of nails with their names on gradually increased. Among the first gangs to appear I remember perfectly well, to this day, in an indelible way the following felons- Franz Stangl, Gustav Wagner, Bolender and his bosom friend, nicknamed 'The Red Cake', who will appear in the following lines, in a sadly spectacular manner. Next to these prominent elements there came the others whose perilous-ness and iniquity were no less remarkable, such as – Karl Frenzel, Steubel, Bauer, Gomerski, Weiss, Poul, Vallester, and Michel. Besides those, I also remember other scoundrels whom I came to know later, as Grinman, Graetschus, Richter, Beckmann, Groth, Getzinger, Bredow and another one who was called "The Baker".

I received the silver and the gold sent by Wagner and started to make the sinister jewels. Once in a while a

latecomer whose measure I had not yet taken yet and whose name I had not copied would show up. The ones who most frequently visited our workshop were Stangl and Wagner. They went there to watch our work. Every time I would ask about the rest of my family and I always got the same answer – I should not worry because very soon we would be sent to the place where my parents were, it was only a matter of time.

However, I never learned which place that was and my worries had grown a hundred times worse since my nephew's report of what he had witnessed in Camp 2. Atrocious suspicions filled my spirits and my imagination never tired of thinking of the possibility of their having gone through all the horrors I had been told about. The days went by and the work on the rings went on without ceasing. The only ones who never came in to watch us work were the Ukrainian guards.

They were the worst kind of canaille, capable of all kinds of wickedness against the Jews only to please their masters. They were on the same level as the Germans, and they might even be worse were they given any commanding positions. They had actively taken part in the tragedy my nephew had witnessed and they were even worse than the Germans in the art of brutality. Fortunately we had not had any contact with them and we hoped we never did.

The same did not happen though with the German officers, whose constant visits to our workshop made us interrupt our work quite frequently. They did not go there only to fetch the rings. It even seemed that these were not enough for them. They also wanted us to make them other jewels since they had so much gold at their disposal that they did not know what to do with it.

I had a lot of work ahead and I could not serve them even if I had wanted to, since my companions did not how to make anything and I could not take all that load on my shoulders. The only thing I could do was to tell the presumptions Nazis that I could not do anything besides the rings without the consent of Gustav Wagner or Stangl. They became visibly irate at my refusal and went away muttering curses. However, we were led to believe they had no intention of beating us. I even came to think that they must surely have been scolded by the bully and the commander, since everything seemed to indicate that they respected both of them. Some of the most daring ones came to the point of threatening us with beatings, but I did not pay any attention to them. Alarmed though I was I accepted the circumstances because if I gave in to their whims I would be punished by Wagner, and this latter possibility seemed definitely much worse.

One day, when I immersed in my work, I saw something which left me astounded. The monstrous commander of Camp 1 suddenly came in and rudely shouted to the painters who were working on the other side of the room. Their names were Herszel and Moniek. Angrily foaming at the mouth, he immediately asked for the plates he had ordered. The poor young men, trembling in terror before the truculent German, tried hard to articulate an acceptable excuse for the fact of the plates not being ready.

When Wagner had ordered them to make the plates he had said they had to be well made, no mention being then made to a time limit. As a matter of fact, both painters had been working rather slowly although continuously. The job was coming out beautifully and they did not know that the sadistic Scharfuhrer did not value his own words very highly. They were mistaken when they thought, in good faith, that there was no need to finish the plates in a very great hurry. On finding out they were not ready yet, Wagner slapped Herszel's face with all his might, and the young man fell to the ground, blood oozing from his mouth. With the violent slap he lost two teeth. Because he was not yet satisfied with his fierce deed, while the boy still lay on the floor, the Germans wild instincts changed his face into a violent mask and his blood-thirsty personality showed through. He started then to bludgeon Moniek.

Wagner was a Hercules. His physical strength was such that his hard slap would knock his victim down. The two painters were lying on the floor, nearly unconscious, when they were grabbed by their collars and taken away. Then an unforgettably savage scene started. The bestial German started to hit and kick them pitilessly and careless of where he hit them, in an indiscriminate frenzy, as if he were making up for the hypocrisy he usually showed towards his victims. He only stopped when he noticed that both young men had fainted and their faces were swollen and covered with blood.

We witnessed everything in astonished and mute stupor at Wagner's fury. We did not dare make a single gesture to help the unfortunate boys until their torturer had left. As soon as he went away, though we ran to them and took them one at time, inside our workshop, we had to carry them bodily because they were still unconscious. As no medical resources were available, we decided to put cold bandages on their faces. They thus came slowly to their senses although their conditions were still deplorable. We spent the rest of the day at this task, doing our best to help them at least regain their ability to speak and see. Finally, late in the night, they were able to move with a lot of effort and to open their eyes, muttering their first words. We could then see they did not have any broken bones and soon they fell asleep, and rested for a few hours.

In spite of all the bruises they had all over their bodies, when daylight came they felt better and they decided to finish the plates as soon as possible. On seeing them act like that we could not be sure whether their unusual ardour was due to the immense power of recovery that adolescents have or to the panic which would seize them at the mere thought of being once more the target of Wagner's anger and sadism. It even seemed their energies had increased. Such was the eagerness they showed in finishing the unpleasant task.

Life in Sobibor went on in the usual routine – New levies would come daily and the orders were methodically repeated – men to one side, women to the other. The women were always the first to disappear behind the fateful gate, in the direction of Camp 2. Then the men's turn would come. Some were set apart due to their professions. The others inexorably marched towards the unknown, following their mates in rows of four. Then, the cleaning people would come, clean the vestiges left on the admission yard and go away as unobtrusively as they had come. The machine assembled by the Germans worked to perfection, with no faults, no wear, no pause.

The camp was always seen as clean and empty, but the levies never ceased to arrive. Then I started wondering – where did all those immense crowds go? What giant task demanded so many thousands of workers? What farms were those from which no crops were ever seen?

I even came to the point of musing but I was never able to come up with an answer that could explain such an absurdity. Stangl's and Wagner's visits to our workshop became increasingly more frequent and constantly I asked them to let me see my parents. The same contemptuous answer would always be given – that we were much better off where we were, we did not lack anything and in time we would all be together.

Our horror grew day by day after we had seen what Wagner had done to the painters. What else could we expect after that? Our scepticism got stronger in direct proportion to the series of strange and even unconceivable events. While we proceeded with our work more transports came and they were larger each time. From the window of our room we watched long columns of men, women and children head towards Camp 2, never to be heard of again.

We had already been informed of what happened in that cursed place, and our thoughts were monolithic,

with new doubts and new questions – How could the Germans have so many clothes to give the Jews after they had had their bath? What would this bath be like? Why did they mistreat them first and even kill them? Why were there only Jews? But our questions became more numerous and yet we could not understand why all of them disappeared leaving no trace behind. We could not understand why so many Jews were concentrated in Sobibor, if the Nazis were the absolute and unquestionable rulers of all Poland. We could not understand why they would not let us see our parents.

There was no satisfactory or even acceptable answer to anything. We tried, through hard work, to forget the turmoil of uncertainty which would drive us crazy. We were eager for survival and with that aim we never refused submissiveness or devotion. Under the circumstances, we did not think of anything else but to please the Germans, the only straw we could hold on to try an almost impossible salvation. It was Friday when Stangl came. Under the hide of cynicism he gave me a piece of salami and with the face of an angel and a tender voice said “Eat”. He remarked that our holiday was getting near and that next day, Saturday, we would rest.

These words were uttered with a touch of derision throwing on me his unrestrained irony. In planning his jibe, the devilish Commandant had remembered that Saturday was the day of rest for all Jews. From that moment onwards I realised that the wickedness of these scoundrels would not spare even the core of our religious feelings. They did not care about anything and they ignored the most elementary rules of respect towards other people's beliefs.

We had been in Sobibor for only approximately fifteen days when a Ukrainian guard came into our poor workshop. As I was deep in thought I was taken by surprise because up to that moment I had not had any contact with those elements who, incidentally, were isolated from us. The guard was a youth about twenty and he looked uneasy. He did not look like a criminal as most of those servants did. He could even be one but he looked different from the others. He also seemed to be a learned man because he spoke very good German. Actually he was a Volksdeutsche, born in the Ukraine.

The young man seemed a little hesitant and I noticed he wanted to talk to me. Very unobtrusively he came near me and whispered that he had something to give me. He added he was a sentry in Camp 3 and had been sent by a young Jew who said he was a close friend of mine, and whose name was Abraham.

As the reader may remember Abraham was the old friend I had had in Opole and whom I had seen and waved to, some days before, when he was one of the fifty or sixty Jews in charge of cleaning the yard where our shack was. When I saw him they had been removing the vestiges left by the transport in which I had come. After we had gestured to one another from a distance, all the group had left, having finished their work, and I did not hear from him again.

When the Ukrainian told me about his mission I was astonished and did not know whether I should believe what I had just heard. I did not know whether I should accept the message he had brought. All these uncomfortable suppositions clouded my mind and I could not make myself say anything. At last the youth gave me the note and said he wanted some gold in exchange. I was even more perplexed and did not answer. Now I was more afraid than ever. As he insisted, I agreed, because by then I was very curious, but with one reservation. I informed him that I would only give him the gold next day. He agreed to that and told me his name - Klatt. Before he left he added that Abraham had already given him a large quantity of that

material. Not only for the military who managed the camp but also for me there was plenty of gold. The surplus and parings, which I kept in the workshop alone, would total some dozen grams.

I would not dare read the content of the message before it got dark, so I put it carefully away. It was only when everything was calm and the darkness enveloped the camp that I decided to open it. I could then see only four words written on a little slip of paper: "Nobody alive..... Say Kaddish". I was totally stunned and a shiver ran over my whole body. I did not know what to think because the words were very laconic, although their meaning was enormously ample. However, I did not have any details and I could not know whether I should pray the kaddish, for all, or only for my unfortunate parents and my sister. Because I was still very young I did not know the Jewish prayer in honour of the dead and none of us had a bible to guide me. The only thing which came to my mind were the few words Nojeh had heard in his childhood and which referred to a passage of the respectful prayer. Those words I still remembered for his sake although I did not know what they meant. And so I prayed HISKADA WE HISKADAL SZMAI RABU.

A horrible depression took hold of us all and we felt at a loss with the fatal news. Would all be dead or only my parents? I tried to brace up my spirits to resist the unexpected impact. I held my sobs back and the tears which threatened to burst and give vent to the feelings which swayed me in that dramatic moment. My brother and my nephew spent the night sobbing and moaning. They were younger and more sensitive and they could not resist the violent trauma. My cousin and the painters kept quiet, maybe pondering over the words in the message as if they wanted to alter the essence of their transparent content. Even against my will I had to be strong so that the Germans would not find me strange the next day and suspect something. Besides, I had to prepare the gold I had promised the bearer of the message, the Ukrainian Klatt. Circumstances forced me to hide my pain and to pretend an ease which was incompatible with my mood. However, a hatred, which I had never felt before, started to bite into me, little by little and from the depths of my wounded heart was born a terrible wish for vengeance and survival which I cannot explain to this day. Thus night came to an end, each one of us nursing his own bitterness.

The following morning the guard came at the set time. He came to receive his pay in gold as a reward for the most hateful news we had ever received in our lives. I wrote a short note for him to take to Abraham. In the message I asked whether I should pray the "Kaddish" only for my parents or for all the Jews. I asked him what fate awaited the immense quantity of people destined to Camp 3 and also that he send me a report of what actually happened in that camp. I finally mentioned my strangeness at the fact that Sobibor being a labour camp needed so many Jews, since the transports continued to come without a stop. I also questioned why we were not permitted to walk in Camps 2 and 3. Klatt picked up his portion of gold and left in a hurry.

While I anxiously waited for the answer to my message I continued to work on the silver rings with the gold symbol of life and death. The visits of Stangl and of the SS officers were as insistent as ever and the transports still came to Sobibor with the same frequency, always bringing larger and larger numbers of unfortunate Jews. I decided then I would ask less questions about my parents and the need I felt to see them, as I already knew what happened – in Camp 3, where they supposedly were. However, I did not want to raise any suspicions so I avoided talking about the subject.

When Klatt came for his gold and for my message to Abraham, he was very nervous and extremely intimidated. As the Ukrainians were strictly forbidden to enter the place where we worked, he had broken three very serious regulations. Besides violating that rule he had brought us some news and had been paid for that. Obviously, he could not keep calm under the risk which could be fatal to him.

When he was already leaving for the camp where he worked, with the gold I had give him and my message to Abraham, I had the impression that he had been seen by the Nazi Poul, who was then coming to our workshop. In fact, less than a minute after Klatt had left, the criminal entered the room with his usual drunken countenance and the classic staggering gait of alcoholics.

My face grew white with terror at the unexpected and symptomatic presence, I even thought I was lost. His first attitude was to thrust his hands into his pockets and drew out an infinity of used rings, not to mention jewels in an identical state. Then he ordered in an overbearing manner "I want you to make me a ring".

Although I had not recovered from the fright I had experienced at his sudden appearance, I replied I could only do that with the consent of Stangl or Wagner because I had not finished the jewels. I had been ordered to manufacture for the officers of the camp and thus I was not able to do what he wanted.

The German Poul ignored my argument and shouted rudely: I don't want to hear anything about that and I should have the ring ready in three days". I repeated what I had already said and argued that, without the indispensable order I would run a serious risk, and for that reason I would not dare disobey the instructions I had received from Wagner and be punished. I added that up to that day all the officers had understood the orders I had and that he was the first to make such a preposterous demand. Foaming with rage, the brute retorted – "I don't want to know anything. I am not interested in Wagner or Stangl. I want my ring in three days". At that he violently slapped me. While I stumbled he hit me again in the mouth and knocked me down. When he saw one of my eyes already swollen and my wounded mouth bleeding his wild anger was placated. Maybe this was caused by the fact that he realised that if he went on beating me or if he killed me he would have no ring made. He went away cursing and banging the door. In spite of the excruciating pain I felt in my wounds I did not shed a single tear. Only hatred filled my whole body. I sat down and started to think, my head held in my shaking hands.

In the afternoon Gustav Wagner came. He noticed the large haematoma on my eye and my wounded mouth and he asked me who had done that to me. As I was afraid of Poul's retaliation I did not answer. But the man kept insisting and I finally had to tell him the name of my aggressor. As soon as he got the information he wanted, the brute burst out laughing. He laughed in such a strange way that I came to the conclusion that I was facing a lunatic. I could never have expected him to react in that way. His attitude was totally incompatible with the orders he had issued, only a few days ago. I had disobeyed another officer's orders just to avoid being punished by Wagner and now he was delighted with the beating I had taken.

I had always been afraid of being punished by the others in case I did not do what they told me to. However, Wagner had said that nothing would ever happen to me because he would give me his full protection. Based on this guarantee I had refused to satisfy Poul's whim and had faced the consequences. Now the Nazi saw me beaten and was overjoyed at my misery and the wretched appearance of my face. I realised he was a sadist and I could hardly be saved because I was in a snake pit. When he stopped laughing I told him I felt unprotected. I poured out all my thoughts and asked him resolutely what I should do? The German answered on leaving – "Make the rings with the emblems and leave the rest to me". I went back to the rings to finish them as soon as possible. I would work night and day, since they had become a real nightmare to me. As a consequence, the Nazis never stopped coming to our workshop and sometimes asked for something impossible to be done. On the day following the beating, I walked Wagner and Poul smiling as if nothing had happened. I even came to believe that it had been the former, who approved the beating, so impudent was his smile. As I already knew him very well I did not doubt that it had actually been so. In fact everything indicated that he had at least enjoyed what the other bandit had done.

The two Germans watched our work for sometime and whispered some things to one another. Then Wagner turned to me and said: - " When you finish the rings you may start working on my friend Poul's order". As I had not mentioned my parents for some days, I reminded him that I wanted to see them. The Scharfuhrer still smiling and with an air of sarcasm, gave me the usual answer – "Take it easy, you will go there soon".

He had no idea I already knew, almost for sure, that my parents had been murdered by the devilish device assembled by the Germans. I had to act like that and ask the same question again and again, for them not to guess I was suspicious of my parents death as well as other things which took place in Sobibor. Soon after they had left , the Ukrainian Klatt came in. This time he brought me a long message from my friend Abraham. He left it on the table and said, as he had done before, that he would be back next day to collect his gold.

I took the slip of paper, quite larger than the first one, and hid it, because I was afraid someone might have seen the guard enter. I expected to read it only in the evening, but my curiosity was such that before twilight I decided to learn what was in it. From this day on, the last and smallest hopes I still nourished that all I had been told might not be the stark truth vanished completely. The mask, which disguised the wickedness of the Germans, was finally shattered. I still had some doubts as to fate of the Jews who were sent to Camp 3. However Abraham's letter erased them all in a clear, undeniable way. As of that day I would not have to conjecture or try to deceive myself.

This was the message :

"Dear Brother.

I asked you to pray the kaddish not only for your parents but for all. I want you to know that from the multitude of Jews which passes through Camp 1 and goes to Camp 2, only a few are still alive. Of all those who have been transported up to now, only a handful was spared for general services, and I miraculously belong to this group".

"When the thousands of Jews pass through the gate you mentioned, they go down a long corridor and enter Camp 2. There they are stripped of their last belongings, and made to stand there, naked, until they are led into a large shack where they are allegedly going to have a bath. Hundreds of people enter that shack at a time".

"When the shack is chock full, the door is locked and hermetically sealed. Then a large Diesel motor is set to work, and its exhaust pipe is passed through a hole in the wall, so that the gases of combustion are blown inside, until everyone is asphyxiated".

"Before this operation, giant ditches are dug. After the mass extermination, we, the survivors of the same transport you came in begin to pick up the bodies and throw them into the ditches. Not seldom, the ground has shaken under the weight of that human mass to be buried. Then the monsters came and shot them to make sure that they were dead".

"I am telling you all this because, should you ever escape, you will be able to tell the world everything that happened here, because, you must not expect to see me again. Whoever comes to Camp 3 will never leave it. This place is the end for each and every Jew in the power of the Nazis".

" I cannot describe all the scenes because you would never believe what happens in this horrible place. All of it is thoroughly inconceivable to the human mind. I wish you could see how the sadists like Bolender, Gomerski, and one called Red Cake acted. While the slaughter was in progress, these monsters were delirious with happiness, as if they were at the opera. They seemed to take delight in looking at so many dead bodies, naked and inert."

The end of the message was tragic. Abraham told how the work of his group was arduous and endless. It seemed impossible to endure much longer the macabre task of getting rid of the larger and larger human levies, which kept coming. In spite of the rations they received no one was able to swallow any kind of food after watching these hideous recurring facts.

To the Germans it did not make any difference whether some member of the group was strong and healthy or not. The routine was always the same. All of them were replaced , from time to time, by only Jews selected among the new levies. Whoever, was replaced was killed the same day along with those previously scheduled to be exterminated. It was like a rotation of death.

To finish the message he added :

"I have written you this message for you to be aware of everything, since I no longer have any kind of fear. My end is coming and I already know what it will be like. It will be the same as the others. I have one foot in the grave where I shall meet our brothers who are gone forever. I am not afraid of anything , in writing to you because it does not make any difference to me whether they catch me or not.

I am in the power of these scoundrels and I do not expect any good from them. You would be in trouble should they ever find out I wrote to you, but even so I decided to try. I have done this to warn you because if you ever have any chance, try to escape.

Unfortunately I am not that lucky, since CAMP 3 OF SOBIBOR IS THE END OF ANY JEW UNDER THE GERMAN YOKE. If you can, escape and avenge us"

Signed:

Your friend Abraham

5. The Dialogue with Nojeh

Without doubt Abraham's message had had the effect of a bomb, so many were the details he gave me. When I finished reading the terrible report, in a loud voice so that all the others could hear, a deadly silence fell in the room. As night had not come yet we could only hear some rare sounds which came from other parts of the camp.

The first one to break our general muteness was my nephew. He may have done it because the scenes narrated by Abraham had impressed him more than us, because he had actually seen all that take place in Camp 2, when he had gone there looking for Bolender.

He had completely lost control of his nerves, affected by our continuous strain and now torn to pieces before this confirmation that he had just had about the fate of his mother and his grand-parents. He was the youngest of us all, and nature had endowed him with more sensitivity thus making his emotions collapse before the tragedy which was developed in Sobibor. The impact had been stronger than his boyish capacity for resistance and he broke into hysterics. He thrashed and rolled on his bed, shouting for his mother. My brother and I did the best we could for hours together to make him come to his senses again, but to no use. It was only when my cousin Nojeh intervened that we succeeded in somewhat calming him down. Very

tactfully he performed the miracle, by comforting and relieving the deranged spirit of the boy.

Nojech, a clever , polite young man , was so serene that he was able to stand the strongest shocks with stoicism. He valued his own faith so highly and his religious fervour was so great that, to say the least, he belonged to the roll of those who accept everything as expiation imposed by God or as encouragement to his faith. Before the war, when we were still free, he could be considered a priest due to his peculiar habits. As a matter of fact he dressed in the traditional clothes of the Chasidin – the deeply religious Orthodox Jews. After he had proved he could calm the pains in the boy's soul by making him finally sleep, we started talking. Once in a while, our dialogue was interrupted by the sobs of my nephew who would wake up and start to cry, as if he had a terrible nightmare.

This was directed towards only one topic of capital importance importance to us- what would we do from now? Death was approaching us but Nojech with his adamant resignation, told me what he thought :

“ We must thank God because everything he made is good – we should never rebel against him”.

I turned angrily to Nojech and replied

–“God? Where is your God who lets my parents be eliminated in this way? "How is it possible that He, who is so kind, does nothing for them? Where is He who does not come to our rescue? Why does He accept that Nazi oppression extinguishes thousands of innocent children who could not even babble the word “mother? Would you like me to pray to God and thank Him for the way my loved ones died?” What about the others who have also died? ”

"No, Nojech, No.", I replied, "My only wish is to kill. To destroy these bandits and not to pray to your God who helped them".

Little by little I was getting inflamed and I went on reminding him

–“Is it possible that you have forgotten the abuse that we, the Jews, suffered before the war, when we were still little boys? Is it possible that you have also forgotten the abuse that we, the Jews, suffered before the war, when we were still little boys? Is it possible that you have also forgotten the times when we went along the streets to the religious services and were the target of the derision of the Poles who would throw stones at us and spit, among laughter and insults?

Do you not remember the constant fighting there was between the Poles and us, triggered by the stones they threw at the synagogues? s your memory that weak, Nojech?"

You could at least remember how the Poles came to the extreme of lunging at the Chasidim to pluck for their pales long curly whiskers, You should also remember the crowds who shouted to our faces – Rzydzi do Palestina." (Jews go to Palestine).

These were the kind words, Nojeh , that the Poles reserved for us. However, they did not know that we had been born in the same country, in the same Poland which together, we had helped to build and develop. There we worked in the fields and the cities, in commerce and in the small industries but, even so, they wanted to expel us from our native country only because we were Jews. "I remember the fights which took place in the streets when I was a boy, and the countless times when I got home full of bruises and scratches and all that to refute the offences they made to your God, Nojeh".

It looks as if you have forgotten what the Germans did when they invaded Poland and started to persecute us. Then, the Judenrat was created, how useful was it to us? What was the worth of the prayers and the good faith of the Jews of the Judenrat? What was their worth, unless it was to widen the rough road of humiliation and suffering, along which we went and to make us take everything with our heads bowed?

No Nojeh, a thousand times no! If your thoughts were different , if the philosophy you defend so bravely had undergone a radical change, perhaps we the Jews, would not have been so slighted and we might not have been swept out of Poland. If this were still to happen, at least we would resist and also kill, but we would never serve as pasture for the Nazi beasts. If it had not been for the peacefulness and temporization of the Judenrat, the Jews would not have resigned themselves to that chaos and they would have rebelled in unison. We would have died but we would have killed. What use was there, Nojeh, for the great minds we have given the world in all fields and at all times? What was the use of our parent's efforts to these great men?

They did not take any of this into consideration. We have always been treated the way cowards are treated, because men like you sat on the benches or stood at the pulpits of the synagogues to pray or to preach. You forgot that we had already produced men like Maccabees and the Bar- Kochwa who, although they were religious, made legendary their dauntlessness, and their boldness.

Of one thing you may be sure, Nojeh – if by any chance one of us survives, he will tell the whole Earth what happened in Sobibor. All the Jews in the world will no longer shelter under the utopia that with their prayers they will be saved. Then what will be seen is not the humble sheep of today, but many and many Maccabees of tomorrow, who will never harmonise with what we now accep

You yourself should notice how, even in the name of God, the Nazis commit murder. Pay attention, Nojeh to what is written on the henchmen's belts –Got Mit Uns (God is with us). Answer me now – whom is God with? Is He for or against us?

My dear Nojeh there will only be peace in the world when there is union among men, when there is only one religion and only one God, when there is no racial prejudice of any kind and when there is love towards our neighbours and understanding between the peoples of the world. The hatred, iniquity and the persecutions which now prevail will have to disappear. Those who find themselves superior and who want to dominate others will have to be banished. It is necessary that humanity understands that we all came to Earth in the same way and that we are all brothers. All with no exception. After I had said that to Nojeh he still insisted, maybe to make me relax -We the Jews, are making amendments for our sins, and you are also sinning.

I asked him then – And these children who are being murdered now, have they already sinned too? Answer me, Nojeh, who does not sin in this world? What sins were committed against God and should all the Jews pay for these sins?

Nojech kept silent for some moments. Although I was prepared for the worst, that night I only hungered for vengeance. I did no longer feel as a young fifteen year old boy, innocent and naïve, who believed in men. At that moment , I changed into a mature thirty-year old man, and divorced myself completely from my chronological age.

I lost all my feelings and all the love I had had, and became a callous man. I rebelled against everyone and everything and I ceased to believe in human kindness. To me, everyone was hypocritical and perverse. I thought only the strong would be worth anything and that everything was permissible to reach our desired goals. Now, I thoroughly believed that only wickedness could overcome what was inside the hearts of all the bad people. And all of them seemed monstrous.

In spite of that, Nojech still went on hammering –Pray , Pray – we must always pray

Without doubt he was a faithful and obstinate Jew. Although he did not listen to me he would at least be able to assimilate all that he had heard and to understand what had happened in the cursed Camp 3.

On the contrary he went on affirming, that we should respect the will of God. I could not stand him, any longer. A sudden fury erased my love for him, and I shouted

–"Stop do not insist on this. We must only think about what we are going to do tomorrow and not waste any time in invoking your God who will not do anything to save us."

And thus, at the break of dawn my dialogue with Nojech ended. Although my point of view was contrary to his, it finally prevailed, and he stopped talking. There was a vital need for us to think of a way to help us maintain the present state of things and consequently, our lives.

We then decided he should calm my nephew's revolt, by trying to convince him as best he could not to show he was afraid and not to cry in front of the Germans, so as not to raise their suspicions. As to us, we would go on pretending total ignorance of everything which was happening in Camp 3. Thus we would go on asking about our parents. We would start to use the same weapons as the Nazis – fraud and deceit. If we did not do so, we would show them we were afraid and suspicious about the reality of our situation and our end would come fast. Only prudence could save us. When we thought of salvation, we never did so in long terms. Everything was planned as if we would survive for only days, hours and even minutes, since we were on the brink of ruin. After we had agreed about everything, I made ready to answer the letter from my unfortunate friend Abraham.

Dawn was coming to an end the first light of day was already there. We had spent the night lamenting, arguing, digressing and planning. I sat at the table and started to write some words for an answer:

Dear Friend Abraham,

Your appalling words did not take me by surprise, since I already suspected everything which was happening there. Now that I know the truth, a force was born in me which I cannot explain. A sixth sense has developed in my spirit and it makes me feel that these tormentors will not kill me and that I shall live . If this actually happens , I will do my best to avenge, not all, since it would be impossible, but at least my family and my friends, as many as I possibly can.

I say this as if I were promising you too, on my parent's ashes. I will take revenge, one way or the other.

Write to me only when it is absolutely necessary and do not run any risk only to answer me, since it would not be wise. Avoid any unnecessary risks and try to the best of your ability, to stay alive, even if it is only for a few more days or hours.

Who knows if luck will not help you and you will be able to escape this hell in which you now are?

It was already daytime when I finished this message. Soon afterwards Klatt came, as promptly as ever, to take it to Abraham. I gave him a lot of gold, which I did not need, and which I did not care about. The Ukrainian hurriedly left for the slaughterhouse in Camp 3.

After he had left I told Nojech that the Jews who survived the German yoke should not stay on in Poland , but try to build their own country in which they could live. While they were spread out all over the world, they would always be trodden upon and never respected, for they were human beings without a country. There would always come someone to say that "the houses are yours, but the streets are ours".

Our synagogues would continue to be stoned and our activities persecuted and ransacked. We would always be defiled and treated as if we were different from the others. But we are not, definitely not, different. Billions of people, of all nationalities and all political and religious creeds, think so too. We made our land revive, our Nation. It was forged by men, who thought they should work and fight in the land of their ancestors. In their land, not on somebody else's land.

6. Sobibor Becomes A Giant

No sooner had Klatt, the guard, left our workshop carrying with him his pay in gold and my answer to Abraham than the Nazi Poul came in again. Drunk as usual, he had the air of a lunatic, so disorderly was the manner he entered the room and addressed me. He immediately demanded that I make the ring he had told me to manufacture a few days before.

As Wagner had told me, in front of him, that I could make it only after I had finished delivering the large order of the silver rings with gold emblems for all the officers in the camp. I tried to remind him of that and regretted I could not serve him yet. I added that I did not have any free time, because I was only devoted to that task and besides, I could be punished for disobeying the orders of my master.

But the SS man did not pay any attention to my words. He ordered me to do as I was told very promptly and worse still, that he would come back for the ring the next day, without fail. As I realised I ran the risk of being beaten again I finally said I would try very hard to do what he asked me. Then he threw a small package on the table and tottered away.

I opened the package and I saw it contained lots of used rings and human teeth with gold fillings, as well as teeth all made of gold. As to the jewels I already knew where they came from and I had gotten used to receiving them. However, I was shocked at the sight of a new material which, up to that day, had never come to my hands. From the teeth still hung pieces of bloody gums which made me come to the conclusion that they had been violently pulled out only a few minutes before. And only one hour had passed since another unusually large group had arrived in Sobibor.

What was even more strange was the fact of Poul having bought more gold. A few days before, when he had ordered the ring, he had bought me a good amount of gold and had given me a beating. Most certainly he was always drunk, he had reached the point of alcoholism and had forgotten what he had done. As my gold reserves were a little low due to the payments I had made to Klatt, I decided to keep quiet about it.

The next visitor I had was Wagner in his daily routine. He was in the habit of checking every day, all the quarters in Camp 1, whose commander he was. He did it as if he were taking a stroll, so informal was he. He immediately asked me about the rings and I answered I would have been working on them if it had not been for Poul's interference.

I told him in detail the absurd demand of the other officer and said I had promised him to make the ring, although I would hardly be able to. I affirmed I was terribly afraid of Poul and that if I did not agree to what he wanted, I would certainly be beaten, since I had already felt in my own body how brutal he could be. I finished by adding that I would spend the night working on that order, so as not to interrupt the manufacturing of the other rings.

After having listened to me carelessly Wagner went away if he had not attached any importance to what had happened. At night I decided to work hard and finish the cursed ring once and for all. I picked up the material Poul had given me and started to melt it. The teeth which had pieces of gum attached to them were among the jewels I was melting and the terrible smell which they produced I will never be able to forget. The gold and the flesh simultaneously submitted to the effects of heat gave off an odour, which was nauseating to say the least, and the whole atmosphere in the room was impregnated with it.

It was revolting that I had to do this, and I hated myself for having used teeth which had come from the mouths of Jews, people who had my own blood, to manufacture jewels for the fierce Nazi hyenas. I would never do such a degrading thing again. In the afternoon of the following day, the German came to ask for his ring, drunk as usual. As I had already finished it I handed it to him without a word. I was then given a prize for the finished job - half a bottle of vodka.

When I was starting to refuse it, my eyes crossed Poul's and I abandoned my intention. The German's eyes looked like two lanterns and a gleam of wickedness and contempt showed that his offer was not to be refused. I took it then because I knew I would be forced to drink all of it, whether I wanted to or not. And this

was exactly what I had to do, in front of him, while he laughed madly at the grimaces I made out of aversion for the strong beverage.

A few minutes later I was totally drunk and that made me have a peaceful night and forget the repentance, which was gnawing me since the gruesome operation of the night before. However, I was to have a great surprise the next day. Very early in the morning two sinister well-known figures appeared at the door of the workshop. They were Wagner and Poul, both of them smiling and with an air of derision.

They did not even come in - Poul promptly shouted "Come outside". I did as I was told and he ordered me to take off my pants right away and start counting. -"You are going to get ten whiplashes across your buttocks", he told me. I submitted again for it would be useless to disobey him. I was hit the first time and I felt a violent cutting shock. I was not strong enough to bear the pain and shouted "Mother". And then I started counting - "One Mother, two..... When Poul's whip hit me for the last time I called my dear mother for the tenth time. But she was not there to help me, she was already resting in heaven with Daddy and Ryrka.

Only those who have ever been whipped by an infuriated SS can calculate the pain this kind of punishment brings. A throbbing pain radiated from the purplish welts left on me by the well -managed whip of the bandit, and the signs of the blows crossed each other in every direction and stayed on my body for many days. Once the punishment was finished, the two Nazis went away as they had come, without ever telling me the reason for all that.

To this day I cannot understand why Wagner could let the moment go and not give vent to his sadism. It was from him I could expect punishment. Yet it never came. On the other hand, the German should be happy on account of the jewel I had made for him, the same man who had been so delighted the day before as to even give me half a bottle of vodka, had mercilessly whipped me. I was getting increasingly sure of the high degree of mental alienation of those devils who could enjoy torturing us in any possible way without rhyme or reason.

My desire to revolt grew whenever I watched the brutality of their acts. My heart could no longer shelter any other feeling than a passionate thirst for revenge, since there was no place in it for any feelings of conformity or mercy. However, I had to resign myself because I was totally restrained in my freedom to act. Wherever I looked I could only see guards and wire fences. I could not think of vengeance or escape from that mousetrap yet. For the time being I could have only one aim, the most important of all - to stay alive. As the rings for all the officers in the camp were finished, their owners came to fetch them. However, they were never satisfied with only what I had been authorised by Wagner to make.

They all wanted me to make them some other jewels, of the most varied kinds, and for that they had available immense quantities of gold which came from the constant levies of Jews who arrived in the transports.

The Jews came from all over Europe, from the places under the rule of the Reich. While the Polish Jews who were bought to Sobibor came on freight trains under the worst possible conditions, those who came from other countries were transported in luxurious cars.

They came from France, the Netherlands, from Germany, from Central Europe and from the Balkans. In short, from all places where the fearful Swastika waved. These innocent Jews did not suspect anything, when they were put on board the trains in their native countries, they did so with every valuable thing they possessed and with everything that could be useful to them. They brought lots of luggage and they were usually very well dressed. The Germans used luxury trains so as not to raise their suspicions and they deceived these poor people by telling them they were going to work on farms in Poland.

When they arrived in Sobibor they did not even have time to think since they were exterminated on the same day, after having been properly looted of everything they had. With this, the fountain of objects of the most widely varied types flowed in ever-increasing volume, into the hands of the Nazis, and vast quantities of gold arrived in Sobibor.

One day Wagner came and ordered –“Tomorrow all of you are not to leave the workshop for any reason. You will have to stay locked inside. This is an order”. We soon learned that these measures were being taken because on the next day a committee would arrive from Germany. We were worried and curious. As we were not free to move and we were not entitled to anything, we decided to peep through the cracks in the door and windows of the workshop.

Indeed very early next morning, a group of high –ranking officers came and we did not know any of them. From our makeshift we saw very clearly Stangl, Wagner and some others talking with the members of the committee. By the gestures of the former, we noticed that they were trying to flatter the newcomers. Stangl was particularly solicitous and excessively cheery, presenting an unseen euphoria, which did not match his customary arrogance.

Amidst the whole group of strangers we could notice one element who was very outstanding, since he was a target of all the attention and the smiles of the leaders of the camp. He was a tall, middle –aged man who wore glasses thinly rimmed in black.

We kept watching and then we saw that after the inspection they made of the buildings on the camp, the VIP's on the committee started to gesture more frequently and to point at different places, as if they were suggesting or consenting to something. We then came to the sad conclusion that they were a band of Nazi scoundrels very highly specialised in the elimination of Jews.

Our forecast was doubtlessly correct. Worse than Stangl and his gang, they represented the summit from which emanated all the plans and orders which would make it possible to eliminate us more efficiently.

Soon afterwards, we learned that they were responsible for the enlargement and the improvements introduced in the Sobibor camp. Their visit was connected with this re-building. The tall bespectacled man was the all-powerful Heinrich Himmler, the head of the cursed Gestapo and of the SS troops, accompanied by his brilliant entourage.

Maybe the arrival of Himmler and his gang gave me the opportunity of telling this story to the world. It was on that day that maybe the possibility of our living a little longer was born, as the reader will soon learn.

Some days afterwards, a great change in the panorama of Sobibor was introduced. New structures started to be raised and the exterminating engine was given some improvement, which would generate a substantial increase in production. In Germany, the Nazi party did not seem satisfied with the indices of genocide and its leaders conceived of new methods which would raise these indices to much more impressive levels.

With the continuous arrival of new batches of Jews, the killings acquired new vigour. Thousands of Jews were incessantly killed and their number would still grow considerably. Colossal amounts of the Jews' personal belongings were daily gathered. It was jewels, clothes, shoes, canned food, blankets – in short, a long series of items of the most diverse kinds. The Nazis had appropriated all that.

Out of this the need rose to put this precious booty to a more rational use. Then, the Germans started to seriously worry about that, because, after all, they were surplus which would be extremely useful to a country at war.

Soon after Himmler's inspection, they set to work and the camp came to acquire a new appearance. Shacks, sheds and some other buildings were raised in a hurry, and soon Sobibor would be seething with activity.

As we did not believe that all this enlargement was being made to make us more comfortable, we thought of something which seemed more logical, that is they were going to improve the slaughtering methods in the death camp, so that a larger number of Jews could be swallowed by it.

We had been in Sobibor for a little more than a month when a new batch came from the city of Wlodawa. As usual the batches were immediately separated according to their sex, inside our camp, and then they disappeared in the direction of Camp 2.

Hours later, we had a great surprise Gustav Wagner came into the workshop with three women, and derisively said to us –

“Look things are now going to be better for you”. Next he led them through the compartments of the large shack where we lived and showed them a small room for them to clean and lodge in. This done he went back to his quarters.

In the afternoon, the others and I tried to contact our three new companions and talk to them. We approached them and soon found out they were very distressed and terribly afraid, perhaps because of what they had been through a few hours before. The impression left by the usual savage events at their arrival must have caused in their minds a state of anxiety and fear. Thus, obviously, they could not be either calm or talkative.

After we had mutually introduced ourselves I started to give them a mild explanation of what we had in Sobibor, because they showed visible interest in the subject and, as it was only natural, they were worried about their own fate.

I tried not to describe what really happened since the shock would perhaps be too strong. I omitted the fact that they had come to a place where Jews were killed at an enormous rate. I preferred to let them think that they had come to a labour camp, with the only exception that the orders given to us were rather rude.

I noticed that the explanations I had supplied brought them some comfort. I could not evaluate the exact degree of their suffering and their real need yet. I did not know whether they had suffered as much as I had or even more, perhaps.

I was not able to make sure whether I had convinced them with my few comforting words. The truth is that our presence eased their suffering and we became friends in the calamity which enveloped us all.

As sooner or later they would learn the truth I tried with some perspicacity, to prepare them so they would not abandon themselves to despair when they faced the reality of Sobibor. I instilled into their minds all that we could expect from the Nazis and that, whatever their attitude, they should always be prepared for the worst.

Their names were Edda, Esther and Bajle. Edda was a young woman, about twenty- five. She was intelligent and pleasant. She commanded respect very easily, anywhere, with her strong personality. Her sober appearance and her level of education identified her as a secondary school teacher. She later escaped from Sobibor and now lives in Israel.

The second one Esther, was the youngest and the most out-going of the group. Although she was very communicative, she was a little hot-headed and even violent. Quite often she had difficulty in controlling her own impulses, and gave vent to her temper which was even more excited, due to the circumstances, she found herself in.

The last one of them was Bajle, had nothing in particular to call anyone's attention. She was quite common in appearance, serene, kind and affable. She was twenty- four years old and her face did not reflect any malice. On it only pain and melancholy had left their marks, as it happened to most of us Jews, in that gloomy period.

Next day due to the confidence which had developed among us, and as I thought I did not have the right to hide the truth from them, I told them the whole truth about what happened in Sobibor and about the risk they ran.

I did this because I believed that was the right thing to do. They would come to know everything, someday and I did not want them to blame me later on with omitting anything. The first reaction prompted by my report was terrible. All of them were desperate and, after the first few minutes, they were wrapped in a mantle of profound sadness. They became silent and lowered their heads, as if they tried to foresee what was going to

happen to them.

They had been deceived by the promises of the Germans when they had left on what might be their last trip. They had then supposed they were being taken to a mere labour camp and now they saw at close quarters the stark and naked truth, implacable, inhuman.

However, little by little, they regained their calm and inevitable conformity took care of the rest. And thus another day went by. With the passing of time my friendship with Bajle grew closer. The understanding of each other, with the repeated descriptions of our hardships, generated in her some sympathy for me. My frank way of telling them about our reality as well as the sincerity I used with her, made her trust in me grow day after day.

Our confidences were now more encompassing and they also became more intimate and open. She told me she had come with her husband and her little daughter and that now, after what she had heard, she no longer nourished any hope of their still being alive. She seemed to be resigned to everything that had happened and she no longer had any illusions about the future. Her feelings had already been totally undermined by the constant misfortune that had lately fallen on her family. She then let herself be possessed by an irrepressible apathy and nothing ever bothered her now that she no longer had anyone she loved.

Other days went by and new batches came, again and again. From one of them two shoemakers and two saddlers were selected. The former were called Szol and Icek. They had been chosen with the aim of manufacturing the shining boots of the Nazi tyrants. Icek has survived and he now lives peacefully in the right place – Israel. The latter two, the saddlers were selected mainly to make the whips which would be used on us.

From the following transports five tailors were chosen, four of which were brothers and the other one was called Jankel, all of them from Warsaw. The eldest of the brothers was called Mundek. Their task was to make the uniforms and other clothing for the Germans. With them was also a hatter who, from now on, would make hats and caps for the Germans.

All these newcomers would be used in their own professions to work for the Nazis of the camp. For this reason they were put in our shack where they lived in rooms which had been vacant up to them.

With that addition the group of Jews in the service of the tyrants grew and among us, a close friendship developed, given the understanding we all had of what happened in Camp 3. We then tried to live in the happiest possible way, since we were aware that being sad and silent would not help us in any way. We played our games and made our jokes. In my group we had almost run out of topics, so we hardly had anything to talk about. With the coming of the others we became more cheerful and thus the first smiles started to bloom on the lips of the Jews of Sobibor.

At night, I was starting to think of something which had never seriously bothered me before – women. It is true that I had known Zelde. In those days in the Wolwonice ghetto, while I was living on that potato farm managed by the unforgettable German sergeant. But then the natural instinct of a man towards a woman

had only been served.

Now that I was between my fifteen and sixteen years of age it was only natural that the constant presence of females in my dull life would stimulate my desire. I liked Bajle very much and she was always in my mind.

Although I was too young and too little experienced for her I felt she liked me and I felt the same for her. However, I was not bold enough to tell her about my feelings and ask for her favours. Besides I was afraid of her refusal, since she was still wrapped in the memory of the recent tragic events.

Bajle, as well as her companions, had been selected from a levy, which had been brought with the aim of cooking for the growing number of tenants in our shack. They lived there too, in the room adjoining the kitchen.

I used to visit them quite frequently and then we would talk about the most varied subjects which, however, related to our sad fate. As I had never found her alone I could not open my heart to her and I would finally go back to my workshop with no change in our monotonous routine.

One day I went to the kitchen and found her alone. She greeted me very warmly and said that Edda and Esther were having their bath. I thought the opportunity was favourable and I kissed her face and told her my wish. She smiled then and told me I was too young for her. She added that perhaps I should try Esther who was some years younger.

I blushed and did not know what to say. I got hold of myself however, rather quickly, and told her that I did not love Esther but her. I then noticed she was starting to yield. Before she could counterattack though, I added that I had never tasted an apple and that I would not like to try a very green one.

At that moment the barrier, which still separated us, was broken. Very naively and using such frankness which might have put an end to my intentions. I had just touched one of the weakest points in a woman – pride in herself. Bajle was twice proud, not only for being the one I had selected among the three but also, and mainly, because she had been preferred to a younger woman.

From that moment on she was theoretically possessed. Only the actual performance of the act was missing. We made a date to be held in the workshop when the others were not there. I took all the necessary steps and away went my chastity.

Next day a large quantity of material came to Sobibor. As it usually happened, whenever some novelty broke the routine of the camp, we were all curious and started watching. It was not long before we found the solution to the enigma. It was a giant pre-fabricated shack. It was literally dismantled and its pieces reminded us of a children's jigsaw puzzle. All we had to do was join the pieces, and presto....

At the same time, the Nazis selected about one hundred men from that day's batch. They would be used in assembling the new building.

Some of them were carpenters and joiners who were real experts in their fields. Most of them, however, knew little or nothing about it. No matter how well they knew their business, the shack was taking shape although some of the men had soon been withdrawn from this job. As a matter of fact, whoever was not good enough for work was immediately sent to Camp 3 and found death.

When the shack was ready its huge bulk was impressive, it was dozens of meters long and it had only one door, the windows were pre-installed and did not open. Inside, many partitions were put up.

In one of them, the back one, a kitchen was installed. Another was set apart to be the women's quarters. A third one was reserved for the kapos and this way all the different rooms were given their use. The kapos were nothing but the Jewish commanders of the various camps. Selected by the Germans to direct their own brothers, they were as unhappy as we were. Each of them were responsible for his work-team.

We soon came to learn that other huge sheds were also being assembled in Camp 2. They would also be used as storehouses for the booty taken from the Germans who arrived by the thousands every day. The quantity and variety of the objects thus obtained by the Germans was such they decided to allot a shed to each type – clothing, blankets, footwear, cans of food, glasses etc.

As soon as the sheds were assembled the Nazis selected from the next batches the strongest men to do the job. Then they started to select the women. All of them were used for work inside the giant shacks since , with the enlargement of the quarters in Sobibor they needed more workers.

There was no doubt the deadly machinery would start to function in a more ostensible way after the visit of Himmler and his train. On account of this Sobibor gained a new appearance and a new life.

After they had finished building the the huge shack in Camp 1, they started to build another which would be divided into two sections. One of them was set apart for a machine shop, which I was later appointed to manage. For the other sector, that of the carpenters, only the best were chosen, the real experts in carpentry and cabinet making. Their task was to manufacture furniture for the Nazis.

From the next levies four shoemakers and four tailors were also chosen. For them a new workshop was set up, so they would not mix with those already working for the Germans. From now on two workshops for tailors and shoemakers, would be functioning – one to cater to the Germans and the other for the Ukrainian guards.

Some days later they also selected two cooks, they were brothers and came from Lodz. As they were not enough, two others came. One of the latter, the father, was appointed the chef. His name was Herszel and, having escaped from Sobibor, he now lives in the United States of America. The other one his son, also escaped but came to die later on. With the coming of these servants our group became quite large and now

there were ten of us sleeping in our old room.

Next a bakery was set up and a baker, who soon joined our group, was chosen. His name was Mendel. They had thus gradually taken from the transports more than five hundred Jews. For the time being, their death had been postponed. They all catered to the Germans needs, besides performing those tasks which referred to the continuous slaughtering, not only in our camp but also in others.

To facilitate the administration and control of this multitude of people, the Germans divided us into large blocks. In Block Number 1 they included the tailors, the shoemakers and carpenters. Their leader was a tailor by the name of Mundek. Block Number 2 gathered those who enjoyed some privilege in the camp – myself and my group, the washer-women, the cooks, the masons, the cleaning people and the bakers.

I was appointed the manager of this block. Mundek and I held the position of Blockelderster (Block Leader). Our job would be to answer for the presentation and the counting of the elements in our care.

In the other blocks, from the third to the sixth, were placed those who were responsible for the separation and elimination of the remains of the people exterminated in Camp 3. To head each of these blocks some Jews were chosen as Kapos.

Besides these, there was a Commander –General , also Jewish , to whom all were subordinate, including the Kapos. Their jurisdiction however, extended only over Camps 1 and 2. This Commander was called Moses.

Unbelievable as it may seem, neither the Kapos , nor Moses were able to do anything for us. They were eventually eliminated in the same way that the other poor devils sent to the Death Camp.

Moses was a young man a little over twenty. He was merry and playful, he was always smiling and seemed to be unaware of the dreadful tragedy we lived. Unfortunately he had very unpleasant duties. The Nazi tyrants made him obey all their orders, including those of punishing his own companions. If he did not do so he would receive, along with the Kapos, the punishment destined to transgressors.

The routine in Sobibor was changed before our very eyes and all of us felt it.

We started to live under a truly military regimen. Early, in the morning, at seven o'clock , we had to be in formation to receive instructions about the day's tasks. Before that , however, the Jews were counted, by the leaders of the blocks, in Wagner's presence.

If there were any unjustified absences, the leader of that particular block would be punished with twenty- five whiplashes. The tally was repeated twice in the day – when we came back from work at lunchtime, and in the evening, at curfew.

Whenever, a man was frequently absent he would soon be sent to Camp 3 to be killed. Sometimes, to avoid

this, we, the Block Leaders, did not inform on the absence of those who were sick, thus trying to save them.

In these cases, whenever, we were caught, we were severely punished.

One day, the Jewish Commander, Moses, had to punish one his subordinates. The act was performed in public and in Wagner's presence. The transgressor was a boy who would receive ten whiplashes and, as it was the custom, he would have to count them, one by one.

When the whip hit him for the first time , the young man shouted, as fast as possible, One, two, three up to ten. With that he thought the punishment would be over. All of us burst out laughing and so did Wagner who ordered the second lash to be struck. The boy did the same fast counting up to ten, but he actually got the ten whiplashes.

It was the beginning of July, in the middle of summer. After all the modifications which had been introduced in the camp, not only in its physical appearance, but also in its personnel, another unexpected thing was in store for us.

They started to militarise us as to discipline and also in making us march to work. We marched to and from work, as if we were a military unit. Military drilling was performed at the end of long and hard-working days, and all of us had to participate. We were already tired, hungry and thirsty, in need of rest, food and water. Even so, we were not allowed to do anything before we aligned for the exercise. All this was not as easy as it may look at first sight. We should never forget that there were old, weak and sick people amongst us, not to mention the general exhaustion that enveloped us all.

Besides, hardly any one was familiar with the austere military system or was strong enough to stand the arduous marching we had to do by the Germans orders. They started by teaching us how to form rows and columns, then to practice a series of exercises. As we progressed we lost the right to make mistakes, since every fault was punished with the most varied and tiresome postures, like lying down and getting up in quick succession, crawling on the ground or walking with a goose step. Besides all this they made us sing German hymns, in loud voices, while we marched. Any wrong step would certainly bring about punishment.

The truth is that, at the end of a few days, the ragged levy of Reich slaves became an elite troop, so high was the level of instruction they reached. We marched all over the camp singing the hated hymns in perfect rhythm. It seemed as if there were a Jewish army in Sobibor.

Meanwhile, my work at the shop went on without pause. I had not finished the cursed forty rings yet. Wagner visited us, as usual, sometimes with over officers. Between Bajle and I everything was running beautifully. Our love trysts were frequently repeated whenever possible. As she was very affectionate, she washed my clothes and brought me my food, trying to show her interest in me.

One day Wagner came in and told me, without any preamble, that as neither my nephew, Jankus, nor my cousin Nojeh knew anything about jewels, he was going to take them away from the workshop. And he

immediately did so. I felt then completely at a loss because I could see their last hour had come. I did not expect anything but their being led into Camp 3. I imagined then they were irretrievably lost, and I nearly went into despair.

I stayed like this for the rest of the day. Sometimes I thought, against all hope, that they might still be alive and working in Camp 2. Finally, in the afternoon, they came back and told me what had happened to them.

They said that when they had left with Wagner, he had taken them into the most secluded place in the camp. There, he had baptised Nojeh as platzmeister. As to Jankus, he made him his personal valet. His duties would be to run his bath, to shine his shoes and boots and run some errands for him. He was also baptised with the name of Benjamin. Next, Nojeh explained his duties as platzmeister. He said that, immediately after his baptism, Wagner had taken him to an unknown place and had instructed him about what he was to do from then on.

He would be in charge of gathering all the pots, pans, buckets, wheelbarrows, in short, each and every utensil with metal bottoms, which was taken from the Jews on arrival.

After separating these objects, he should put them in rows according to type and count them, checking every item, so as to make sure that none had a false bottom. To do so, he would use a small hammer, with which he would hit the bottom of the various containers.

If any of them had a false bottom, the characteristic sound of the hammer blow would reveal the fraud. After everything had been checked, he was to prepare the whole load for shipment. The job was rated as highly important because this artifice was commonly used to hide jewels and gold objects so as to smuggle them into Germany, since all these things were destined to help the Nazi war effort and were sent over to that country.

Nojeh was very pleased with his new duties. He would work even harder than before but the task was reasonable and it meant that he was going to live longer. After I heard the news I was elated since nothing serious had happened to them.

Some days later a fearful creature came again into my workshop. His hateful presence put me immediately on the alert, expecting some other disaster. Tall and fat he appeared to be forty years old and his face looked like a huge tomato, so red it was. He was bow-legged and walked as heavily as a pachyderm. Besides he was also known as an inveterate drunkard.

He was the insane "Red Cake" in his natural state, that is to say drunk. With his characteristic arrogance, he ordered me to make him another ring in three days time. He took from his pocket a bundle containing jewels and gold teeth and threw it on the table.

Once more, I tried to evade the charge by reminding him of Wagner's prohibition. I also asked him to bring me the necessary authorisation without which I could not serve him, as I was terribly busy. But "Red Cake" was not willing to argue. He said he was not in the habit of explaining anything to Wagner or to anyone else

and that three days later he would come back for the ring. He warned me he wanted me to make it as bulky as possible, because he would be leaving on vacation in a few days and wanted to take it with him. He gave me a bottle of vodka he had under his arm and left.

As he had left I put the bottle away as I would not be forced to drink it in his presence. I thought the situation over very carefully and decided not to make the ring since no matter what I did I would be punished.

When the three days had elapsed "Red Cake" came early in the morning, to get his ring. He asked me if I had made it and I said I had not. Then he said All right. He left very calmly, followed by his famous dog Barry. Once in the yard he started to blow his whistle and to shout like a madman – Come out all of you, you tramps, you lazy Jewish curs.

Immediately a torrent of men, including ourselves started to run out of their places of work. When he saw us all in the yard the German blew his whistle again to make us align. Then he started the punishment, making all of us crouch, raise, run, stop and crawl. We did all this at the blow of a whistle, in endless succession, abruptly alternating the painful movements of the swaying Jews, already exhausted by the violence of the inhuman exercise.

However, the sadism of the drunken Nazi had not reached its climax yet. At a given moment, he blew his whistle to make us all lie down and drawing his gun started to shoot us. With the bullets whistling past my head my only thought was – "This time I'm done for". After he had fired his last shot he walked in our direction and stopped beside me. He kicked me violently and shouted "Run".

I got up quickly and started to run as fast as I could. I had only gone a few meters when I got a violent blow from behind and then I felt terrible pain. Barry had attacked and bitten me. I still have the scar that his sharp teeth left where they tore off my flesh. It seemed as if "Red Cake" wanted to put an end to me with his dog that had been trained to do that.

All of a sudden a saving order was heard, given at the right moment. It was if it had fallen from heaven. Wagner had come, no one knew where from and ordered my torturer to call his dog off me. Maybe his attention had been drawn by the shots he had heard and thus prevented my death.

He did that on purpose as he could not admit of any interference by the other officers in the internal discipline of Camp 1, of which he was the commander. He reserved for himself alone the right to abuse us and the scene put up by his bloody companion had not pleased him.

The truth is that, with his providential interference, he had saved my life. Soon afterwards he hugged "Red Cake" and whispered something in his ear. Then he told us to get back to our work and left arm in arm with his comrade, as if nothing had happened. The whole group of Jews, about forty men, had borne the consequences of the furious hate that Nazi officer felt for me. They had nothing to do with the reasons, which had triggered these events, and I was remorseful for being the only one to blame for their suffering.

After this sadly strange episode I never heard of "Red Cake" again. He completely vanished from Sobibor.

7. The Slaughtering is Perfected



We all went back to work. I continued to manufacture the rings, along with my brother Nojeh was fulfilling his new duties and the Germans seemed pleased with him. In the same way Jankus was being used as a valet not only by Wagner but also by all the other officers in the camp

We had been freed from "Red Cake" and his cruelty, but Himmler's visit continued to bear fruit. Suddenly, the transports ceased to come.

As the days went by no Jew came to Sobibor. We were surprised and happy, since this meant that the slaughtering had been interrupted. However, the construction work went on at a faster pace. They started to build new sheds in Camp 1, for the carpenters, mechanics and blacksmiths. On the other hand, they tore down the shed, which had first been erected to that aim and in which I worked. The jewels were still manufactured in the old shed we all lived in. The wrecking had been a matter of aesthetics.

That shed was nearly in the middle of the camp, and the Nazis thought the place should be demolished to make the yard wider to hold the hundreds of Jewish workmen who entered it everyday to be counted. While a human anthill took care of the building, we had the opportunity of watching the passage through our camp of a giant machine which we had never seen before. It was a mechanical digger called Bagger and it was accompanied by a certain amount of rails. All these things went straight to Camp 3, where they would be put into use.

In the meantime they were starting to build new sheds in Camp 2, which were to shelter the goods belonging to the unfortunate Jews who were exterminated. As the Germans found the ones they already had insufficient they not only enlarged them but also built new ones.

They built a stable too, for the thoroughbreds the henchmen rode. The man in charge of the stables was called Samuel and he has survived and lives at present, in the United States. Still, in the same place, they started assembling a powerful Diesel stationery motor which would provide the whole of the camp with light. By Wagner's orders, I made all the installing of the electrical wiring which would connect the dynamo to various sectors in the enormous camp. As it was not a highly specialised job, I could perform it fairly well.

In the yard reserved for the Germans, a casino was built for the officers. From now on they would eat and drink there, as well as entertain themselves. They were at that time lodged in provisional quarters, which were somewhat precarious. Many a time they held real orgies there to celebrate the victories won by the German armies in the war. On these occasions they sang and drank until the early hours of the morning, and made terrible noise.

However, their troops were no longer invincible. When bad news came from the Russian or the African front they also gave themselves to alcohol, and then totally drunk, they went out blowing their whistles and summoning the poor Jews to get up and fall into formation. Once this was done, they ordered us to perform the most varied physical exercises, as if the Germans were taking revenge on us for the defeats that

Montgomery and Zhukov inflicted on them in El Alamein and Stalingrad.

These reprisals became worse as of November 1942, when the decline of the Third Reich began. In the construction of the casino, all the carpenters were mobilised. They worked day and night, making chairs and tables, other pieces of furniture, and decorating everything to the desires of the Nazis.

Thus, the latter would enjoy the utmost comfort to rest their numbed spirits, from the wicked things they did to us so gladly. A German Jewess was chosen to be kitchen chef – she was a real expert in the culinary art and she was to cook all their favourite delicacies for the tyrants.

They also selected two boys who would be used as waiters . They would serve food and drink to the Germans and they would have to keep the casino clean. Their names were Josiek and Moshe Szklarek and the latter one still lives in Israel. A magnificent barbershop was also opened with the best there was at the time. They appointed one barber to serve only Stangl and his gang. His name was Josef. Since this barbershop was reserved only for the Germans they built another for the Ukrainians. A barber whose son was his apprentice was recruited and both started to work for the Ukrainians.

As they were in Sobibor we sometimes asked them to cut our hair. This, however, was not done in the private barbershop, which was reserved for the Ukrainians, but in our quarters where they sporadically went. With the interruption of the transports, our food standard got considerably worse. Before that, we had always been able to snatch some cans or other supplies taken by the Germans from the Jews who came to Sobibor. The human shipments which came from Poland were made up of poor people who brought very little or nothing with them. However, those who came from other countries brought much luggage and lots of food were found and given to us.

Now, the situation was completely different, food was scarce and awful. There was no choice left to us but eat the horrible soup the Germans distributed. It was always made with hot water, a few pieces of potato and, occasionally, horsemeat was added and a handful of spaghetti. By then, there was no secret for us in Sobibor. All the hundreds of Jews who worked there in the diverse services knew all about the real objective of it all. Some of us lived in Camp 1, but we were practically free to go anywhere and we always went to Camp 2 and to the officers yard. The only place we did not know was Camp 3, but we knew everything that happened there.

One day I got another message from Abraham. He was still in Camp 3 and that was to be his last message, though I saw him once again. The bearer was Klatt, the Ukrainian. As usual, he demanded his pay in gold. In his writings, Abraham informed me of important changes that had been made in the Camp. The manner through which the Jews were exterminated - asphyxiated by the combustion gases of a Diesel motor, had been abolished.

They had also modified the slaughterhouse – bathroom, and they had closed the hole in the wall through which went the exhaust-pipe of the motor which had been taken away. Besides, they had installed a moveable skylight in the ceiling of the fatal shed. As they did not think one “bathroom” was enough, the Nazis had erected another, which already obeyed the specifications above mentioned.

Everything led us to believe that they were preparing to launch an unprecedented slaughter, and had thus improved the lethal capabilities of Camp 3. Abraham went on to explain that, to direct the massacre, a chief of operations had already been appointed, the cruel Bauer. His main activities were those of checking, through the skylight, the exact moment when the shed was filled to saturation. At that moment, he issued an order and the door was hermetically closed. Next, he opened the skylight, threw a can of gas on the compact mass of condemned people, and closed it again. The gas was the deadly zyklon-B, conceived in laboratories of Germany with the only aim of answering to a demand from the killers – to discover a product which would kill more quickly.

After he had thrown the lethal charge down into the “bathroom” he waited in his watch-post until he was sure that all the occupants had been killed. Then, his macabre task was finished. Proceeding with his report, Abraham then mentioned the digger and the rails we had seen some days before, when they were on their way to Camp 3. He affirmed that the huge machine was in full use. It exhumed the corpses that had thus far been buried in the Camp, and which came to dozens of thousands.

With the rails they had raised a huge trivet which was used to cremate the bodies. By using very large fans, they kindled the fire of the wood burnt at that human furnace. Before cremation, the corpses were piled between layers of wood and then fire was put to the whole thing.

It stood to reason that the Germans not only thought of making the killings more dynamic but also of erasing their traces. It was not convenient for them that mankind came to know about the millions of Jews who had been buried not only in Sobibor but also in other extermination camps.

They then decided to eliminate the traces by burning them to ashes. Abraham went on saying that immense and frightening fires were always lighting the whole of the camp where he lived, as the Germans were in a hurry to cremate, as fast as they could all the dead people who had been buried there, these last few months. The fact did not surprise us though, since we were already accustomed to seeing from our camp the reflection of the flames which rose very high, lighting the dark sky over Sobibor.

On these occasions when the wind blew from the direction of Camp 3 we could smell the nauseating odour of human flesh being burnt. The odour was so strong that we were constantly sick to our stomachs and quite often we threw up the little we had eaten, at the mere thought that they were incinerating human beings in an advanced stage of putrefaction. Before he ended his report, Abraham warned us about the Jewish Commander of his camp. His name was Franz

And he had been his childhood friend. I knew him myself for he had also been in the Opole Ghetto and he had come to Sobibor on the same transport I had. He must have been at that time, only eighteen years old. Abraham referred to him in a way which was not to his credit. On the contrary, he discredited him severely, and said he was a highly dangerous element, unworthy of our confidence.

He emphasised that Franz had formerly been a nice boy. However, as soon as he had been appointed by the Germans as leader of the Jews in Camp 3, his personality had been completely altered. It was as if he had

been contaminated by the atrocities which he watched daily. In truth, Sobibor had made a lunatic out of him, perhaps due to the constant practice of his tragic duties.

He had lost his reasoning abilities completely as well as his self-criticism and had begun to think of himself as an authentic German – even worse, an intolerant defender of Nazism. He thought the Jewish race should be annihilated and his obvious paranoia had reached a stage when he fulfilled his duties with a sadism not even the Germans could equal. He was always well-dressed and wore shining black boots. With that he aimed at putting on commanding airs and thus inflict terror in all his companions, with his arrogance and endless cruelty.

He had become vain and he thought he was a very important person before the unfortunate Jews who passed through the camp and met death.

We could even forgive him if we took into consideration the fact that his mind might very possibly have been deranged by the horrors he had seen. After all, it was only thanks to Franz that Abraham was still alive, lunatic that he was, he had eliminated and replaced one by one, all his subordinates and had only spared Abraham because he liked him very much.

To end the letter, Abraham warned me not to send him any answer since there was no need for one and the risk would be too great for both of us. This letter, evidently, served for me to learn certain details which I did not know yet, for I already knew most of what happened in that infamous place. Some days later I had a great surprise, I was working in the machine shop when the criminal Bolender, the manic Franz and my friend came in. They had come to look for nails. While these were being supplied, Bolender strolled over our quarters, and showed them to Franz. They looked as if they were close friends.

There was a large number of Jews working at that time, as he slowly walked by Franz started to deride us, calling us lazy tramps and some other bad things. He seemed to be taken for a Scharfuhrer, because he said, loud and clear, that our place should be Camp 3 and not that paradise where we lived like princes. In his sickly enthusiasm he added that he would like to see us in his camp and to show us how we would work under his command.

When he passed by me, he made a point of pretending he did not know me, even after our eyes had crossed. Meanwhile Bolender smiled in scorn, as if he approved of everything his faithful disciple said. A little later, Abraham gestured to me to make me understand I should not expect to see him again. He was unrecognisable. He looked extremely depressed, and was dressed in rags. He showed he was in a state of severe moral collapse and did not in the least resemble the strong happy boy of yesterday. He was not the same one I had known.

Some minutes later, they left, taking the nails with them, and headed towards their hell. From that day on I never had any other news from my dear friend Abraham. Week after week went by and Sobibor still grew. In Camp 3, the digger worked night and day and the fire was never put out, throwing up in the air its reddish glare and its fetid rolls of smoke.

In Camp 2, the sheds were overfilled with millions of the most varied items which had been taken by the Teutonic fury from its victims. In Camp 1 a whole battalion of artisans ceaselessly worked in the enlargement and the maintenance of the monstrous engine which would devour us.

In the officers yard the orgies followed one another and leisure was eternal. Elegant henchmen rode shining horses on their habitual rides through the neighbourhoods of the cursed camp. One day, without any warning, a train came.

It was not a transport but a special armoured, luxurious train. Himmler and his retinue stepped out of it. As it happened the previous time, they inspected the construction works of the killing machine and went through all the quarters of Sobibor. It lasted one hour. The luxurious convoy left and none of us ever came to know what happened. The truth is that our visitors must have been pleased and must have given some new instructions. Soon after the second inspection from the "Chief Hangman" the monster became even more voracious and started to reap an unprecedented number of lives.

There also appeared some unforeseen things. The alcoholic and bloody Poul had been relieved from his functions for having sexually attacked two Jewish girls. Some time later the day came for Bolender. He forcefully grabbed a girl who had come in one of the latest transports and raped her. Both officers were sent from the Camp and sent no-one knows where. Even though they were absolute masters of the situation, the Germans considered any intimate contact with Jewesses as the acme of absurdity, as it went directly against one of the dogmas of the Nazi party.

That was the reason why the two transgressors had been punished with their transfer. I had been in Sobibor for a little over three months and I was still alive. Every hour that passed, every day gained represented some more time for living on which we could not depend. Sometimes thinking of my own tragedy and of the place where I found myself, I could not understand how I could have escaped death for so long.

If I was still alive, it was because I worked for the bandits and they needed my help. Only this and nothing else had kept me alive, as well as the others who worked in the shops and at other services. When they no longer needed our presence, we would all be sent to inexorable death, as it usually happened to those who worked in the constructions in Sobibor.

As the buildings were finished, they were sent to Camp 3. The weak and inefficient were also sent there, without delay. Meanwhile, the business of cremating corpses went on. The flames kept burning and the stench persisted, even stronger. The Germans were interested in ending this task as soon as possible, to make room for new transports. Sobibor had really changed.

Besides all the sheds which had been built, the station ramp and the selection yards had been improved, with the consequent increase in their capacity. They also built a shed where the Jews would have their hut cut upon arrival. It was located between Camps 2 and 3, and the hair cutting operation would be performed before the "bath of death". The Nazis started to utilise the hair which was cut and thousands of kilos were sent to Germany every month.

For these functions twenty or thirty boys were selected and to direct them they appointed a kapo who went by the nickname of Fip. As the hair was to be cut very close to the skull, and this kind of job did not require any practice, the Germans chose these youths at random and supplied each one of them with the proper clippers.

Then the transports started to come. How they came with impressive intensity, from everywhere. Once it was already late in the night when a passenger train appeared. We soon learned it had come from abroad. When they gathered in Camp 1, we noticed that the newcomers were well-dressed and relatively healthy. They reminded us of a group of tourists, due to how different they looked from the shrunken Polish Jews we were used to seeing.

They came from Czechoslovakia, and as night had already fallen, it was decided they would spend the night, right there in the yard. At dawn I went out to look at them. I then saw something which filled me with such emotion that up to now, after twenty five years have elapsed, I still keep it in my mind. The crowd had taken a reverent posture and they had turned to the West. All of them held their *feelin* and *Taleisim* .

The fervour and the cohesion of their prayers were such that they seemed to be being directed by someone, given the discipline with which they prayed to God. As soon as the holy act of faith was finished, the Germans came and sent them to death.

From that time on, a real avalanche of transports started to come to Sobibor. Sometimes many of them came on the same day. Many of them came from Holland, Belgium, France, Czechoslovakia, Germany and even Rumania, not to mention those coming from other countries also occupied by the Germans. All these Jews thought when they got on board that they were being sent to agricultural farms in Poland and they bought with them everything they could. Even baby carriages were frequently found in the luggage.

Sometimes the coming of the transports was interrupted and for days we would not hear of any new Jews. We did not hear of any new Jews. We did not know the reason for these interruptions but, all of a sudden, they started to come again at even a faster pace.

From one of them, which had come from Holland they chose a technician who was to finish the new electrical wiring in Sobibor. They gave him a helper and, after long days of hard work, the huge Diesel motor was set in motion again and a torrent of light flooded all the corners of the camp – the workshops, the yards, the train station, the sheds and even the dividing fences made of barbed wire.

Following this improvement transports started to arrive during the night, which up to then had not been common. Besides this, the exterminating capacity was increased with the nocturnal killing of victims in Camp 3 now flooded with light.

September was coming when Franz Stangl paid us a visit. He entered the machine shop and made sure everything was in order.

Then he addressed me and told me he wanted to use my skills in the manufacturing of some jewels,

because he was going to travel and wanted to take them with him.

I did not suspect anything, because not only he but all the other officers were totally free in Sobibor and they used to travel very frequently, a fact which did not happen with the soldiers on the front, who needed special leaves of absence. As a matter of fact, the kind of life the Nazis lived in Sobibor was very pleasant, and the rights they were entitled to were real privileges.

Some days later, Commandant Stangl came for his jewels as he had said he would. He was very pleased and left on his journey. Some time later, during one of his beats Gustav Wagner came near me and warned me; "You will never make any jewels again. From now on, you will be the head of the machine shop and, in your leisure time, you will do some things for me. You must also know that a new commandant will be coming in a few days".

Before he left he gave me the nickname of Spengler, which means car body repairman.. I started thinking and came to the conclusion that Wagner was somewhat interested in not letting the future Commandant know anything about the manufacturing of Jewels in Sobibor.

I was pleased at my appointment as the head of the machine shop. With that I would have the mechanics, the blacksmiths and the car body repairmen under my responsibility. As my brother was still with me, we would probably have some more time to live, mainly because I would still have to make jewels for Wagner.

Not much later, Franz Stangl's substitute came. He was the new Commandant of the extermination camp of Sobibor. We never learned his name. We, the Jews of Camp1 ,immediately nicknamed him Trottell, which means idiot, fool. We did that because those were the only words he used to call us by.

Trottell, an obese man, nearly as round as he was fat, was still very nimble and firm in the way he walked. Very red in the face, nearly as much so as Red Cake, he loved to show off his authority by talking very little even with his officers. He always shouted at us and he liked to give us continuous orders which had to be obeyed to the last dot. He was really a very tough fellow, his own subordinates respected him and promptly obeyed his orders.

The change in command and the transfer of some of the Scharfuhrers did not alter the rhythm of work in the Slaughterhouse. Stangl, Poul, and Bolender had left but the transports never ceased to come. The carnage went on and all the Germans who had left were replaced by worthy substitutes.

The machine shop was not well equipped yet and I started to gradually furnish it. The machines and other supplies, like the vices, and the sets of wrenches, were already being used. We did not know where they had come from and many of these things had been taken from the transports.

In September, a mixed transport was brought in. In it had travelled Polish Jews from Piaski, Lubelskie and their neighbourhoods, as well as some other people from Holland.

As usual, some elements were detached to do some specialised jobs. Among them were two brothers. One of them, also called Abraham, was about twenty years old and he came to work in my shop. The other Mordche, a little older, was chosen because he could paint pictures. He still lives in Israel, having escaped that hell.

I was exceedingly happy with the coming of Abraham because he helped and oriented me quite a bit as far as mechanical services were concerned. Though young, he was very intelligent and skilled worker, while I hardly knew anything about that.

My appointment as head of the shop had been due to the fact that I had been around for a long time and also because Wagner was particularly interested in me. I would make his jewels. I had about fifteen men in my care and I would only work for the brute in my spare time and in the shack where I lived.

My subordinates were highly technical artisans and I was merely an outsider.

This made me feel bad but I could not tell them anything about the reasons which had made me their boss. Wagner needed someone who could satisfy his ambition, since the new Commandant of Sobibor, was too austere, and did not know anything about the manufacturing of jewels, and the consequent leak in the gold supply.

From now on, everything would have to be done in utmost secrecy, because should "Trottel" learn anything, he would send me to death in Camp 3.

Any transgression always brought about punishment to the Jews, even when the German officers were the ones to blame. To them nothing would ever happen. The worst thing that could happen was for them to be transferred.

Right from the beginning, Abraham proved he had extraordinary creative ability. We faced countless problems, due to the shortage of material in our workshop, but he would always come up with the solution, due to his suggestions and expertise. In a few days he had invented a revolutionary forge for the blacksmiths, by adapting a bicycle wheel to it. Thus our work was really simplified.

Some more time went by and we warned by Wagner that a new oxygen-operated soldering kit had come which I did not know how to use at the time. However, to Abraham there seemed to be no difficulty. He taught me how to use the device so well that I became an expert welder in only a few days.

His inventiveness was so vast that he created a system to manufacture children's bicycles, using the metal frames of the baby carriages which had been collected from the transports which had come from other countries.

When he first had the idea he thought his makeshift bicycle might please some officer and he decided to make it.

I did not have any difficulty in getting him one of the carriages he needed, because I had free access to the sector where Nojeh worked. I went there to look for him and succeeded in getting what I needed. I came back and Abraham immediately set to work to put into practice what he had created.

With the use of some other material he had available in our workshop, the strange bicycle was soon taking shape and we finally painted it. The first SS to see it was Wagner who was enthusiastic about it and became obsessed with the idea of owning it. He mentioned the fact to his colleagues right away and they as promptly came to see it.

A real torrent of orders was immediately made, since all of them wanted to take a bicycle like that to their children back in Germany. Thus the stock of baby carriages in Nojeh's care nearly finished, such was the amount taken out to make the bicycles, which had been ordered by the officers.

Some days later, a new transport came, from which two men were chosen. One of them was a blacksmith and the other a mechanic. Both were sent to my workshop. The blacksmith was a Dutch Jew, rather elderly, but strong as an ox and who liked to work. The mechanic was a Frenchman, by the name of Leon. He was a Jew who led a rather agitated life since he had taken part in the Spanish Civil war, many years before. This deed had left a bullet in his leg which was still there because the doctors had not been able to locate it.

Because of that his leg still hurt on cold nights. Even so he never lost his calm, and bore his pain with resignation. This Frenchman had no doubts about our future. He constantly urged us to escape. The answer we would always give him was – how?

In these days very little alteration was to be noticed in the life of the camp. Our workshop became larger, with the increase in the number of men who worked under me. Once in a while we received some new apparatus we needed, usually taken from one of the transports.

I would always hear the giant Wagner shout the nickname – Spengler at me and give me his orders. He was always in need of the most varied services in the shop and he would personally fetch the things he had told us to make, however, he would only address us in shouts.

Besides the tiresome daily tasks that I had to perform I still had to work, most nights, on jewels for Wagner, and I made them also for other officers, without his knowing. In this way I faced the problem of having to hide the different pieces in different places.

No one was to know what was being made for the other because, when the new Commandant arrived, it became strictly forbidden to waste gold in Sobibor. Germany was at war and needed a lot of the precious metal. So everything which was taken from the Jews, would have to be sent over to strengthen the gold ballast of the country- for that reason I had to be very careful with the jewels.

Notwithstanding this fact, I had my own reserves. All the gold trimmings and the used rings which I did not use were sent to Nojeh for him to hide. Then, he would bury the gold along with the gold he found in the

false bottoms of the containers he checked in his work as a platzmeister.

We had put this idea into practice aiming at taking with us, if we ever escaped, as much gold as we could. If we died, at least a large quantity would not have fallen into the hands of the Nazis, and that already was a comfort to us.

One day Wagner came to me with a gold coin. Even after I had examined it, I could not guess its worth or its origin. I then supposed it was a kind of heirloom or even an antique piece. The truth is that I did not know anything about it.

He ordered me to make a medallion out of it, with a loop on top so it could be hung. As usual I started work in the evening and in utmost secrecy, so as to make the jewel without anyone knowing about it. I had not finished it yet when one day I was not expecting him I heard a harsh order. It was Wagner who was storming into the workshop shaking with anger.

He immediately barked – “Go outside”. Next he dragged me to the door. I followed him with a lot of difficulty and nearly running, for the monster took very long steps. At the same time, he murmured words which I could not understand, while we crossed Camps 1 and 2. Perhaps he was wondering – should he or should he not kill me?

When we came near to the fence in Camp 3, I realised my fate. I already thought of myself as finished and done for. In these very dramatic moments however, I noticed he muttered panting and continuously, between clenched teeth – “Where’s my coin”.

A few steps from the fence which separated me from death I threw myself at his feet and took hold of his legs. While I was on my knees, my ears full of tears, raised to his face. I begged him –

- “Do not take me there! Do not do that to me. Please do not forget that I was the first Jew you chose to work here”. Gustav Wagner was motionless. He seemed to be trying to control his wild rage. He thought for a few minutes, looking down at me, and then kicked me, shouting again — “Run – Go back to Camp 1”

I never ran so fast in my life. I was saved once more. I will never know what Wagner thought when he decided to give up his perverse intent. Maybe his abrupt change of attitude had been dictated by the fact that he remembered his coin. Only a few minutes before he saved me, he had asked for the medallion and I had told him it would be ready that same day. Thus, if he sent me to Camp 3, he would never get it. However this is only guessing. I was pale as a ghost when I got back to the workshop and I found my brother weeping, surrounded by all the others, which became mute as I walked in. They had not expected to see me again, since they knew I had been taken away, by the German. Nobody asked me anything.

As to myself, I was frantically afraid and I could not think. I looked for the cause of all that, and my confused

thoughts would never come up with a plausible hypothesis. Only some time later, when I was a little more relaxed, I remembered that I had shown the coin to Szol, the shoemaker. Then I imagined that the poor man, very naively, had told Wagner that my work was coming along beautifully.

Maybe he had done so to flatter him, unaware that by so doing that , he had almost sent me to my death, since the situation did not permit of anything being known about the manufacturing of jewels in Sobibor.

I proceeded with my work in the machine shop and, unexpectedly I was told to manufacture a certain amount of clamps to fix rails to the supporting ties. I did not know at first what were these clamps to be used for. Soon, however, my doubts vanished since, in a little time a cargo of rails came and, some days later, also the ties.

A bunch of Jews was immediately called to start the work. All the necessary material was rapidly unloaded at diverse places in the camp where a small railroad was to be built for internal use and which would go through several quarters of the camp.

In continuation to the railroad on which the trains came to Sobibor, they started to build another, with a narrower gauge. The work developed at a priority rhythm and that seemed to indicate that the Germans found it extremely important for the better functioning of their genocide –activities. All of it was part of the scheme drawn by Himmler and now Trottel carried it out to perfection.

The ties were being set and the rails fixed night and day, meter after meter. Then the wheeling material started to come.

When everything was ready, we the Jews nicknamed the wagons which ran on the railroad “Loras”, since they were exactly like the small trains we had in our parks for children. The small wagons were rectangular and in them lots of corpses could be put.

The small railroad started at the railroad ramp of Sobibor and went up to Camp 3. Its chief object would be to transport the goods the Jews had brought with them, as well as the dead and dying people found in the transports. Everything would be placed on the “Loras”.

These would depart from a platform next to the old ramp and would go through the sector where the officer's yard was located. From there, they would continue to Camp 2 and there they would leave their precious cargo to be selected and deposited in the proper shed. In that place, as soon as the little convoy stopped , a group of people dressed in rags, would be in charge of unloading the little wagons which were filled to the brim, as quickly as possible. Next they would move onto Camp 3, since their rails would stop at the cremation furnaces, where they would unload the cargo of corpses and dying people taken out of the transports.

The dying and sick would then be immediately sent to the “death shack”, together with the whole of the Jews who had left the train and who would have to walk there, crossing Camps 1 and 2. Then they would be

exterminated.

In the beginning, the Israelites who had just arrived were sent to Camp 2 carrying their own luggage. Now the method had changed. The "Loras" would take care of everything and the carnage would be done without wasting any time. For that, Himmler had been to Sobibor twice.

There was no doubt that the Nazi regime was made up of a gang of malign technocrats and that the leader of the Gestapo and of the SS groups enjoyed more and more power among his peers, as an expert in the job he superbly performed.

To perfect the art of exterminating people, rapidly and efficiently, the Germans decided to build another branch to that unusual railroad. This one started in front of the "bathrooms" and ended at the entrance to the furnace in Camp 3.

In this way they saved themselves the work of manually carrying the dead to incineration and the time thus saved would increase five times the deadly capacity of Sobibor.

Before that, hours and hours were spent for the corpses to be taken to the furnace located at a little distance from the yard, and only after they had emptied the "bathrooms" a new batch could be locked inside it to die.

All the new work had been done extremely fast since there were no shortage of Jews to do the Germans work. The foreman of the railroad building team was a cursed SS Unterscharfuhrer.

His name was Vallaster and his most efficient method of work consisted in systematically instilling terror in his workers. This officer was short, of unpleasant appearance, even ugly. Violent and perverse he sent many Jews to their death and personally eliminated many dozens of them. He had been carefully picked out so as to guarantee that everything would be ready in the least possible time. He fulfilled his duties like an expert in the function of an implacable hangman.

He used to intimidate the poor devils who worked under him with a hammer. Whenever he was face to face with someone whose work he did not like he would mercilessly kill him by hitting him with the hammer, to right and left. He did that just out of dilettantism, since it did not matter to him the place the person was hit, whether the head, the feet or the hands.

Besides the person would not be missed, since the bandit had thousands of others available under him. Among the constellation of morons he belonged to, he was well up to their standard. Vallaster was one of the worst of all the henchmen in Sobibor.

Next the Waldkommando (Forest Commando) was created. It was composed of forty men who would be sent to the forests to fell trees and chop wood. This wood would be used to feed the cremation furnace. As the furnace was always on, it needed formidable amounts of fuel. With that the forests were being pitilessly devastated.

To start the work, the Nazis only chose French and Dutch Jews. After they had organised the first commando, the men were all sent to the forests in single file, chained to one another. The chain was attached to a handcuff on each one's left wrist, so that they looked like a slave contingent heading for the galleys. In their right hand they carried an axe.

The poor devils were forced to prepare the logs which would burn their own brothers to ashes. All the wood that was chopped in the forests was then carried on trucks to the terminal station of the "Loras", since the distance up to Sobibor was five to six kilometres. Then the "Loras" did the rest by taking the cargo up to Camp 3, where the logs were piled near the furnace. The wickedness of the Germans was so great that the only reason why they did make the poor men carry the wood to Sobibor on their backs was that it would mean a waste of precious time, which they could not afford to do.

However, the Jews from France and Holland did not cope with the tremendous work in the forest for a long time. They were not used to working that heavily, and at the least sign of exhaustion, the Germans immediately put them to death in Camp 3. The greater the need for wood, the harder the task in the forest and even the strongest men were not able to bear it, collapsing out of physical exhaustion and sickness.

They were always tired, bruised and constantly whipped by the savage members of the escort, who gave them no respite whatever. They came back more dead than alive. When they were taken sick or became weaker, they were summarily excluded from the commando and sent to Camp 3. Although the availability of Polish Jews were larger, and they were fitter for that kind of work, the Germans did not use them for fear of them escaping. The Jews who had come from other places would not dare to do that because they were always shyer, and they did not know the region or the language, but this did not happen to the natives of the country, which might be successful in escaping. Each forest Commando went to work escorted by a group made up of four Nazi officers and five Ukrainian guards.

The Bahnhof Kommando (Railroad Commando) was also created. This working group would be in charge of receiving their future victims. As soon as the transports came, they took away all their luggage and put it on the "loras".

Next, they led the Jews to be selected in Camp 1. They also did all the cleaning up of the newly arrived wagons, took off the dead and the sick of that particular trip, put them also on the "loras" and shipped them to Camp 3. The convoy was thus thoroughly cleaned so that no traces were left on them.

To work on these commandos twenty strong Jewish boys were selected. Their height was the same and the Germans gave them blue uniforms with caps and jackets striped in white. When they were in formation, they looked as if they were a platoon of well-drilled soldiers.

For them, there was no rest. The transports did not obey any schedule and some times several of them came in on the same day.

The amount of luggage was enormous and all of it was to be sent to Camp 2, during the day or at night. They all had to be on duty and they were the Sobibor group that worked longer hours.

From all of them, only one is still alive. His name is Abraham Margulis and he is in Israel. At that time he was one of the refugees from the Warsaw Ghetto and had come to Sobibor in one of the innumerable transports which had come from Zamosc.

There was still another Jew who was appointed to the job of burning papers, documents and photographs which belonged to the condemned people. He still lives in Europe, and his name is Majer. He worked in the luggage storehouses located in Camp 2 and his job was ceaseless, given the enormous quantity of papers to be separated and incinerated. The Germans were very worried about eliminating these vestiges of their cruelty, so that in the future nothing could be found to indict them.

The way they used to deceive the Jews when they came to Camp 2 was also changed. When they arrived there and the order was given for them to undress and have a bath, a Nazi officer would appear among the crowd.

His name was Michel and he had the rank of Oberscharfuhrer.

He was a kind of general administrator of the camp and he also was the guard of the Gold Box of Sobibor, where all the jewels and valuable objects taken from the Jews were collected.

Then, Michel would step onto a small platform and make an enthusiastic speech. He always did his best to persuade the innocent people that they should undress without any resistance, because any reaction would be useless.

He said they should not be afraid of anything, since they were only going to have a bath, receive new clothes and then, head for work. Finally, Michel said that Sobibor was nothing but a mere labour camp.

Doubtlessly his words succeeded in convincing most of them, chiefly when the audience was made up of Dutch, Belgian, French and German Jews.

However, when he orated to Poles, his demagogic speech was lost in the air, since they paid no attention to him and did not believe a word of what he promised. Hardly any of them were unaware of the reason why they were here and the horrible end, which awaited them.

Only a few innocent people were convinced, since the Germans came to a refinement of distributing bars of toilet soap and bath towels.

They did all that only to facilitate the operation, because had they wished, they would have reached their aim merely using force. In some occasions, tumult would break among the women who refused to undress. Then the henchmen intervened and, under the use of brute force, all the women ended up by taking off their clothes and heading towards the "death bath".

With the men the task was easier because they were not so embarrassed. Sometimes their shouts could be heard as they headed for the “bathroom” – Listen God – Listen Israel.

November was already coming. Now Sobibor was complete. Its fury had doubled, with the improvements made. Levy, after levy of Jews were devoured at hallucinating rhythm. All the sections now worked without ceasing and the furnace burned more vigorously than ever. The “Loras” never stopped their traffic and the forests were felled one by one. The work in the shops and in the diverse areas continued to be saturating and the Nazi officers got more and more demanding and cruel.

The transports never ceased to come and the Jews never ceased to die. The war went fiercely on and there was no hope of any kind. The German were the masters of the whole situation and the machine was working the way they wanted it to – in an entirely self-sufficient way.

8. Reaction Sets In

Meanwhile, the panorama of the war was changing. In Egypt the progress of the German and Italian troops had been held back by Montgomery’s legendary VIII army in El Alamein. A Jewish brigade had been incorporated into those forces, and was fighting side by side with the British against the Nazis.

On November 3rd 1942, unable to resist the strong British pressure, Rommel had decided to withdraw. But there were visible signs of panic in the Fuhrers headquarters. On that same day, Hitler had determined that the fortified line be kept at any cost and he issued the order of “ Victory or Death”. in Alamein. On the following day, aiming at saving what was left of his army, Rommel ignored the higher orders and started the retreat.

The Desert Fox was thoroughly beaten. On the Russian front , in Stalingrad , the same thing was happening. For long months the Germans had striven to take possession of the city and their attack had failed completely.

Soon afterwards foreseeing the final collapse, the German Commander Von Paulus was already thinking of withdrawing his army when the absurd order to resist to the last drop of blood came. Hitler was already becoming insane and despair seemed to be taking hold of the German High Command which already suspected defeat was inevitable. With this attitude all their troops were annihilated in Stalingrad. On the Pacific, a bloody battle had been fought in the air and on the sea in Midway, and the Japanese had been defeated, losing most part of their fleet of aircraft carriers. From that moment on, the Americans would launch their attack and the end of the Empire of the Rising Sun would start. With all these severe mishaps the Berlin – Rome – Tokyo Axis began to disintegrate and the Fuhrers gang could feel their end was near.

But not only on the battlefields did a reaction take place, also in Sobibor, the first signs of rebellion would soon start. The perverse acts the Nazis performed on us became more frequent every day. Their habitual drunken orgies multiplied and, as a consequence, we started to suffer heavier punishments. They would

wake us up late at night, only to quench their thirst for vengeance, and force us to march, robbing us of our sleep. This was very symptomatic. It clearly meant that things were not going so well for them.

Winter was coming and we were led to believe that the conditions under which we vegetated in the camp would become even harsher. The killing went fiercely on, now performed with unmatched efficiency, with the refinements lately introduced. At the least unpleasant thing and under any pretext, the Germans would impose tremendous physical punishment, sometimes without their victims even knowing why.

Dozens of Jews were constantly submitted to twenty- five whiplashes. Quite often this rude punishment was doubled and even tripled. They had to count every blow because if they did not, the punishment would be worse. There were cases in which the poor devil could not resist this torture. They were already undernourished, with their health weakened and more dead than alive.

Thus, they would finally succumb to suffering. Others even tried to kill themselves, led by their total hopelessness and by their highly sensitive nerves in shreds. They preferred to hang themselves, which would bring them eternal peace. To go on living longer in the hands of their torturers, waiting for death, which they knew would certainly come.

Some even begged the Scharfuhrer to kill them, since they no longer had the necessary strength to tolerate life under those conditions. However, the hangmen never attended them. They only killed them when they felt like it, but never in answer to their pleas. The answer was always the same –

- “No, you must not die now, because we need you to work in the fields”. Only those who were better fed and healthy could stand the terrible torments that the Germans created specially for us. One of them consisted of making the victims go from one end to the other of a beam which supported the roof of one of the sheds. These beams were dozens of meters long and were placed at great height. The crossing would have to be made with the hands, as the only support, the whole body hanging in the void.

When his energy failed him, the victim would obviously fall, and the fall was usually fatal. Many were successful, but others died.

Little by little, an atmosphere of rebellion started to form. We did not mention insurrection as such, yet, but there was constant clamour against the wave of violence and abuse, which reigned there. Many Jews already thought that a few scarce minutes lived outside the barbed wire fences would perfectly make up for the loss of their own lives. Perhaps they no longer cared whether death came after freedom, even if it were ephemeral. Notwithstanding, no one had dared try to escape as of yet, since among the Jews themselves there did not exist enough mutual trust which would be essential to the success of the dangerous enterprise. Strict secrecy would be necessary, since, in case of failure, the consequences would be unpredictable. The Polish Jews did not seem to trust those who came from other countries and were afraid of being betrayed.

One day, Wagner called me and ordered me to get my main tools ready. This time, though, it was not going to be my goldsmith tools, but those I used to fix the metal parts of cars. He told us we were going on a trip. I gathered my tools and waited for new instructions, with some doubt in my mind and worried at the sudden

change in routine.

A few minutes later there came a truck under heavy SS escort. We got in, twelve people altogether, for other Jews had also been called. We did not have the slightest idea as to the reasons and the final destination of that strange trip.

At the end of the trip we noticed we were approaching Wlodawa, incidentally Bajlie's native town. The truck drove to the sector where the old Wlodawa ghetto had been. The Ghetto was already literally deserted. All its inhabitants had been evacuated for extermination. The place was very gloomy with all the abandoned buildings. We could not see anyone nor hear anything.

Finally, the vehicle came to a halt. The Germans showed us two of the best houses there and told us to demolish them. They warned us, however, that all the material should be removed in the most perfect condition.

Thus, both houses had to be taken apart very carefully. The roof, the doors and windows, the boards and locks, as well as all the other components were to be carried intact to Sobibor, and there reassembled. I was told to dismantle the zinc roof and to take off all the locks and hinges. While I worked, my thoughts continuously turned to escape. In my mind, ideas were in turmoil but common sense prevailed.

My escape in those conditions would not help me in any way, since my brother and my nephew were still in Sobibor and I would feel responsible for their misfortune. So I gave up my bold plan. Even if I succeeded in escaping at that moment, I would be running serious risk, because the Poles could later denounce me and even kill me. I had known them a long time and I trusted the devil more than I did them.

We went back to the camp and we promptly started assembling the houses. One of them was destined to serve as lodgings for four officers. The other would be raised next to the small railroad station of the hamlet which had given its name to the camp, outside its limits.

When the first one was completed, we had the opportunity of seeing what level of effrontery of the Germans would reach. They had a sign painted with the following words – "Birds Nest". They should have written on the sign something referring to a snake pit, as that house, would be called by us, from then on.

As to the other, placed outside the camp, I was told to assemble the roof. When I had been told to dismantle it, I had been so surprised that I had not even been able to say I did not know how to do it. However, I had not found the task very difficult. Now, though the work was rather different and as I did not know anything about it, I decided to get some information from a friend who was an expert in it.

I headed towards the place followed by my brother and escorted by two Ukrainian guards heavily armed. The cold was starting to be felt, as winter was coming. Inside the camp, the temperature was much more bearable, since we worked indoors, while there we would have to work the whole day in the open air. We spent two days to get the roof of the house ready.

While my brother handed me the zinc sheets, I fixed them to the beams with a great waste of nails. Incidentally, I did not care very much about doing a good job and I did not worry about the possibility of the roof having a leak, even because when that happened, we probably would no longer be alive.

The roof was awfully assembled and it could not be any other way since I was only a goldsmith. Besides, the zinc sheets did not fit one another and they always got crooked. The cold threatened to freeze my hands and the height of the roof was making me dizzy. Even when we knew nothing about some kind of job that the Nazis assigned us to we could never refuse to do it, or try to argue with them.

In the first days of winter, under already very severe cold a transport came from the Polish cities of Zolkiewka, Turbin, and Izbica. From it were taken several carpenters, skilled artists in their profession. One was chosen to direct the group. His name was Josef. Among the others, there was a boy who was the son of a rabbi. His name Lajbu.

Lajbu, a huge Jew, was enormously tall and, besides, was intelligent and kind. His affable manners immediately conquered us and his word soon carried a lot of weight. He kept telling us that someone would be saved from that place. It was only a matter of time, he said. Besides, poised and thoughtful as he was, he always advised us as to my moral problems. He had become an adviser in his own right inside the camp. Lajbu survived Sobibor. However, he was cowardly murdered, in 1945 by reactionary Poles, in his native town – Lublin.

The transports kept coming ceaselessly and whenever it was convenient for them, the Nazis selected new elements to make their engine work better. They appointed a young Czech Jew, by the name of Kurt, to be a nurse. He later escaped and now lives in the United States. That nursing position was merely symbolic since the Germans did not supply him with the essential drugs. The infirmary was nothing but a room which had been destined to receive those who were in any need of medical treatment. As the latter was non-existent, the infirmary had become only a show piece. As a matter of fact, should any patient stay there for two days and he would be sent straight to Camp 3.

An elderly Jew was equally selected to be our doctor, the poor old man was an invalid and, as he did not have any medical supplies available, he was completely useless to us. When any patient needed to stay in bed, he would continue in the shed where he usually slept, together with all his healthy companions and did not get any kind of special treatment.

The brutal Wagner would always come and ask him how long he had been in bed. If the answer indicated that this was his second day, the patient would be sent to the Death Camp. He was carried there wrapped in a blanket.

As getting sick in Sobibor meant a candidacy for Camp 3, the most desperate pretended they were sick, only to make death come sooner. Those were the ones who had already been vanquished by dejection and tiredness, since the Germans exploited a man to his last breath, Only those who still had some flickering hope of survival resisted to the end of their energies, when they would then collapse and surrender.

Some days later, another transport came from Holland. From it some men and women were selected. The rest, about two thousand people, were put to death. In the first two days it even seemed that the women were just having a picnic. When the hour came for the distribution of the scanty rations, they would go there happy as larks, singing lovely Dutch songs and swinging their well-nourished bodies.

However, their happiness and their vigour were short-lived, since the exhausting work in the camp soon annihilated them completely. Some of them even died due to overwork and to their extremely weak physical conditions. These Jewesses were well-fed young women who had only been used to performing their house-keeping chores in their native country and they found themselves all of a sudden forced to fulfil arduous and inhuman tasks, working much above their strength would allow them to, and on extremely poor rations. The truth is they soon stopped singing.

With their arrival the number of women working for the Nazis in Sobibor came up to about sixty. For us, men, they were like a blessing fallen down from heaven. Hardly anyone still expected to go on living or that anything would ever happen to make that hell a little better. As we know all was lost – and so did the girls – we gave ourselves to the only pleasure still left to us – love.

It was like a kind of previous consolation for death, which was getting nearer and nearer.

However, not all the men enjoyed the same opportunity. There were hundreds of men and the women were only some dozens. The privileged ones, the group leaders and the kapos were those who could enjoy this special prerogative. The other poor devils did not mind very much being passed over as most of them were not strong enough to try to go after the women. Most of them were practically finished, physically as well as morally. We, the privileged ones, were not worth much, but we were a little better off than the others.

Obviously, we were, thus, the lucky ones. This helped to make our last days of life a little better. Each one did the best he could. But there was also a serious problem. If any of them were unfortunate enough to become pregnant, the Germans would immediately send her to Camp 3. As the German wickedness went to the extreme, the women took all the necessary measures they could, though to no avail in many cases.

From the group of women who succeeded in escaping from Sobibor I remember Eda, who had come in the first group of three, and some others – Chelka, who now lives in Israel. Helda and Esther, who now live in the United States, and Zelma, who at present lives in Holland with her husband Chaim, another survivor from Sobibor.

They first met there and they are still together. As to Esther, I would like to remark that she is not the girl by the same name who had come in the first group, along with Eda and Bajle.

Among the Dutch Jewesses who had just come, there was one called Kory. She was a beautiful young woman, the same age as I, sixteen. Between the two of us soon a tender feeling developed. I forgot Bajle and devoted all my attentions to Kory. Our trysts were held in the machine shop, whenever possible. As soon as the daily tasks were finished, the counting was performed and all of us then went back to the shed where we slept. Taking advantage of the absence of the workmen, Kory and I used to meet in the shop. Bajle found

out about it and out of jealousy stopped her intimate relationship with me. However, we still were close friends. Soon afterwards, Bajle started a love affair with another Jew and everything was in harmony again.

All of a sudden, the snowfall started, increasing our suffering with the glacial cold. Fortunately we succeeded in getting some warm clothes so as to better bear it, since the storehouses which held used clothing in Camp 2 were filled to the brim. When December was coming to an end, many of the officers left Sobibor and went back to their homes in Germany for Christmas and the New Year's celebrations.

The few who stayed behind held noisy parties in the officer's casino.

While they got drunk, sang and danced, we, the Jews, had to bear the bitter cold and we were even happy at the mere thought of being still alive. While the Germans merrily met their relatives and their friends to celebrate, we were deep in loneliness, without our parents and without even any hope for a less gloomy future. Thus ended the year of 1942

Evaluating my situation, I came to the realisation that my only happiness had been the fact of having been able to survive for over seven months in that human maelstrom, where my most faithful companions had only been uncertainty and death.

In the sheds destined for the Nazis and the Ukrainians there was a kind of stove, which was not only used as such but also as the heat source for the interior of the room. I, as a repairman, was responsible for the installation and cleaning of the stoves and their chimneys. Because of that I was free to go through all the buildings on the camp.

I took advantage of my job to do as little as I could, since I was always mentioning something which had to be fixed, all of them unnecessary I should say, or the replacement of pipes and chimneys as well as many other imaginary repairs.

Thus I was able to spend long hours on the roofs of the sheds, and then came into contact with the Ukrainian guards. Out of this little intimacy our first and very useful confabulations sprang.

Meanwhile, the great amount of snow on the railroads had decreased the number of new transports. Many days passed without any new Jews coming to Sobibor. From one of the transports, which had come from the town of Izbica, they selected a blacksmith, a Polish Jew. He was a strong young man with an air of inconformity and even rebellion.

He told us he used to live in the forests near his town, with a small armed group. They were a band of Jews who had taken refuge in the woods when they saw how bad things were, and they were all ready to defend themselves, and even die, if need be. He added it had just been his bad luck to have been caught by the Nazis on one of the rare occasion he had gone to town to see his relatives.

With the arrival of this blacksmith a movement of rebellion against the threat which afflicted us started to

grow inside our machine shop. We knew our end would be tragic. Not all deserved our trust though, and the first meetings were held by a group of about fifteen men of which I was one.

As things in Sobibor were getting worse everyday, the blacksmith started to get mad and he became inclined to commit violence. Many times he would urge us to escape, even without having planned anything. He even spoke about killing the Scharfuhrer's who came into our shop.

On my part, I always tried to calm him down, by telling him that this would not be an adequate moment and that in case of failure, we would be immediately punished with death. I also asked him not to express himself in that way and to even avoid talking about the same dangerous topic. All our companions were Jewish, of course, but even so we did not know all of them well enough to trust them entirely.

Before he had been grabbed in his native town, the young blacksmith had already been aware of what was being done against his people, but he could never have imagined how things actually were in Sobibor.

This is why he never tired of talking about escape and he could not accept our conformity. He even got to the point of saying we were all weaklings. In the machine shop I headed, there were not only Polish Jews, but also Dutch, French, German and Austrian ones. All our talks were carried out most carefully, since we were afraid of being denounced. As a matter of fact, I could only trust the Polish Jews.

One day, a transport came filled with Jews from various Polish towns. If it had not been for a special fact which called our attention, there would not be anything strange about it. However, it so happened that, when the women were being led to the bath, we heard piercing cries. At the same time we heard the loud voice of a woman say – "I am not a Jewess!. You cannot do this to me. Release me"

Despite her protests, pleas and tears, the Germans did not pay any attention to her. Once they had come to Sobibor, no one would ever escape. No argument would ever be able to convince those bandits. We only saw a long line of Jewesses heading towards death. The protesting woman had been arrested by mistake, along with the Jews of some city. If she had not succeeded in convincing the Nazis before she boarded the train, she could not expect to do so in Sobibor.

We did not pay much attention to that, because we could not experience any feeling about the fact that the Polish were suffering in their own flesh the same horror that the Germans had been practicing on us and which they used to applaud. Sobibor, however, did not only mean work and killings. There was also some swindling. The great masters of these foul dealings were the Ukrainians. They always had some excuse available to call on us in the various places where we worked. They offered us bottles of vodka, roast chicken and salami, in exchange for gold. As the winter was very severe, liquor was very welcome to us.

Incidentally, I had become an inveterate consumer of vodka, and this was one of my most constant worries. It is true that temperature led us to drinking but some time ago I had come into the habit of drinking alcohol. This was one of those rare things, which helped me to see life as less bitter and face it more bravely.

It was easier for me than the others, because my access to any part of the camp was free. Thus I did not experience any difficulty in getting a bottle, even through the dangerous barbed wire fences. I must confess to the reader that in Sobibor I drank enough to last me for the rest of my life. However, if any of us were caught while performing one of these dealings, he would be sent to Camp 3. Even so this kind of business still existed, since death was a common event in Sobibor which everyone expected, sooner or later.

But I was not the only one to easily obtain gold which was to be used in the swappings with the corrupt Ukrainians. Other Jews were also able to get it, chiefly those who worked in Camp 2, separating the things which belonged to our brothers who were exterminated.

Nearly all the dealings with the guards were also performed by them through the wire fences. The Ukrainians, obsessed by gold, were very greedy in their dealings. One of the most frequent excuses they found to go to our workshops was that of the constant clogging or some other problem with their rifles.

They would go there nearly everyday for me to unclog or repair them. They would prudently first remove the bolt before handing the gun to me. Then, while I held it in order to fix it we would talk and do our trading. In these moments I was very careful, due to the presence of Jews which did not deserve my confidence yet, since the only people I trusted were my Polish countrymen.

The rifles had been manufactured in Russia and I had never used any kind of weapon. As I handled or fixed them, my curiosity was roused and I started to observe how they worked, even without their bolts. I paid great attention to all the details and, little by little, I learned how to use them. I did not dare ask the guards any questions since they could suspect my excessive interest. I limited myself to coming to my own conclusions and I handed the weapons back without a word. Only the Russians used that kind of weapon, the Nazi officers had hand-machine –guns.

And thus winter came to an end, without any new important events happening in Sobibor. When the first spring flowers started to bloom, the coming of the transports became active again. There were times when six and even eight thousand Jews were killed on the same day. It was as if the giant had been in a state of near hibernation and now had wakened with his appetite sharpened and ready to devour thousands of victims at one time.

According to custom, I had to call the roll before work, everyday, at the break of day. On a given day, two bricklayers were missing. As Wagner was on vacation, the man in charge of receiving the results of the counting was the Nazi Karl Frenzel. When this officer asked me if all were present, I had to tell him two were not. The hangman then asked about their whereabouts, and I said I did not know. Frenzel left the room in a rage and soon afterwards, he learned that an escape had been performed. None of us had known anything about that escape, we did not even know if they had been successful or not in their daring feat. No rumours came to us about their fate and we could not guess if they had escaped or been killed. However, they had left some vestiges on one of the fences which surrounded Camp 1.

The reprisal was fast in coming and ruthless. Karl Frenzel put us in one long line and started to count us from one to ten. When the tenth man was reached, he would tell him to step out of the file and resumed the operation. When he was satisfied, he stopped counting. Twelve men had been separated- he aligned them

and led them to Camp 3. Thus the German appeased his anger. Unbelievable as it may seem, none of the condemned men even hinted at protest. They placidly walked to death, and none of them ever cried or asked for mercy. They left peacefully as if their destination were to them a natural event.

Maybe they were happy, even in good spirits, since they headed for Eternity with their thoughts turned to success of their brothers, who would take out into the world the first true cries of what was happening in Sobibor. After this first escape, the Germans doubled their watch and the safety of the camp. They were mainly worried about the outer fences which, once one had passed them, would give access to the world outside and, consequently, to freedom. All along them were then dug ditches, the width and depth of which would be able to make anyone, no matter how brave, give up his idea of crossing them. Besides that, there still existed the intricate barbed wire fence.

The ditch was dug around the whole of Camp 1 and, as they were not satisfied yet, the Nazis decided to mine the whole of the length.

To that aim, they ordered me to make some strange objects. I obeyed this command and soon afterwards I learned that explosives would be put there.

These rudimental artefacts consisted of a metal pipe about twenty centimetres long with a diameter of twelve to fifteen centimetres.

Their extremities were soldered so that the contents would be closed inside. On one of the sides, an orifice was opened through which a detonation fuse would be inserted. We made such a large quantity of these mines that it would be impossible for me to be precise about the number.

Besides, these, real mines used in the war arrived from Germany a little afterwards. Thus three very difficult obstacles would give the camp the conditions necessary to prevent any escape: the fences, the ditches and the mines.

It seemed that nothing would be able to cross this powerful barrier. I worked very hard to manufacture the mines. The task was exhausting due to its priority and even so, I still had to make some jewels during the night. One day I was soldering the pipes I noticed that the oxygen in the apparatus was nearly finishing. I informed Wagner, who had already returned from his vacations, about the fact. He had been furious since he had learned about the escape.

Wagner had promised me he would see about a new supply of oxygen, but he had completely forgotten about it. In the meanwhile, another Nazi henchman came to my shop – Getzinger. The officer, brutal as usual, had a metal object in his hands and he wanted to solder it himself.

He pulled the blowtorch from my hands and started the operation. To my complete disgrace, the oxygen finished at that moment. The German immediately went into a rage and asked me why I had not told him that I was running out of oxygen. I answered very shyly and awkwardly, that I had already told Wagner about the immediate need of a new supply. But the German was not convinced by this irrefutable argument and

slapped my face with all his strength. Then he went away without further explanations. About half an hour later, when I still lamented the pain caused by Getzinger's slaps, Wagner came again and addressed me in a derisive way ; -“ Then the oxygen has finished, hasn't it?” Shaking in the expectation of what was going to happen, I dared to answer; - " I had already warned you Sir, that it was finishing.”

Without as much as a wink, the giant violently pulled me outside and got hold of his whip. Then the same usual punishment started – twenty- five whiplashes across my buttocks and I had to count them, one by one. Very pleased at what he had done, he went away. I was not able to sleep that night, such was the state I was in with the blows Wagner had struck me, and which throbbed ceaselessly.

On the following day, the oxygen cylinders I had asked for came and I resumed my work manufacturing the mines, until they were satisfied with the amount made. Not only I but also the other Jews who worked for the Germans no longer bothered about the customary punishment of the twenty-five whiplashes. For us, what was important was to live and to try to keep our bodies and spirits healthy.

The rudeness, the shouts, the blows and the physical punishment of any kind were so frequent in Sobibor that they were already an integral part of our lives. Should they be abruptly interrupted we might even come to miss them, since no one attributed any importance to the fact now. If anyone mentioned it, he would run the risk of being considered ridiculous.

The Nazis took away all the mines with the strong explosive. We never learned what type was used nor how powerful it was. The truth is that, a few days later, the whole circuit of Camp 1 was solidly mined. Plates indicating the existence of dangerous mines in the place were also put up. With that they hoped to break our spirits and lessen our boldness.

In the middle of April 1943, a mixed transport came from Izbica, Lubelskie and their neighbourhoods . From it the Germans selected one by one, about forty men to work for them. They were all strong and healthy young men. However, the Nazis made a mistake as to one detail.

All these males were no longer similar to the large mass of Jews that let themselves be influenced by the Judenrat of their former ghettos. They were not used to following their advice or obeying their orders. Due to their own good faith , millions of trustful people had already been exterminated by the sole reason that they had let themselves be led by the members of the Judenrat who, on their turn, were dominated by the Germans and faithfully obeyed all their commands.

Many of these forty young men had not peacefully accepted the tutelage of that nefarious Jewish organism, which nearly always collaborated with the Nazis and had never done anything on behalf of their fellow – citizens. Because of this, they had refused to go to the extermination camps and had escaped from their ghettos. Some of them were members of Jewish organisations such as “Betar”, the “Ha-Shomer and the Gordonia. These entities had been created before the war and their main object was to prepare Jews to go to Palestine. There, they would start to form the Kibutzim .

In this way an important increment would be given to the Jewish colonisation of that remote region, the

starting point for the establishment of a Jewish State. All those youths had had some military training, and they were men mentally mature and very distrustful. On this occasion, a small Jewish resistance against the Nazi maelstrom had been started in Poland.

Many Jews had started to live in hiding in the forests and they even had weapons. They lacked two things to be able to attack the Germans but they intended to, at least, defend themselves, since they would rather fight to death than submit to the oppressors. Some of them were finally caught by the Germans only due to the lack of support from the Poles, who refused them anything and even denounced them.

So, as they needed to go to the towns to get food and news they ran the serious risk of being denounced and arrested. Many a time they had been arrested when visiting relatives, which still lived in the town. The Germans were always on the watch and they used to surround the ghettos, in search of new victims for extermination. Then, whenever they were unfortunate enough to be there at that moment, they were inescapably herded along with the others.

Incidentally, this had happened to our companion Chaim Korenfeld. He was a man who could not accept the German tyranny and knew very well what his fate be if he ever got caught. Because of this, he had hidden in the woods, where he decided to live. His calls did not meet with any receptivity from the Poles in that region and latter even refused to give them the least help. All of them constantly changed their living quarters, so as to avoid being caught unawares or being denounced. They had some weapons which were aimed at defending themselves but they did not possess the necessary conditions to start any kind of attack. One day, Chaim dared to go to the ghetto to meet his own father. He wanted to convince him to go back with him to the forest where his band lived. They would thus be safe from the fury of the Germans. Chaim left the woods and very carefully entered the Ghetto.

However, by an unlucky twist of fate, on that very day the Nazis decided to surround the community to capture all the remaining people. Most of them had already been sent to the extermination camps. As the Jews in the neighbourhood were getting scarce, the Germans launched an overpowering raid on all the ghettos of the region, aiming at collecting the sufficient number of victims to make up a transport.

Picking some here and others there, they succeeded in coming to the desired amount , since they were not interested in making a train run with an insufficient quantity of Jews. The convoy would only depart fully loaded, that is to say, with some thousand wretches. Thus Chaim had come to Sobibor.

Out of the forty robust Jews taken from the transport, the Nazis selected twenty-eight Poles who, once added to the twelve Dutchmen who were already in Sobibor, would make up the total of forty elements which were necessary for forming a new Forest Commando. The former Commando had been made up of French Jews who could not resist the arduous task and who had been sent to Camp 3.

The necessity for wood for the furnace had largely increased, and the Frenchmen had not produced enough, as they had not been able to adapt to the tremendously rough job. As substitutions were made daily, the Commando came to pieces and the Germans immediately tried to organise another. Although, very worried, they decided to use Polish Jews on the new Commando, as they knew they would be the only ones to bear the terribly tiring work in the woods.

They knew very well how hard they could work and their physical resistance for hard labour, significantly higher than the energy shown by elements who came from other countries. However, they were afraid of the possibility of an escape when they adopted these measures and made no secret about it.

In the middle of spring, in the first days of May, a rebellion which was promptly put out burst on the camp. The intended escape never did take place and I had not known anything about it, just like it had happened with the first one.

Everything was done very fast. I never knew what had actually happened and how the plan had been found out. My companions did not know anything either. On the following day, the henchmen appointed a new Commander to replace Moses. He was a German Jew from Berlin, which was soon to be called Kapo Berliner by us. To the position formerly held by Krajcewicer, they appointed another Jew, also German. It soon became obvious that the Nazis intended to place German Jews in the main trustworthy positions.

They did that on purpose, since the Jews who had come from Germany were not only more obedient but also more subservient. Even suffering the horrors of Nazism, they still believed in the Fuhrer and his gang. Their faith was such that they even thought they would be spared. My companions and I did not trust them any longer. They were already known as inveterate stool pigeons, such terror did the Germans instil in them.

Any insurrection would never be able to count on their participation.

Soon after the aborted escape and considering the circumstances under which it had been stifled, we came to the clear undisputable conclusion that the denouncer had been Kapo Berliner. From that day on we never believed anything the German Jews ever told us and we lost the least bit of trust we still had in them.

Oberkapo Berliner came to be considered a dangerous, infamous individual, absolutely deprived of any scruples. As a matter of fact, it was his habit to abuse his subordinates only to please his masters, the Nazi scoundrels. It has already been said that this story is intended to be the faithful report of the whole truth, which took place at those sadly remembered times.

Unfortunately, the immense majority of Jews who had come from other regions of Europe did not inspire confidence in the Polish Jews. Our distrust was notably worse when we dealt with the German Jews. Numberless times we had heard them say that they did not believe Hitler would destroy them and that the Germans were not as bad as they seemed. They thought we magnified the facts and that we would all survive in the end, meaning specially the Germans in Sobibor. So they tried as the best they could to collaborate with the monsters.

We cannot deny that all of them suffered the same misery we, the Jews from Poland, went through. We cannot avoid mentioning that among the foreigners there were fighting, hopeful, brave elements, willing to do anything. However, they were so very few that nearly all Polish Jews constituted a monolithic block with similar ideas, capable of performing significant deeds and of facing any kind of danger. The only thing missing was opportunity.

On May 15th 1943, something happened that served to prove that not all those who lived in the cursed camp were submissive lambs. From that day on, the Germans started to notice that things were no longer going to be the way they wanted them. There was in Sobibor a group of Jews, mostly Polish, who were willing to react against oppression and the threat of death.

Everything happened with the group of forty men which had been formed some weeks before to replace the former Forest Commando, made up of French Jews. The new group was composed, as I have mentioned before, of twenty-eight Polish Jews, taken out of the last transport which had come from Izbica, and of the twelve Dutch Jews who already were in Sobibor.

The day they had been sent to chop wood in the forests, nearly three weeks before, they started to notice that the Nazis did not take them back to the camp at lunchtime, as usual. Early in the morning, they would leave the camp, chained to one another, and head for the woods, taking with them their meagre rations, which was nothing but a piece of bread.

The Germans thought they were strong enough to bear the tremendous task without being properly fed. Only in the afternoon would they stop working and be sent back to camp to sleep. The escort was composed of four Nazis, carrying machine guns and five Ukrainian guards with rifles.

When it was time for lunch the Ukrainians would stack their arms and sit beside the Germans to eat and talk. Then the members of the Commando, chained to one another, would gulp down their pieces of bread. That day, maybe due to their carelessness or because they did not believe there was any danger of an escape, the guards responsible for watching the Jews, did not put them in chains, at meal –times. But the Ukrainians did not know that in the group were four young men who were planning to escape, and they would never find a better occasion than that. Luck started to smile on the indomitable youths.

One of the guards called two of them to follow him to a brook nearby. They were going to fetch some water. The young men immediately got up, grabbed the buckets and headed to the place the guards had mentioned. They were two robust Polish Jews – Josef Kopf, and Szlomo Podchlebnik.

Both were walking ahead of the Ukrainian who followed them some meters behind. So, they moved away from the bivouac until they came to the banks of the brook. But it had not only been to fetch the water that the guard had decided to call them. He also intended to do some of his usual trading with the two Jews. To them, the call to go to the place had been like a heavenly blessing, and the exceptional opportunity could not be ignored.

As soon as they had reached the river, the Ukrainian asked them if they had anything to trade. Podchlebnik slyly told him that on that particular day he only had some diamonds and proffered his hand with half- closed fingers, as if he were really holding something. The unsuspecting guard immediately bent to look closer at the supposed precious gems. At that exact moment, the Jew violently stabbed his stomach. Before he could shout for help, Kopf hurled himself on him and beheaded him with the knife he also carried. Once the Ukrainian was dead, the two Jews took his weapons and went back to the bivouac. Their weapons were a

rifle with a fixed bayonet and a revolver.

This was the best occasion for the two of them to escape, however, the four friends were committed to one another on their honour and two of them had stayed in the bivouac. Thus, they returned very carefully walking among the trees and bushes around them until they came to the place where the other members of the Forest Commando were, with their dangerous well-armed escort.

As soon as they saw their friends they started to gesture to them from afar to tell them they had already gotten rid of the guard, who had gone with them to the river and they should also try and find a way to escape. In the meanwhile, though they understood what had happened, the other two companions, Zyndel and Chaim, could not do anything, since it was impossible for them to act at that moment. Thus they decided to wait for their chance. This was not late in coming.

Their escort, made up of four SS and four Ukrainians, was resting. The eight criminals had just finished eating and they were engrossed in lively conversation, sitting on the ground. Their rifles, in the meantime, were stacked a little way from them. Not far from the henchmen the Jews of the Forest Commando were equally resting, well away from the Ukrainian weapons. As to the machine-guns, the Germans kept them by their side.

The final blow would have to be struck in such a way as to take all the members of the escort by surprise. One small mistake, as unimportant as it might be, would endanger the success of their escape and bring about drastic consequences.

In such a case, Podchlebnik and Kopf would also be under the risk of being killed, even if they were a little distance away from the bivouac. A few seconds later, one of the Germans got up and left the group, strolling towards the Jews, as if he were taking a leisurely walk.

When the officer was distant enough from the group, the other accomplices Zyndel and Chaim, hurled themselves on him as fast as lightning and brandishing their sharp knives. With well-aimed blows the SS was felled and went down to the ground writhing with pain.

This was the sign for flight. With one exception, all the Polish Jews in the large group promptly rose to their feet and hurriedly left the place, disappearing in the forest. The Germans and the Ukrainians were so surprised that they stood there petrified. Before they could recover from the shock and get hold of their weapons, precious seconds had elapsed, enough for the fleeing band to get out of sight and put a great distance between them. The bandits had just suffered a tremendous impact with the loss of two of their men and it took them some time to recover from the shock and start to do something. The only Polish Jew who had not followed the others stayed in the same place, sitting peacefully. He was dead. He had had a stroke, perhaps brought about by the unexpected emotion, and had died in the same sitting position he had been before. His name was Heinech.

The other twenty-seven members were lost from sight of the Germans who hunted them in despair, sweeping the woods without finding anything. The brave Jews had disappeared without leaving any traces

and the Germans seemed to be totally disoriented, shouting orders in the forest which were only answered by their meaningless echo.

As to the twelve Dutch Jews who had also belonged to this legendary Forest Commando, they were nothing but poor devils. They had been so frightened that they never even rose from their places. Immediately after the Nazi officer had been killed, they raised their arms and were surrounded by the Ukrainians. Incidentally, this contributed even further for the escapees to gain time and, consequently, distance.

The guards could not pursue them straight away, because they were too worried about the harmless Dutchmen. The total lack of initiative on the latter's part did not permit them to follow the brave Poles. They had had everything in their hands, but they had not known how to make use of the panic reigning over the enemy and had preferred to submit, thus wasting the last and only chance which came their way.

They paid very dearly for their inertia and their unfortunate lack of courage. They were immediately put in chains and taken back to Sobibor, where they arrived in the late afternoon. Soon, the trills of a whistle, which meant a general call, were heard summoning all the Jews to go into formation. All of us then gathered again and started to wait for what was going to come. The crowd was next led to the vicinity of Camp 2 and there we were given the order to place ourselves in a long semi – circle.

As soon as we had done that, the twelve Dutch Jews were shown to us in chains and followed by the Ukrainians. The bandits put them one beside the other, about thirty meters in front of us. Then they shot them all before us. With this inhuman act the Germans expected to discourage any other similar attempt. However, the Dutchmen deserve an honourable exception.

The fact even called our attention. Even if they were innocent and obedient, they were going to be punished by something they had not done. On the contrary, they had submitted without the least resistance.

They were brave men – justice be made to them. They faced the firing squad without a word of protest, without a gesture of defence. None of them asked for mercy, and they stood upright, serenely waiting for the murderers bullets.

There was no sign of fear on their faces and they even seemed pleased at being only one step away from Eternal freedom. They had not learned to live like the others, but they had known how to die like no one else.

The Germans set up this disgusting scene with great pomp. They intended all of us to watch it, thus thinking they would be able to instil fear and terror in us. They were wrong once more. We had only been frightened when we heard the whistles, which summoned us to a meeting.

At that moment, we had been worried since, every time this thing happened , we thought our last hour had come. We were not afraid of it but the mere expectation was a torment. We would prefer death to come suddenly than have to imagine it was coming. We would like it to be certain, never doubtful.

Among the twenty-seven Polish Jews who had participated in the spectacular escape of the Waldkommando, three are old friends of mine and are still alive. One of them is called Chaim Korenfeld and he lives in the state of Sao Paulo, Brasil. The other two, Zyndel and Podchlebnik are in the United States of America.

To my three indefatigable heroic friends I dedicate the pages of this chapter, since they were the ones who blazed the way along which others would follow. To them I devote all my praise, since they covered themselves in glory by taking revenge against the Nazi tyranny.

9. Preparations for the Uprising

The march of time proceeded and summer was coming. In the meantime, life in Sobibor did not experience any important changes. The Germans had already formed another Forest Commando and they surrounded themselves with all kinds of precaution to avoid the venture happening again.

The safety measures of the camp had been strengthened and its leaders thought it was impossible to escape from it. Any services which had to be performed outside its perimeter and which had to include the participation of Jews would be fulfilled under reinforced escort, whose eyes were riveted on them.

Severe punishments would be applied to those Ukrainians who were found careless in their watch. The Germans were determined not to let any other escape be tried. At the same time, the transports which came from Poland itself could no longer be as massive as before. We noticed that the number of remaining Jews had become increasingly smaller as the constant killings had devastated the Polish nation.

And the few that did still come were already rebellious and inclined to violence. Day after day the latent spirit of insurrection and vengeance against the oppressors was getting more bitter. In opposition, mistrust among us had increased, since all of us feared those individuals who could like the Oberkapo Berliner betray us at any time.

Our despair was such that some of our boldest men even thought of instigating the Jews in the next transports, to revolt as soon as they set foot in Sobibor, by using the chance of the large number of people gathered in one group. These newcomers, in spite of having lived in the few isolated ghettos still existing in the country, were not unaware of what was happening in Treblinka and in the other labour and extermination camps.

As to Sobibor, nothing was known of it. They already knew about Polish guerrillas in the forests and of the acts of sabotage which had been performed against the German rulers, which already presaged resistance against tyranny.

They had also heard the rumours which were spread about the epic insurrection in the Warsaw Ghetto and

about the unfavourable military situation of the Nazis in the war.

However, we had well-grounded fears that the plan could abort due not only to the impromptu character of the act – we could not imagine either what would the reaction of the men be to our decisions. Even if the majority of newcomers were willing to face risk, a small cowardly minority could endanger the success of the movement and bring about our massacre. Only careful planning would be able to give us some hope, even if our dream never came true. If we did not succeed in escaping, we would still have the satisfaction of killing enemies before dying.

We could clearly see in the Polish Jew transports to which level of poverty and abuse they had been submitted to. By their ragged appearance and their endless moral and material poverty, we could conclude that they had come to the utmost limit of what was acceptable or bearable.

However, the aspect of the Jews who came from the rest of occupied Europe surprised us. Although they were no longer as healthy as those who had come before, their general condition was infinitely better than that of the Poles.

From that we could deduce that the Nazi persecution against the Jews born in Poland had reached the limit. But this hate was dictated by a twofold reason, particularly inherent to the German generation of the time – we were Jews, and we were also Polish.

The Germans did not only enslave and destroy us but they also used us as spearheads in their most dreadful purposes. They could use their shameless propaganda to perfection, and they even came to the point of using us as a means to convince people and diffuse their ideas so as to more easily attain their aims. Only those with nerves of steel would be able to tolerate the absurd things which they tried to induce us to do, and it is thanks to that stamina that many were still alive.

One of their customary ignominious acts was to make use of us to persuade the unsuspecting newcomers to believe they were in a labour camp. They would deliberately make use of our fragility and our impotence to make us lie to our own brothers.

On many occasions, when a new transport came in, Wagner or any other officer led some of us up to the fence behind which the reception yard was, filled with Jews. Then he called one of these poor people and started to ask us questions in front of him to which we would have to have highly convincing answers, prepared to suit the purpose. We would also be jokingly asked what we did in that place and we answered that we were artisans and had our workshops. He then inquired about our food, and in reply we said it was very good.

Thus, against our will, not only I but all the other companions contributed a lot for the Nazis to be successful in their shameless purpose of preventing the newcomers to Sobibor from suspecting anything. We felt guilty and filled with remorse, but we did that with our hearts broken, because we knew in advance what end awaited those poor wretched people.

Even if we wished or were able to, we would not be allowed to say anything else, since it would not help them in any way to declare we were in an extermination camp. Besides, we would be running serious risks, if any Jew ever betrayed us. Many a time I felt the urge to reveal the whole truth, but at the same time I thought that any attitude would even hurt those who might be selected among the group and used in the service of the bandits, being thus able to live for a longer period of time.

Quite often I had the opportunity of being alone with them near the wire fence. Then I would deliberately play the German's game, and try to comfort and calm them, by falsely telling them all this was only a place of work. No one will ever be able to imagine the inner debate I held with myself to act like that and how could my nerves stand the hard strain.

In the beginning of summer the Germans built several "Bunkers" in the camp. Those were subterranean storehouses to stock ammunition that had been manufactured in Russia and which had been yielded to the Wehrmacht on the battlefield. These explosives were transported to Poland and since the Nazis intended to use them later on, they had had some depots built in Sobibor, to profit from the enormous amount of slave workers available.

Countless women were chosen to work in the "Bunkers" under the extremely slim but violent hangman, Getzinger. The duties of the Jewesses would be to clean the storehouse and to sort the ammunition according to their types, as well as to pile it up. At the same time, we received some news which filled us with happiness. We learned that the cursed Gustav Wagner, the leader of Camp 1 had been re-assigned. He had been promoted to Oberscharfuhrer and now he had one more star on his epaulets. We were very happy about his removal from our camp, because his too frequent visits to our workshops would have to decrease.

From now on, he was going to hold the position that the bandit Michel had held before, and he would become a kind of general supervisor and supplies officer in Sobibor. In this way he would not have much leisure to bother us with his customary and unpleasant visits. To fill the vacant place which had been left by Wagner, the no less sordid Karl Frenzel had been appointed, as the Commander of Camp 1. As to cruelty, he was not different from his predecessor in any way. However, he was a much vainer element and he was much less intelligent than Wagner.

Some time later, another transport of Polish Jews came. They were all gathered in the yard, waiting for the moment when they would have to go along the fatal corridor which would lead them to death, when an old lady called me. I was standing on the other side of the fence, watching the movement in the yard. As there were no guards near me, I approached the fence close enough to be able to talk to her.

As soon as I saw her, my memory lit up with the image of my dead grandmothers face. The unfortunate Jewess was so old that I immediately started calling her "granny". I addressed her in kind soothing words and told her she was going to have a bath and rest after the long journey. However, an embarrassing surprise was in store for me, since she answered me – "No my boy, you cannot deceive me" Next she bent down to the ground with a lot of difficulty and grabbed a fistful of dirt. She slowly rose and, raising her hand as high as her exhausted energies would allow it, started to let the dirt dribble and scatter in the wind which then blew while she prophesied - "Look at this. Exactly like this dust is being scattered, so will the Germans

disperse. My end is near and I know I am going to die in a few minutes, but you will survive to take revenge and to tell the world what happens here and what they do to us". She actually died, because within a few minutes, the long column of women headed towards Camp 2. Among them was the wrinkled old lady, exhausted and hobbling in her death march but brave and haughty to face it with serenity. I shall never forget her.

One day we heard an explosion. As all news spread very fast in the camp, we soon learned what had happened. A grenade had just exploded in Getzinger's hand, and had instantly killed him. A Ukrainian guard had also died with him. The ignoble officer had met his well-deserved end through his curiosity and conceit. He had been checking one of the Russian artefacts stocked in the "Bunkers" he was responsible for.

He considered himself so competent about it that he certainly did not believe the possibility of having any kind of accident. Of his body only pieces were found. They were soon gathered and sent back to Germany.

This event brought us indescribable happiness, since we had just been ridden of another henchmen, even if it did not mean much, because someone else would immediately be sent to replace him. After the first minutes of happiness, we started to worry about the reprisal which would certainly be coming, since whenever anything happened in Sobibor, we were the ones to bear the consequences.

Fortunately, luck was on our side and this time nothing happened. On the contrary, signs of restlessness began to be noticed in the Germans. As they were already being beaten in the war, maybe that fatal accident had looked like a bad omen to them.

Some time later a transport came from Biala –Podlaskie. Then the Nazis decided to make use of the return of the empty freight train to load it with a large shipment. To this purpose, they took from that transport about three hundred men who would then be used to load the train.

The cargo would be made up of part of the hundreds of tons the most varied utensils stocked in the sheds of Camp 2 and which had belonged to the exterminated Jews. These sheds were already overfilled and there was urgent need to empty them a little.

What we saw then was perhaps the most barbaric event among all those which had been publicly practiced in the camp up to that moment. The three hundred Polish Jews, in spite of their being exhausted after the trip and by the mistreatment they had suffered on arrival, were immediately put to work.. As the Germans were in a hurry to load the wagons, all the work was done at an incredibly fast pace and with unparalleled savagery.

In our presence those poor people were forced to run, ceaselessly, from the ramp where the train was to the sheds in Camp 2, where each picked up a bale of goods and ran back to the place of shipment. Along the long route, to and from the ramp, the Germans struck whiplashes and blows of every kind on them, urging them to move still faster and without granting them one second to rest. But the brutality of the Nazis did not end there. This time, the monstrous SS wanted to amuse themselves and started to hang the defenceless Jews. At the least sign of tiredness, dozens of them were grabbed and immediately hung by their necks from the nearby trees. All this was done to the accompaniment of loud guffaws from the German and Ukrainian jackals.

Not yet satisfied with murdering them like that, the hyenas went down to torture too. They gathered a large number of flasks of different kinds of drugs found in the latest transport, called some of the wretches and made them drink them one after the other, until the flasks were empty. All of them got poisoned and fell to the ground. Many others were forced to swallow large quantities of dry sand, until their stomachs were filled up.

Soon, under a wave of torture, killing and beating, the train was totally loaded and ready to leave. While the whistle of the engine would be heard leaving Sobibor, the remaining Jews were led to Camp 3. The dead and dying which were the aftermath of the slaughter were thrown onto the "loras" and sent to the same destination.

A small airplane periodically came to Sobibor. It flew there in order to take back to Germany all the load of gold taken from the Jews. In spite of the existing shady dealings and of the constant leaks, the quantity of gold taken to that country was very large, but it was impossible to really say how much it amounted to. The plane landed in a small airfield between Camps 2 and 3. One of the novelties which appeared at that time was the arrival of ten Russian non-Jewish women. None of us ever found out how they got there and no one ever saw them.

The rumour that they had been sent to Sobibor to cook for the Germans and to wash their clothes was soon spread. However, what really happened was quite different, since, at night, we could hear the din made by the bacchanals that the Ukrainians held with the Russian women. My nephew Jankus who worked in the officer's yard, told us the higher ranking guards used to take the women into their lodgings. It is possible that the officers also used them occasionally. Although they were not Jewish, no one ever left Sobibor alive, and their fate must have been death.

When we were at the end of summer, a transport came from the Concentration Camp of Majdanek, near Lublin. As its passengers were totally incapacitated for work, the Germans brought them to Sobibor to die.

In Majdanek there was a crematorium, but it could only incinerate a small number of corpses at a time and it would not be able to absorb that large levy of Jewish skeletons. By virtue of that, they had been sent to Sobibor which could swallow them all at the same time.

The unloading was done in the afternoon, and the Germans decided to leave the slaughtering for the following day. Thus the wretched people were thrown in the reception yard to spend the night. As I had already finished working, I went out to look at them from afar, through the fence. I could then watch one of the most painful scenes I have ever witnessed in my whole life.

The poor Jews, dressed in striped clothes which were used in Concentration Camps, looked like a band of convicts. However, never before had such a rickety group entered the camp. By their undernourished and weak conditions, they were all annihilated and unable to even move.

They were really half-dead. They all lay on the ground, in a long human mat.

They were not even strong enough to talk. I could only hear some feeble moans. My curiosity was roused by

the awful scene, so I decided to go nearer the wire to watch them at close quarters.

Then I stared at them in astonishment and I could see they were nothing but remains of human rags, so useless that not even a single guard had been posted there to watch over them. I suddenly heard an extremely weak voice. I listened hard and tried to locate where it had come from, since I had heard my own name. I looked at all of them but was not able to distinguish anything.

A second later to my immense surprise my name was called once more and then I could see it was a man who had called me. Although he was not able to talk, he identified himself as my cousin Majer. The poor devil whispered only a few words – “ Don’t you remember me? I’m from Pulawy”.

I would never have been able to recognise him. Majer had once been a tall strong man. That which I saw now was only a skeleton. Besides, he had shrunk and his back was already hunched. I could hardly believe what I saw. I tried to comfort him by telling him he was going to have a bath, put on new clothes, eat a meal and rest until he recovered and could be sent to work. In truth Majer was already irrecoverable and he was very close to dying, even if he were not sent to Camp 3.

Even so, I lied to him on purpose, thus using the Nazi methods. I played the role of a doctor who does not dare tell his patient that death is coming and that nothing else can be tried to prevent it. If I had told him about the end which was to be given to him on the following day he might have died then and there, probably for his own good. However, I wanted to encourage him in his last moments even if he were virtually incapable of reacting.

In Majer’s figure I saw the spectre of penury, of starvation and abuse. I could not hold back my emotion. I went to my shed and got a whole loaf of bread and went immediately back to my cousin. I threw the bread to him through the fence but I was horrified to see how many Jews, as squalid as he was and who were near him, came crawling towards the bread. The starving people fought a terrible battle over it and hardly anyone was able to eat a piece of it, since the loaf crumbled completely. Majer had not been able to get a single crumb.

I got mad at that and promised him I would bring him another roll, but first I warned him to try and come a little closer to the fence so that the same thing would not happen again. I intended to put the roll in his own hands. However, his extreme weakness would not let him move and I was forced to try again to throw the bread to him, the same way as before. I fetched another loaf and again threw it towards him. However, the others were already expecting it, and again they made the same disorderly charge. I never came to know whether Majer was able to grab a little piece of it. I soon gave up the idea of staying there, for I was afraid the noise would call the attention of the guards every time they made one of those attacks. Besides, some of my friends were also trying to help the poor human rags and the place had become hectic. I was sorry for not having been able to help decrease my cousin’s suffering, even though I had really tried.

Soon afterwards a group of officers and Ukrainians came and started preparing their delight. The bandits walked among that defenceless mass of human beings and, as if they were merely taking a stroll, started to hit them with their rifle butts and bludgeons, finally killing some of them among devilish guffaws and jokes. Only when they were fed up with killing, did they go away, as if nothing had happened. And thus that night

passed.

Soon after daybreak, the criminals came back and started to move the remaining crowd to Camp 2. Most of the Jews were no longer able even to get to their feet. Some of them tried to drag their bodies, crawling with great effort, while the others remained on the ground in the yard or in the corridor, which led to the other camp. Perhaps only one tenth of them ever made it to Camp 2 by their own means, since nearly all stayed behind.

The yard as well as the corridor were littered with bodies of dead and dying people who made up the most part of those wretches and their bodies carpeted the vast area. Among those still alive, none was able to walk. Then to finish the task of removing the bodies, the Nazis called in the "Bahnhof –Kommando". Very promptly, the Jewish boys on the Railroad Commando started the job and spent the rest of the day collecting those human remains to take them to the "loras" which would then transport them to Camp 3.

When all was ended, another group came to disinfect the yard and corridor, with chlorine, since the Germans were afraid of an epidemic. After disinfection, the ground became whitish. There were no words for me to tell you what this transport from Majdanek actually was like. No one had ever before seen such a cruel, horrifying scene in Sobibor.

However, we had not been very alarmed or disappointed. Anything could be expected from the Germans and we had already witnessed as many unbelievable things in those long months of our miraculous survival. A few days later, something strange happened. It came about in the afternoon, at the time of the evening roll call, after work. Since he had taken over the command of Camp 1, the Nazi Frenzel had become the man in charge of receiving the results of the counting.

Once this had been done, he told Mundeck, the chief tailor, to step out of the group and gave him twenty-five whiplashes. Next, he told me to do the same and the same punishment was applied on me. Everyone was surprised and no one could understand the reasons which had led the hangman to do that. Even now I cannot guess the reasons for that unexpected punishment, since I had not done anything to deserve it. However, our suspicions pointed to the Oberkapo Berliner, who would be the only person who would denounce us at the least transgression. Maybe he had learned that Mundeck and I had both given some pieces of bread to half-dead Jews in the transport from Majdanek and he had decided to denounce us to Karl Frenzel.

Our hate for Berliner grew everyday, because he was just like the Germans. As he was a Jew, we craved for killing him even more than we wanted to kill the Nazi scoundrels. The autumn of 1943 was nearing and the days were becoming shorter. As evening fell earlier than before, the schedules were changed and the roll call was taken sooner. Although we were sent inside the sheds earlier, our work went on as usual. We were already used to life in the camp and we were in control of our emotions. We could even think of ourselves as cold, unfeeling men, deprived of fear or feeling. We really tried to reason out, with no fantasy, any possible way of escaping from that hell.

The transports continued to come from all the countries where the Swastika flag was hoisted and the most sparse were those from Poland herself. One day, one of those came from the town of Lwow, but it was a

different one, in it only corpses came. There were only a few Jews alive in it. As soon as the doors of the wagons were opened, the German officers left the place, so bad was the smell which came out of them. There was no one who could stand the foul smell which came from the freight wagons. Everyone drew back pressing their nostrils.

As the corpses were already putrefied they would have to be taken out in any way, and the nauseating task fell to the Railroad Commando. The poor boys had no choice but enter the wagons and start the loathsome, macabre task of removing the corpses of the unfortunate Jews from Lwow and put them on the "loras". Then they would be taken straight to the crematory furnaces.

The corpses were in such a state of decomposition that, on being pulled out of the wagons, their skin and even their limbs would come apart. The young Jews on the Railroad Commando had to empty the wagons and they did so under excruciating fits of nausea. This must have been the most unpleasant task ever performed by Jews in Sobibor.

Although it seemed unbelievable, some living people were still found inside the wagons. No one could ever understand how they could have stood the trip, so weak they were, inside the wagons which had been made into putrid sewers. As they were near death and could not even walk they were also put on the "loras" and sent to Camp 3. This transport was from then on called the cemetery-train.

As of that day, most of the transports which arrived in Sobibor came from Russia. Although they had been beaten in Stalingrad and the Caucasus, the Germans still held a large part of the Soviet territory. These transports did not only bring Jews but also many rumours which gave us some hope.

We learned that guerrilla warfare in the nations occupied by the Germans was being carried out. In France the maquis bothered the occupation troops. In Italy some elements fought against fascism. In Yugoslavia the chetniks of Colonel Draja Mikhailovitch and Tito's Communist guerrillas were pestering the occupiers. In Russia, the guerrillas were causing constant disturbance to the flank of the Wehrmacht. In Northern Africa, the German forces cornered in Tunisia had surrendered to the Allies. The Allies were preparing to land on Sicily and the Italian peninsular. It was believed that the armies of the Axis were being defeated on all fronts and ceaselessly retreating. There were rumours that the camp of Sobibor might even be bombed. The rumours true or false gave us new heart.

On this same occasion the news was spread that a new aborted escape had happened in Camp 3. The insurgents had paid with their lives for their daring deed. We never learned any details about their failure, however, our flame of hope got brighter and brighter.

On the other hand, the ferocity of the Germans grew worse at every new defeat of their armies. As they had perhaps kindled the dream of winning the war and building an Aryan Empire, they took revenge on us, by killing and abusing us with doubled violence.

In the middle of September, a transport came to Sobibor which would change the course of the history of the cursed camp. It had come from Russia and from it were taken fifty men, all of them physically fit for hard

labour.

They were Russian Jews incorporated in the Soviet Army and who had fallen into the hands of the German troops during the battle. Although they were treated as prisoners of war, they had ended up in Sobibor only because they were Jews.

This was not strange to us, since the Nazis were in the habit of never respecting international conventions about prisoners of war which had been signed in Geneva, in the same way that they did not respect human life.

Among these Russian Jews there was an officer in the Russian Army. As soon as we learned about his rank , we started to call him "Politruk", since he had been a political –officer. His name was Sasha Pechersky. He now lives in the Soviet Union.

As these Russians were a little reserved, they made their own group and they tried to keep themselves apart from us, the other Jews in the camp. We were already in autumn, and the days were increasingly shorter. This gave us the chance of having a few more hours of rest after work. Once the evening roll was called, we would use our free moments to talk, until the lights were turned off in Sobibor. It was during these precious moments that we learned the local news as well as some others from the outside world which were able to penetrate our nearly impenetrable camp.

This was also the time we enjoyed our love trysts and carried out our dealings with the Ukrainians. We gave them gold and in exchange we got vodka to warm us and make our spirits lighter. Gold was not lacking for us, since no one was ever inspected in Sobibor, as nobody entered the place or left it. Thus, the Germans did not bother about what we could or could not have with us. Besides, those who worked in the storehouses in Camp 2 and stocked the voluminous luggage of the people who had been exterminated, as well as in the sheds where the selection and shipment of goods to Germany was done, could easily get the metal. As to the vodka, the Ukrainians had hundreds of litres at their disposal, not only for their own consumption but also for their dealings with us.

Sometimes the Germans came and called the barber, Josef, who was a very good violinist - then they would tell him to play the violin and would make us dance with one another, while they amused themselves by looking at us. Even so, those were only moments when we were able to forget our suffering for a while. Hours went by like that until the lights were turned out and complete darkness would envelop the camp and then only whispers could be heard. It was in one of these opportunities that Lajbu, the Rabbi's son , had his first contact with the Russian Jew Sasha, the "Politruk".

On the following day, Lajbu came to me and murmured the results of his interview with the "Politruk". He told me Sasha had said that one of the Ukrainian guards had informed him about something which was very serious.

The guard told the "Politruk", in secret, that due to the successive defeats suffered by the German armies on all fronts, they were thinking of closing Sobibor , probably before October 15th.

The Ukrainian was one of those pure Russians who had pretended he was of German descent so as to be able to join the armed forces.

Incidentally, I think I should mention that six of them had deserted from Sobibor. They had done so because they had been informed that the German –Soviet front was coming closer and closer by the day.

Serving under German orders they were afraid of reprisal from the Russians, so they filled their pockets with gold and disappeared from the camp.

Lajbu went on to tell me that the “Politruk” had suggested that, as a consequence of the imminent danger which was nearing us, we should try to do something which might be able to save us, even if the possibilities were very small or even null.

I was astonished at that and started to think that perhaps the dramatic news was groundless, I came to the point of imagining that the mysterious revelation of Sasha to Lajbu were part of a stratagem to incite us to rebellion. I found it impossible for a Ukrainian guard, to dare tell a Russian Jew such an important secret. However, Lajbu soon put an end to my doubts.

Even if the Germans did not extinguish the camp, they could kill us and replace us with others. If they extinguished it, we would all be massacred and incinerated. Either way, the moment was highly dangerous and we had to do something.

Since the situation was already like that, I told Lajbu that I would discuss it with my two closest friends whom I could trust. Szol , the head of the shoemakers and Mundeck, the chief tailor. I also asked him to make a date for me to meet the “Politruk” alone, the next day after work.

I went to bed in high spirits, pleased at myself. Sleep did not come easily because a thousand and one ideas crossed my confused brain.

On the following day, I woke up under great nervous strain , since I could hardly believe what I had heard the night before and supposed it had all been a dream. A leader had finally appeared among us. Up to the day the transport from Russia had come , no one had had any initiative for rebellion in Sobibor, inside the enemy’s own lair. There had been it is true, the wonderful deed of the Forest Commando performed in the very woods. Two bricklayers had also escaped , no one knew how. There had been other aborted attempts, but they had been stifled by the Nazis, with un-heard of violence. But now everything would be different.

We would have to subvert the order in Sobibor, under the very noses of the dozens of German and Ukrainian criminals. We knew for sure of the serious risks we would be running due to the Jewish stool pigeons. We would have to face the barbed wire fences, cross wide deep ditches and mined areas. We would have to hide from the machine guns placed on top of the countless high strategic towers.

Finally, we would have to win over a giant, deadly safety system which made Sobibor inexpugnable. Uprising had always been the ideal of many of us, but we lacked someone who could impel us to do it. For all the difficulties to be overcome, it would be necessary for us to have someone to plan it and to lead us. No one

would be better than Sasha, the "Politruk". From now on, he would be our leader. Not only Sasha but all his other companions, also Russian Jews, had solid military experience and this fact encouraged us to the point of facing danger with limitless confidence.

"Politruk" was a man of action and not a bureaucratic strategist. He had been tempered on the battle-field when he defended his country against the bestial hordes of the Third Reich. With him we had some hope, if not of living at least of killing.

I tried to tell Szol and Mundek about what had happened as soon as I could. They did not hesitate, overbrimming with happiness and emotion, to agree to participate in the uprising and happily accepted Sasha's leadership. I asked them to keep the matter a secret and to wait for the result of my talk with the "Politruk". At the time set, I met him and was surprised at the fact that Sasha had brought Lajbu and another of his countrymen, the Russian Jew Miszka, with him. We conferred for some time, in absolute secrecy, and decided that the plot would also be developed in secret, since we could not afford to run the risk of being denounced.

On the Sunday next to our date we held a meeting with the people we could really trust. At the meeting were present Sasha, Lajbu, Szol, Mundek, Josel and myself. Josel was the chief carpenter. All of them worked in Camp 1. However, our conspiracy also spread into Camp 2. We had two companions there who were willing to do anything and who said they would organise a rebellious group with elements they could trust. Both of them were kapos and worked in that camp, although all of them spent the night in Camp 1.

One of them was called Bunio and he was the head of the Railroad Commando, the other went by the name of Pozycki, and he was responsible for those who worked in the storehouses located in that camp. Once the initial basis of our mutiny were settled, we started the period of articulation. We started to meet frequently to exchange ideas and suggestions. We were worried about the way we should use to attract other people to our group, as much as when and how would it deflagrate.

After we had weighed the circumstances very carefully we decided that each one of us would individually try to attract other people who deserved our confidence. Our elements in Camp 2 were not present at those preliminary talks but they met Sasha in private.

From the very beginning one suggestion was accepted by all, with no exception, as being essential to the success of our venture – to eliminate the "Oberkapo" Berliner. Besides, being a habitual stool pigeon, Berliner was very sharp and suspicious. If he only imagined anything was being plotted, we would be irretrievably lost.

Unfortunately it had to be so, and we were sorry for that, because he was also a Jew. However, he had let himself be led by the Nazi technique, and had finally become one of its apologists. He thought he would save himself by acting like that and, to reach his egotistical aim, he did not measure consequences and he was always flattering the henchmen. He had been responsible for the death of many innocent people and, had he survived, he would have been one of the most prominent figures among the criminals who were judged in Nuremberg.

As we considered him our number one enemy it would be better to erase him from the list of the living than risk total failure in our venture. With his death, many Jews would be still saved from that infernal maze.

Everyone of us became conscious of his participation in this first and daring coup in the general fight plan. However, there still was the urgent need for total control over our emotions so that nothing would hinder the next steps in the operation. All was coldly planned and we only waited for the proper occasion to carry it out.

The first days of October were already passing very quickly when luck smiled on us. Wagner as well as the Commander – in – Chief “Trottel” had gone to Germany on a visit. With “Trottel”’s absence, another bandit Deputy Commander Niemann, had taken over the general command of Sobibor. However, Karl Frenzel and the other SS officers were still in their posts.

We agreed that, on a certain night, after we had come back from work and the general call had been done, we would be free to carry out the plan. We would then go to the Kapo’s lodgings and we would try to catch Berliner by surprise, in case there were any need for that.

And thus it was done. When the day came and the hour got closer, we started to move towards his shed. This movement was very careful although seemingly careless. Four of us were in charge of doing it, while some other companions would stand nearby to deceive the other “Kapos” and prevent their entering the lodgings. In the attack group there were Mundek, Bunio, Pozycki and myself.

As we entered , we saw Berliner all alone. We went in and without the waste of a single minute, got hold of him, immediately covering his mouth to prevent his shouting. Totally unable to move, the traitor could not even thrash about or cry for help.

Our plan consisted of beating him in such a way as not to leave any haematomas on his face, arms or any other visible parts of his body. Based on that, we only hit him below the belt so as to reach his entrails and produce severe internal ruptures. Our intention was to destroy him only on the inside, and we were very careful not to hit him externally.

When the man was in a state when it would be impossible for him to survive or even babble a few words, we stopped the operation and calmly left for our lodgings, although our wish was to finish the killing. We slept peacefully that night as if nothing had happened. On the next day, we reported to duty at the usual time. The first call was done and, as it was only natural, Berliner was not there. Then Pozycki informed the Nazi Frenzel that the “Kapo” Commander was sick. No one ever doubted that, not even the other “kapos” who lived in Berliner’s lodgings.

At noon, straight after lunch the Commander of Camp 1 came again for the usual counting, at the time we came back from work. As Berliner was still absent, again Pozycki took a step forward and said the Chief-Kapo was still sick in bed. Again all of us kept quiet, since those who did not know what had happened could not suspect anything.

The beating we had given Berliner had been so violent that no one could really be able to perceive that something strange had happened. Certainly his companions who slept in the same shed, must have thought

he was sick and asleep, since, after the severe beating, we had put him in his bunk, and covered him up to his head with a blanket.

We had not killed him immediately because we did not want to raise the German's suspicions. However, we did not fear anything since Berliner would never be able to recover enough to talk and denounce what had happened to him. He had been left totally inert. He could not move or say anything. There was no doubt that our act had been vile and our aggression cowardly.

But there was a vital need for this prophylactic measure. However, the first stage of our operations was not complete yet. We still had to give Berliner the "coup de grace" and for that we drew a Machiavellian plan. It consisted of using the old aversion that Karl Frenzel felt against him and of which the Nazi made no secret. We settled everything and started to carry out the second stage of our manoeuvre.

It was already late in the afternoon when the presumptuous Nazi officer came to the tailor shop, with his peculiar elegance, to try on his new clothes. Mundeck used the opportunity to hurt his vanity.

The tailor told Frenzel that Berliner usually said in front of everybody, that he enjoyed complete autonomy in Sobibor. He even used to say that he only respected Wagner, since he did not attribute any importance to the other SS officers.

As he was not yet satisfied with his story, Mundeck added that I too knew everything and that I had heard Berliner say that many times. Finally, to impress the truth of his words, Mundeck called me to the shop so that I , in person and in the presence of the Germans, could testify to what he said.

I went there and my accomplice immediately asked me if was not true that "Kapo" – Oberkapo Berliner was always saying that, inside Sobibor, he would only obey Wagner's orders. I did not even wait for Mundeck to finish his question and promptly answered that it was true, that what he was saying was the whole truth. However, in order to make that well-rehearsed plot act as a bomb, I decided to add that Berliner affirmed he was a German Jew, much superior to us, and that he thought he was as important as a Scharfuhrer. Besides, all that , he still said that Karl Frenzel was a real fool.

On hearing these last words , the Nazi had his natural colour changed. Astonished at the pseudo – revelation he became purple with anger and, seeing his pride deadly hurt, he told us – " All right – You will see how this piece of shit will end". The rest of the afternoon was uneventful. When our work was done, the usual roll call was performed and all of us went back to our sheds. The next task was up to the nurse, the Czech Jew Kurt. At this time of day he used to make his rounds. After he had gone through all the sheds, he headed towards the one where Berliner was. While he pretended to be examining him, he gave him some drug which would make him sleep to eternity.

As Kurt had some knowledge of his profession and knew how to put an end to Berliner – he had administered to the patient something which was really lethal. As a matter of fact he had just performed euthanasia, since the "Kapo" would actually never recover. Our plan had been carried out to perfection and we had gotten rid of the dangerous Jew. May God be merciful to him.

On the following morning, the roll call was taken once more and as it had to be, Berliner did not answer it. For the last time Pozyski went to Frenzel and told him the "Kapo" – Commander was still in bed. With a hard face, the German officer replied – "Is that so? All right. Get this piece of shit and take him to Camp 3" Not wasting a second, two of our men left the shed and went straight to the place where the corpse was. They wrapped him in a blanket and carried him away. A new "Kapo" – Commander(Oberkapo) was immediately appointed. He was a Dutch Jew.

We had thus had our first victory, since our daring mission had been successful. However, there was still a lot to be done before our aim was actually reached. Days went by very quickly in that disturbed month of October and we went on with the planning of the last details of our great uprising. Each one of us tried to form his own small group, united and highly trustworthy. The carpenters and the shoemakers closed ranks around their foreman. As to myself, I grouped together all the elements I could trust in the intricate machine shop I headed. I tried to organise a monolithic block and at the same time avoid the danger of being denounced, due to the presence of Jews of several different origins.

The most important thing was to trust our luck and keep total silence and perfect emotional control. We should all go on pretending we were calm and that we knew nothing about what was going on. Many Jews were traitors and the Nazis were very sharp. Some of the officers were able to smell anything in the air. Maybe some Ukrainians were able to perceive some kind of abnormality and tattle. We had to be most careful and none of the conspirators could incur in any kind of mistake in relation to what then meant our whole conception of life.

We had settled the date for the insurrection – it was going to be October 13 and, in spite of the dizzy speed in which this day was coming. I had not said a word to my brother yet. I was afraid that he would, against his will, somehow indicate what was going to happen, by being unusually nervous. Among the men who worked under me in the machine shop I could only unconditionally trust three of them, my brother, the French Jew Leon and the very skilled Abraham, the same one who had made the bicycles for the officer's children.

There was still my cousin Nojeh who still worked as a Platzmeister, near Camp 2, on his task of checking the bottom of all containers and looking for hidden gold. However, he still spent the night with us in Camp 1 and he knew nothing of our plan. My nephew did not know anything either. He worked in the officers yard as a cleaning man, but he slept in our camp. One night, when Nojeh came back from work, I decided to tell him all that had already happened, as well what was going to happen. I told him what his task was going to be and asked him to fill four little sacks with gold and other valuable things. I told him that when the time came we would carry the bags with us.

If we were successful in our daring venture and were able to escape, the gold would be enormously useful to us. At the same time, I told my brother and my nephew about everything that had happened so far. To my complete surprise, Nojeh did not show any signs of hesitation, since he already expected those things to happen, on the contrary he was very pleased at the idea and he only regretted not to have learned about it sooner. He promptly pledged his solidarity to our cause and even went further, saying that he had been hiding a Dutch knife for a long time, for an emergency like that.

As a matter of fact, many Jews kept with them automatic Flemish knives which had been surreptitiously taken from the transports which arrived from Holland. These weapons were the ones used to kill both a Nazi and a Ukrainian in the memorable escape of the Wald-Kommando.

By then Nojech had radically changed. He was no longer the same man with whom I had had such a harsh dialogue, more than a year before. At that time, he could only think of the Bible, and despised all violence. He thought we should only trust in God and that weapons were unnecessary. He still prayed, there could be no doubt about that. However, his spirit had matured and he had kept a knife for any unexpected circumstances. He now knew perfectly well that the teachings of Moses would not kill the Nazis, nor to lead him to freedom. He looked like a new, modern Samson, who did not possess the jaw of a donkey, but who could handle a Dutch knife.

Suddenly he said to me – “You were right about a lot of things”. Soon after he said that, should he survive, he would not stay in Poland for a single day. He would go to Palestine, where three of his brothers lived, as fast as he could. He added that all the Jews, from any country, should go to a place where they would be able to fight, work and finally form their own country. No one then would ever be able to say that the Jews were displaced people and there would never be another Sobibor to annihilate them. Nojech was really another man. He was still very religious , but he now thought that, besides praying, everyone should also fight. He attached great importance to religion and said that, thanks to it, we, the Jews, still existed in the world and had not been disintegrated.

After I had talked to my relatives I cautiously started to steal and hide some of the axes that were sent to our shop to be sharpened. I was doubtlessly happy with the turn of events and my small group was starting to plan the last details. I was absolutely sure that I could count on my companions under any circumstances. Leon the French Jew, was a mature and experienced man, even though he was quiet and a little bit stern. I trusted him blindly since he knew how to deal with firearms and had all his experience of the Spanish Revolution behind him.

Abraham was a very determined young man, equally worthy of my entire trust. Besides , he was a Polish Jew like me, and he had been waiting for a long time for an opportunity like that to take revenge for the death of his loved ones. He had been with us from the very beginning. As to my brother Mojsze, though he was a little younger than I, he was taller and more athletic. Without doubt I could count on him, as suffering had made him cold and willing. I was even surprised at the passiveness with which he received the news about the uprising.

My group thus formed, we decided to carry out our plan of action to the end, keeping in close contact with the other rebels all the time. It was decided that , if need be, we would come to the point of neutralising our own workmates, specially the German, Dutch and Austrian Jews.

These could, at the last and most decisive hour, hinder us and thus endanger the success of our rebellion. By then, all of us had our own switch blade Dutch knives and in the shop we had enough material we could use as weapons.

We also had some axes which had been hidden for that end. As to the other shops which also existed in

Camp 1, only Polish Jews worked there, and there was no difficulty in their adhering to our plan. They were tough, resolute men and very close to one another. Long months of suffering side by side had instilled into them so much hatred that only they could be able to distill.

Luck also was on our side, since in the last days no transports had come to Sobibor. It was October 12th, the day before our desperate, insane attempt. Desperate because, we had very little hope of surviving and being free. Insane because, should we fail, we could at least take revenge and kill as many as we could of those despicable Nazi assassins and their no less abject servants, the Ukrainians.

We would try to do everything in our power or above it to teach those who had humiliated and killed millions of Jews, an unforgettable lesson. We would perform superhuman deeds to show them we were also men, and not dirty, lazy human rags, as they used to call us.

They would then see that we were not so peaceful and submissive as they thought we were and that, given the right day and hour, we would not be lacking in courage and boldness, enough to prove them that we also knew how to fight, to kill and die for our parents, and brothers.

That same night we held our last meeting to add the finishing touch to the last important details. Only the leaders of the rebellion took part in it. Each one of us already had his task planned in detail and we would soon impart the last instructions to the other members of the rebellious groups. Notwithstanding, we still had a capital point to settle – which weapons could we count on?

Our initial plan had consisted in obtaining firearms, only after we had killed some Germans. At present, we only had knives, axes, bludgeons and some tools which could be used as weapons. Our precarious armament did not seem to be enough to face the machine guns and the rifles the bandits were going to use against us, and we were very sorry in such inequality.

Meanwhile, all over the camp, an atmosphere of suspense loomed and it seemed as if something was in the air, not only for those who knew everything but also for those who did not. It was like the calm, which preceded a tempest. Suddenly I had an idea and promptly told the others about it. I would get the weapons.

As soon as I had finished telling the leaders of the rebellion about my daring decision, which had been made at a moment when I was filled with intense enthusiasm about the course that our imminent rebellion was following.

I started to think very coldly about what I had promised to do. I had not measured my words before and now I had to face my own boldness. I could hardly believe what I had said and now everything seemed to me a sad mistake. I had had a glimpse of how I could get the weapons but now I already found it impossible to actually get them.

Even so, I did not waive in my decision and warned them that, next day, at the time set, they should wait for me in the kitchen of our shed. I also explained my project to them and remarked that, at the right time, only the men who know how to use firearms should come to me, since I myself could not handle them. Once our

meeting ended we shook hands and left , each one wishing the other luck and hoping that some of them would survive to tell the truth about Sobibor.

I went back to my quarters and there I met my three relatives Nojeh, Mojsze, and Jankus, with their little bags of gold already prepared. We hid them in the shop and then I told them they should wait for me at lunchtime, when I would tell them the last details so that we all could be together at zero hour.

The other members of my group and I started preparing for the day of decision, since all were now familiar with the plan. Through the shoemakers who worked for the Ukrainians I had been able to get some days before, a pair of boots. We had also been able to get hold of clothes more suited to what we intended to do, through the people who worked in the store-houses in Camp 2. Thus, if we escaped, we would be better dressed and we would not call so much attention.

My whole group being already thoroughly drilled about the task that each one would have to perform, we decided we should try to avoid any contact with Josef, the barber who used to play the violin for the officers. We suspected he would be able to betray us. The insurrection had already been planned. Among us the large majority was made up of Polish and Russian Jews. There were also some elements from other countries but they deserved our confidence. Those whom we did not trust had been left out, from the beginning. The twelfth day of October passed in an atmosphere of deep expectation, and at nightfall, everything was running smoothly.

I soon put the axes in the places we had previously decided on, and I succeeded in doing that without any problem. My team-mates took care of their duties in respect to the rebellion.

After it got dark, we all went to bed, but none of us were able to sleep, even though everything was going according to plan, with all the risks carefully reckoned with. October 13th 1943 dawned, the day of our great decision.

As usual, the morning call was made and we soon headed for our workshops, since our rebellion would only take place in the afternoon. However, we could not have guessed what surprise was in store for us. At about nine o'clock in the morning some vehicles filled with SS troops came to Sobibor.

The rebels immediately contacted each other and the leaders issued orders to postpone the rebellion for that day. All had been synchronised to perfection and the determination was promptly obeyed, and the final steps for the coup was suspended. If there had not been for the perfect cohesion existing among the members of the rebellion, the arrival of the assault troops could have destroyed our superbly articulated movement.

We soon learned that those soldiers had come to pay a visit to Sobibor. They were coming from the Labour Camp in Osowa, located near the village by the same name, and which was about twelve kilometres away from ours. Their arrival obviously brought us some disappointment and various little details had to be postponed or even altered.

Mundek, the tailor and Szol, the shoemaker, were the two who had to face more trouble. Both had to delude some German officers who had said they would go there to try on their new shoes and clothes. These visits had been set for a time when our rebellion would have started. Fortunately our two companions could get out of trouble and the German officers said they would try on the clothes the following day.

There were no doubt that the bases of our structure were very solid. All the hindrances had been overcome and only the final hour had been postponed. After the first minutes of shock, we recovered our calm and the courage which was necessary to carry out our plans. All the conspirators were in close contact and their strength was jointly directed to our common object.

In the evening we met again for a debate about the causes and effects of the sudden arrival of the SS troops. Several opinions were given and the most plausible of them prevailed. We supposed that the coming of those undesirable elements had something to do with the possible extinction of Sobibor.

Some time before the "Politruk" had been told by the Ukrainian guard he had been talking to that the Germans were thinking of closing the camp before October 15th, and that had been the reason for us to decide to escape on the day before that day. Due to that, even if everything were just rumours, we decided that our dramatic operation would be carried out on the following day, the eve of the probable disaster.

Once the meeting was ended I met my brother, my nephew and my cousin Nojeh again. This was probably our farewell, since there was no hope of our escaping from Sobibor. The flight would be a miraculous consequence of our revolt, because the most important reason was to avenge our massacred families and to kill the largest number of German and Ukrainian criminals as possible.

Then I told the other three that they were to meet me, as usual, at lunchtime. Once this was done I called Nojeh for a private talk and we left the others. Next I whispered to him that next day I was going to perform a very dangerous task. I asked him then that, should I fail and not come back, he should try to be beside Mojsze and Jankus all the time and specially when the last hour came.

I had not told the other two about the mission because I did not want to frighten them. However, to Nojeh I revealed the whole of it, down to the minute detail. After he had heard it all very attentively he told me I was going to do something absolutely crazy but that, under the circumstances, and as all of us would probably die anyway, he would have done the same.

It was already late at night and the lights would be put out in a minute. A generalised excitement loomed over those who could not accept the tyranny of the Nazis.

Many of those who did not know anything about it, tried to smell something in the air. Soon only vague rumours would break the darkness of the last night in Sobibor .

In a few hours we would attack the powerful German cohorts with our makeshift troops , so badly equipped,

but who had the intrepid leadership of Sasha Pechersky, the "Politruk", and with the precious help of Lajbu , the son of a rabbi, to both of whom I dedicate this chapter.

10. Now or Never

The present chapter is dedicated to all the brave Jews who took part in the uprising, be they dead or alive, mentioned or not in this book, and who gave their blood to avenge the millions of human beings murdered by the Nazis.

October 14th 1943 was dawning. It was a day like any other day. We got up at our usual hour and all went to the yard, so that the general call could be made. Right afterwards we headed for our habitual work. We were surrounded by an atmosphere of optimism, since the day of the great decision had finally arrived. Soon some excellent news was brought to us – the vehicles that had come the day before had already left, carrying the SS troops which had come from Osowa, for a visit to Sobibor.

Everything was quiet in the camp, in our part as well as in the Nazis' , who did not show any sign of suspicion. We, the leaders of the rebellion, were quite naturally under emotional strain, even if we did not show it and tried to present a coldness which was not in keeping with the drama which we were expecting. It is true, however, that our hopes of escaping were very small, but we were absolutely sure that we would kill a lot of Germans.

At midday we stopped for lunch. We used these few moments to get together for the last time and make sure that all of us had his group ready to perform their individual tasks. Our countenances were somewhat heavy, but none of us showed any restlessness. Next, I joined my brother, my nephew and Nojeh to settle the last details. We decided that each one of us would take his bag of gold now and keep it with himself, since the revolt would start in the afternoon, after work.

I then told Mojsze and Jankus what my mission would be, since Nojeh already knew all about it. My brother received the news in absolute tranquillity, but Jankus, the youngest and most sensitive of the group, could not hold back his tears and was deeply moved.

We succeeded in calming him with some difficulty and induced him into concentrating on his task, so as not to let his emotions betray him. His sensitivity made him fear my loss, because he considered me indispensable as the head of the family and he thought I was going on a suicidal mission. I told him that, if I were not successful in my intent they should always try to be united to the end, the three of them.

Anyway, the place of our meeting would still be the kitchen. We said our last good-byes, because there could be a general failure and we might never see each other again, since no one expected to escape with his life the unequal fight.

We had been in Sobibor more than seventeen months and that had been a miracle in itself. Now our only thought – to avenge the nearly two million Jews whom we had seen die during this period of time.

After the roll-call, which would be the last ones for us, we went back to work. At about 3:30 in the afternoon, smartly riding his beautiful horse, the acting Commander in Chief Niemann came to the tailor shop to try on his new uniform with Mundek the tailor. The officer was an enthusiast of horseback riding and he used to ride through the diverse areas of the camp. He reined his horse in front of the shed and a Jewish boy immediately ran to hold the animal's bridle, while the imposing henchman dismounted.

Niemann entered the tailor shop and Mundek promptly the jacket for him to try on. While he was putting it on the Commander, he tried to divert his attention, by turning his back to the mirror. The German had let the tailor do with him as he pleased as he did not suspect the trap which had been set for him. Meanwhile, the Oberscharfuhrer Graetschuss with his impudent face and his grotesque gait, headed for the shoemakers shop to fetch a pair of boots he had ordered. This officer was the Commander –in – Chief of the Ukrainian guards and his activities extended over the whole group.

The German entered the shack and was promptly asked to sit on a bench, while Szol, the shoemaker went for the boots. In the same way that things had happened in the tailors shop with Niemann, the Nazi had just been lured into a trap, without suspecting anything.

While these events were taking place in Camp 1 and we were sending minute reports about them to our elements in Camp 2, the latter answered by sending us some heartening news. They had already stabbed to death three terrible German officers : Vallaster, Nowak, and Beckmann.

In that place, the plan was being followed to the letter and everything was going well. In the tailor's shop, while Mundek tried the uniform on Niemann, well hidden in one of the rooms was a brave Russian youth who was one of the fifty Jews taken from the transport which had come from the Soviet Union, in which the "Politruck" had also come. The boy held a sharp axe in his hand and was only waiting for the right moment.

At the same time that the tailor pretended to be fixing the collar of the jacket, he also turned the officer in the ideal position for the blow to be struck. When the moment came, the youth left his refuge, tiptoed towards the German and split his head with his axe. The Commander of Sobibor was out of the fight, the first to die.

Minutes later, at the shoemakers, the Nazi Graetschuss was sitting, calmly waiting for Szol to bring him his boots. He, too, did not know that inside the shed there was someone in hiding, holding an axe. Instead of getting his boots, what the henchman got was a violent blow with that weapon. But the man did not die right away and desperately tried to shout, but this was prevented, by Szol's quick action and the rest of his group.

While the chief shoemaker covered the German's mouth with his own hands, the others fell on him and finished the killing with axes and knives.

The body was immediately hidden in one of the rooms inside the shed and the front room was cleaned of any traces of what had happened. After the second German had been eliminated we sent the message to

Camp 2 and in answer they told us what was happening there. In the two fields a total of five officers had already been wiped off the map.

Meanwhile, at the tailor's, as soon as he had killed Niemann, Lerner had taken possession of his gun, a magnificent "Walter" pistol duly loaded. Outside the shop, the boy who had been holding the horse's bridle and who had been drilled beforehand, had left the place taking the horse with him, to the stables, so as not to rouse suspicions. Armed with his pistol, Lerner had also left the place where he had just played his important role.

Before all these blows had been struck, simultaneously and deadly, on the German officers, I had been told to go to the tailor's shop as soon as the Commander of Sobibor had been eliminated. As soon as I heard about it, I hurried there and saw an impressive scene. The hat-maker who also worked there had been taken by a severe nervous fit and was in hysterics. He had taken some large scissors found in the shop, and using one blade as a dagger had hurled himself on Niemann's body.

In a rage, he started to stab him with all his power, while he called, at each blow he struck, the names of his wife and children who had been exterminated at Sobibor. Taken by actual lunacy, his clothes literally covered with blood, the latter would have cut the body of the Untersturmführer to pieces, if it had not been for our prompt intervention. We pulled him away forcefully from the ex-commander's body and tied him up as to be able to finally restrain him. Then he was kept in the next room until he was able to recover his balance.

As to Niemann's body, it was hidden under one of the bunks they had there and we soon started to cover up the traces left on the stage of such a violent scene. We put some bundles of cloth on the ground, so as to not call the attention of anyone who might accidentally come in.

As a matter of fact we came to a peremptory decision – after the death of the first bandit, any other Scharführer or Ukrainian who entered the workshops in Camp 1 or even any other room would be summarily eliminated. The moment the Leader of the Camp had been killed we had immediately informed all the rebellious groups and there could no longer be any retreat now. Whether we wanted it or not the uprising was now irreversible. The plan had to go on, whatever the end might be.

In the meantime everything was quiet in Sobibor. Only thirty minutes were missing before the whistle to end the day's work was blown and the moment when I had to play my role had finally come. I started it right away.

To perform my task and mislead the attention of the guards I went to my shop and picked up some tools and a thick tin pipe, one of those used in the chimneys of the stoves which heated the lodgings of the Ukrainian Guards and which I was responsible for maintaining.

Next I went to the Ukrainian's shack under the pretext I had to fix something there. I climbed onto the roof and started to do something with the chimney pretending I was fixing it. I stayed there for a few minutes so as to make it very clear that there were no second intentions on my part.

Soon afterwards I climbed down, this time to fix the stove, since I needed a reason to be inside the place should any guard come in and ask me what I was doing.

I soon faced two Jewish boys who worked there and made sure there was no one else inside, luck still smiled on me. These two boys were responsible for cleaning the quarters and they also ran some other errands for the Ukrainians. They were even younger than my nephew. Inside the shed, which was rather ample, there was a partition which was destined for the higher ranking guards in the abominable corporation. I started to observe the place, while the two youths stared at me, and they were very surprised when I headed for the place where the weapons were kept.

I threw a greedy glance at the machine guns right there, within reach of my hands. These weapons were only used by the sergeants and the higher ranking elements. I finally controlled my impulses, because I and possibly the others did not know how to use them and they would not fit in the metal pipe I carried. Besides everything else, I did not know whether they were loaded or not, since I did not know anything about that kind of armament. I then turned my eyes to the rifles and soon noticed that they were accompanied by their own cartridge belts, and a lot of ammunition.

However, I was not in a hurry to get hold of them right away, since I had to wait for the exact moment when people would come back from work. I did not think I was running serious risk at the time, since the main Nazi leaders who could give off the alarm were already out of the fight.

We had agreed before that I would only go out with the weapons when the work in the shops had finished and all were heading back to quarters.

I waited for some more minutes and then I heard the characteristic German song that the Jews were forced to sing when they came back from their daily tasks. That was the moment for me to act.

The initial plan had determined that three rifles should be taken away and placed inside the long thick pipe I had taken with me to hide them. Thus I would be able to take them back to Camp 1, without raising any suspicion. Something unexpected happened, though. No rifle would fit inside the pipe, since the head of the bolt did not let it go inside and I did not know how to remove it.

For this reason, as soon as I heard the song, I wrapped the rifles in a blanket and asked the astonished boys to hand the bundle to me through the window, since I intended to go out and get it from the outside.

However, they were terribly frightened and they refused to do what I told them to. The moment was not one for arguments and I had no other choice but to threaten to kill them by unsheathing my knife.

With the gleam of the blade before their very eyes, the poor creatures, who did not understand anything, decided to obey me. I went out of the shed with my empty pipe in my hand and the pockets full of cartridges. I went quickly round the house and stopped before the window where I got my bundle with the weapons.

I then walked to my destination hardly able to carry all my awkward load, since the pipe was still in my hand. Luck was still on my side. I had crossed the officers yard and I was already heading for the kitchen in Camp 1, yet I had not met a single guard.

When I got there, there was a group waiting for me, made up of my three relatives, and the young Russian Jews who were going to use the weapons. At the same time, the large mass of workers was returning from work singing and getting nearer and nearer to the kitchen. My mission had been thoroughly successful and we were in possession of three precious rifles and plenty of ammunition.

As soon as they saw the weapons, the Russians claimed them as it had been decided before. However, I changed my mind and told them that, as I was the one who had gotten them, I would have to have one.

They insisted again, alleging that I did not know how to use a rifle. I was adamant and my point of view finally prevailed. The truth is that I had become so enthusiastic about the weapon that I went back on my former decision.

I handed them the rest of the weapons and also plenty of ammunition, but I kept some for myself. Once this impasse had been solved, I asked them to teach me how to use the gun, as I still did not know most of the essential facts about how to handle it. Thus I felt able to use it.

Still in the kitchen, now alone with my relatives, I told them that we should try to be together at our last moment.

When the multitude of Jews came to the yard, the great majority went into formation for the roll call. Those were the ones who knew nothing about the rebellion. However, those who did only pretended to align, since they expected the mutiny to start within the next few minutes.

Ten minutes were still missing for the counting when Kapo Pozycki started to trill his whistle like mad, thus causing some tumult in the camp. He was one of us. After he had heard the first unexpected whistles, the new Kapo- Commander, the Dutch Jew who had replaced Berliner, went immediately to Pozycki shouting that it was not yet time for the call and harshly scolding him for what had been done.

But the interference of the Dutch Jew was not worth anything. That desperate whistling was the signal we had agreed on to start the general onrush, and the beginning of the great uprising. It was the beginning of the end.

When we saw the Chief Kapo rush at him, the brave Pozycki drew out his knife to receive him properly. I never learned what happened between the two of them because, at that moment, the diverse rebellious groups, who had stayed in the workshops on purpose, started to appear from all sides, armed with axes, bludgeons and knives.

Meanwhile, all those who had firearms, taken from the Nazis who had been killed, started to shoot upwards, thus making the havoc even worse and leading the mob, who ran in all directions, to gather in only one block. Then with Nojeh Mojsze, and Jankus by my side I ran very fast to join the giant reckless mass. There were about five or six hundred Jews, men and women, shouting and running like madmen. Ahead of them all, the Russians were shouting – “For Stalin”.

Many were firing shots upwards right and left, and shouting hurrahs. Others brandished axes, bludgeons and an infinity of instruments which could serve as weapons. All those who did not know about the rebellion joined us and the turmoil was such that it became impossible to know if anyone stood still. There are no words to describe the fantastic reality of that human avalanche which came close to being unimaginable.

The brutish amalgam of maddened people started to move then towards the exit of Camp 1. In the meantime, a smaller group, maybe thinking they were smarter than the others, left the main group and hurled themselves against the fences where there was also the ditches and the mines, since they thought they could cross them. From this unwise group we do not know whether they escaped because, in a few minutes, the bursts of the explosives started to be heard, thus increasing the general disorder and serving to alert the guards in the towers.

The latter had already noticed that something strange was happening since they heard the first shots and the clamour. However, they had been perplexed and disoriented, and were late in reacting. Only with the explosion of the mines, did they start to shoot at the crowd. All the safety system of the camp had been taken by surprise and it seemed as if not even the machine-gun towers were manned at the moment.

Meanwhile, the majority of the crowd ran straight towards the gate which led into the officer's yard and to the Ukrainian Guards. The gate was usually open. At that moment, pedalling his cycle like mad, a guard was entering Camp 1.

He probably did not know anything, and he had not noticed the human mass which ran at him, inexorably.

When he became aware of what was happening, it was already too late. He died instantly, trodden by the crowd, torn to pieces by the hundreds of feet of that indomitable roll. The maddened crowd now entered the officer's yard, right into the sector where most of their quarters were located. Near one of the buildings there were two of the criminals. By their uniforms we could see they were a Ukrainian officer and a guard.

We saw the Nazi gesture as if he were commanding the guard to do something. When they noticed the crowd, they tried to run away, but too late. The compact multitude attacked them and they were torn to pieces.

While this took place in the sector I was in, on the opposite side of the human flood, other officers and Ukrainians had come to the same end, all of them trampled and torn to pieces, crushed under the weight of tons of Jews who turned into dust everything which came their way.

The uncontrollable avalanche now headed straight to the three parallel fences near the main exit of Sobibor. The first two crumpled as if they were made of paper. The third one which meant freedom, also fell under the impact of the solid mass which came against it.

By then all along the broken fences in that sector, the ground was covered with bodies. The vanguard of the multitude of the multitude had been pushed by its own rear lines and all those who suffered the first impact were torn into shreds by the barbed wire.

Even if they had not wanted to throw themselves against the wire fences, and had wanted to stop they could not have helped to be pushed, always forward, by the disorderly mob, which only thought of freedom.

These were the ones who blazed the way for the rest and paid very dearly for their position in the vanguard. Stepping over dozens of corpses, the rest of the mob continued to move forward and suddenly the mines started to explode.

This area did not have any ditches, but it was heavily mined, up to the main gate. Among the boom of the explosions and a sea of fragmented bodies, the maddened mass continued ahead heedless of anything else.

Once more, the dozens of Jews who were running in front opened the way for those who came behind, at the cost of their own lives. Nothing would be able to restrain that mob in its furious mad racing.

At that time, I had not crossed the fences yet and I had lost contact with Nojeh, Moisze, and Jankus. I tried to stop for a while to avoid being forced into the forward lines. I intended to stay on the back lines since no reaction was coming from the Germans. Only the nearest towers fired some shots against the fleeing multitude.

It was then that I aimed my rifle at one of the towers and fired four shots, nearly at random. I later learned that one of these stray bullets had killed one of the guards. I did not try to reload the rifle, since I did not know how to do it correctly and also because I suddenly found myself nearly alone. I started running towards the crowd which was already quite ahead of me. Then I crossed the broken fences and stepped over the dozens of bodies of the victims of the barbed wire and the mines. Running like mad, I soon caught up with the others. All of us kept running for the woods, as we had never done before.

The expected reaction from the Nazis never came. They thought they were brave and the owners of the world, however, they were terrified at the impetus of the badly armed Jewish legions.

When they realised their leaders had been killed, they were afraid of having the same fate and hid behind their own inertia. They understood then that we were no longer submissive puppets they manipulated at their will. We were no longer the same as we had been in Sobibor and the only thing that mattered to us now was our thirst for revenge and freedom. Lots of machine-guns nested in the high towers never fired a single shot.

The defection of Germans and Ukrainians had been great and very few still dared to man their posts and try to put an end to the uprising. To get to the thickest part of the woods we had to cross a wide clearing the Germans had opened so as to avoid the woods getting too close to the camp.

All over the area the trees had been felled. I ran on thinking of my relatives I had lost sight of amidst the havoc of the hour of flight. I did not have the slightest idea whether they had succeeded in escaping or had died in the camp. From that moment on I began to hear shots coming from all directions.

The Nazis were recovering from their initial shock and were hunting us. In mad racing, we finally got into the thickest part of the forest. We had no sure destination, each one trying to follow the next, as we thought someone knew where he was going. However, we still had a common aim – to get as far as possible from Sobibor.

The deeper we got into the forest, the darker it became, because night was falling. For about two hours we ran madly, without pause or destination. It was already night when those who ran in the front lines came to a clearing and there they stopped.

Gradually men started to appear from every corner and gather there, until a group of about one hundred people had come together. All were deadly tired.

Sporadically, another person would come and join the group. Those were the ones who had separated from the main group and had gotten lost in the woods. Lots of them were lucky enough to find us. Others stayed in the woods, wandering about, at the mercy of their own fate.

In the block thus united, there were eight Russian Jews, among them the "Politruk", armed with a pistol. Another Russian had one of the rifles, I had picked up before the mutiny. The other Soviet Jews were also armed with pistols taken from the Scharfuhrers, who had been killed in the camp. We tried to rest for a while, also because that would allow others, still lost in the woods, to find us. During that pause we started to think of what we were going to do next and where should we go with all these people. No one made any reasonable suggestions which the others could accept, since our intense emotion had undermined our reasoning.

German shots were still heard in Sobibor. Our only hope lay in our leader Sasha, an experienced man whom we could trust. Escaping only was not enough, we had to think what to do now. We were all rather restless because while we were running into the woods, we had heard incessant shooting come from the camp. It was the Nazis who were trying to take some kind of reprisal, even though it was too late for that.

We knew very well that during the night they would not follow us into the woods. However, they would certainly surround us next morning.

After our short period of rest a group of Russian Jews was formed. They were the ones who were better armed and who tried to lead the mob. We immediately gathered around them and, at that moment I felt I was important too. I still had my rifle and I claimed the right to be one of the leaders. I went up to the group commanders and stayed there as if I were representing all the Polish Jews.

Then I was surprised by the attitude of one of the Russians who asked me for my gun and said it was because I did not know how to use it.

I promptly reacted against his insolence and answered that I would only part from my gun, if it were taken away from me by force, otherwise I would not surrender it to anyone.

Next I started reloading the weapon, as I still had about twenty bullets and was already familiar with it. The rifle was like a treasure to me and it was an integral part of my own life. I even felt because of it, superior to my companions, my countrymen, in our numerous group.

Soon after the disturbed meeting in the forest, we decided we would try to cross the Bug River and, by always going eastward, reach the front lines where the German and Soviet armies were fighting.

We came to the conclusion, however, that we needed more weapons and food. It was decided that we would collect everything the escapees could hand over. After we collected the necessary funds, one armed group would try to find the nearest village where everything we needed could be bought.

In one minute we collected the necessary amount and a hat was filled with money and other valuable things. The whole group started to look for a village.

We went on walking slowly through the forest and we finally saw the far lights of what looked like a village to us. We stopped and conferred about how we should send the group to do the shopping. After some debate, of which the Russians were the leaders, it was decided that, as they were the best armed, they would be in charge of doing it and as I also had a rifle I would go with them.

Then there came from the Polish Jews a general protest. They would be left alone, unarmed and defenceless. My friend Abraham also insisted with me to stay with them, by telling me I could never abandon my own countrymen.

Someone with a gun should stay, and as I was the only man to have one I finally agreed. However, I argued that I would not be much use to them, since a single rifle would not be able to protect about a hundred people. As a matter of fact, I became the leader of the whole block who stayed behind in the forest, waiting for the Russians to come back.

They had left, in the meantime, with the donated funds and carrying all their weapons. We then started talking about the bloody events which had taken place a few hours before. I then learned that my cousin Nojeh as well as my nephew Jankus had died against the barbed wire fences. My brother Moisze had escaped with his Jewish sweetheart, but no one knew where they were.

Only later did I learn that, after he had been free for one month, he had been killed, by Polish reactionaries

belonging to the extreme right, and who did not like Jews. The infamous event happened in the town of Lubartow, near Lublin, and it came to prove once more what bandits the Poles were.

Moisze had survived over seventeen months of slavery in the hands of the Germans and had regained freedom, only to die at the hands of sordid individuals who had also been born in Poland, and who also fought for freedom.

In the whole group I could only meet two of my closest friends – Abraham and Leon, the Frenchmen. From that day on we never parted again. Our numerous group decided to lie down near the fringe of the woods, thus avoid being easily seen, while we waited for the Russians to return.

Dawn was coming when we heard intense fusillade coming from the village, about two kilometres away from us. We were all extremely excited about how it would end about what might have happened to the young Russians who had gone there.

However, our wait was useless since we never heard of them again. I only know some of them are still alive but to this day, I do not know what happened on that mysterious dawn.

While we were still waiting, we made lots of conjectures. Some soon thought the Soviets had been killed. Others thought that the shooting indicated the Nazi reprisal to what we had done in Sobibor. Some others thought the village must be full of Germans. As no one ever came to tell us what actually happened, we had to give up our project of crossing the Bug River since without the Russians, we would never be able to carry out the plan.

When we came to the sad conclusion that none of them would ever be back, I called everyone's attention to the fact that we should not stay in that place, since daybreak was upon us. We should take advantage of the last hours of darkness to leave, since the Germans might well be hunting in the neighbourhood. I suggested we should leave the woods in smaller groups, since it would be impossible for us to stay all together without running any risks.

Great commotion led to a shower of protest which disturbed the cordial atmosphere we had kept up to then. All wanted to stay with me because I had a rifle. No one was willing to enter the unknown forest without being properly protected, and without any definite destination.

I did not agree to that and nervously started to pace to and fro, going to each one of the hundred Jews and urging them to separate into groups, and go wherever they wanted.

I told them that our former plan of crossing the Bug River could not be carried out any longer since none of us knew where we were and we lost our Russian guides and our leader "Politruk".

My suggestions once accepted, a new problem rose. This time everyone wanted to choose his companions and many did not agree to the company, which was given to them. Precious time was being wasted. In the meanwhile, I kept on affirming that, whether they wanted it or not, our only chance of survival lay in the immediate organisation and departure of several groups. A large bunch of people would call too much attention and would become easy prey for the Germans whereas, separated many of us would still be able to escape to tell the world what had happened in Sobibor.

Besides, none of us knew where we were nor where to go. Separated each one would be able to make up his own decision. At long last, after a lot of effort and good will had been practiced, the small groups were formed. I chose Abraham and Leon, the Frenchman, to go with me.

Both were my close friends and ex-companions in the machine shop in the camp. Jankel and Mundek's brother Majer, the tailors, also joined our group. There were also other men who had worked in the storehouses in Camp 2 and with whom I had very little contact. Among them, the most remarkable were two extremely religious carpenters. Incorporated in the group they later came to bring us a lot of serious problems, and they actually hindered us in many ways. The group was composed of sixteen Jews.

Once this group had been formed, each went its own way, and dispersed in the forest. As we were near the fringe of the forest, I led my men back into the woods and we wandered around until the break of day, then we stopped. To our surprise we were near a road and we decided to hide while one of us would reconnoitre the area. This was the best thing we could have done since, soon afterwards, we heard the sound of motors and immediately had to hide behind some thicker bushes to wait for the day to pass.

Next we watched the parade of a real show of Nazi military ostentation – trucks, soldiers, shouts, orders and shots. Many Nazis were searching a large area in the forest and were constantly firing their weapons.

We never knew whether the shots were being aimed at other escapees or if they were being fired just to frighten the Jews who could still be hiding there. While all this was going on we lay on the ground, totally motionless. We were as white as wax and our fright was such that we did not utter a sound until it got dark. No one ate or drank anything, or even rose to do anything. The Germans went by just a few meters from us and they did not seem to be interested in really searching the place. We were near to the road that they could never have supposed we could be hiding under their very noses. When evening fell, the shouts and shots became less frequent and the Germans prepared to leave the region and put an end to the man-hunt after the Jews, at least for that day. Then we resumed our walk towards the unknown. Our only thought was to get farther and farther away from Sobibor, no matter what course we had to follow.

Late at night, we came to a humble solitary hut. As we were all suspicious, we decided to be very careful and avoid another unpleasant surprise. We surrounded the hut and I cocked my rifle, while the others got near the door, armed with their knives and with some lanterns they had gotten hold of before escaping.

Suddenly we thrust ourselves inside the hut and by the first light of our lanterns found it empty. However, we went through all of it carefully and we found an old man in one of the other rooms. Frightened at our unexpected visit the old man begged us not to kill him. We soon soothed him though, by telling him we only wanted something to eat and that we did not intend to hurt him, since we were guerrillas. The old man told us

he did not have anything to give us but a few pieces of stale bread he had been given. We immediately hurled ourselves on the poor food, since we had not eaten anything since we had left the camp, and we gulped it down in the wink of an eye.

However, the old man made no complaint, since we left him a gold coin when we went away. As we had to gain time and use the night for walking, we soon left. Some hours later we entered a swamp. We tried to go around it but the swamp seemed too wide and we decided to face it.

With that our suffering got even worse. Tired and hungry, thirsty and without a proper destination, we had fallen into a real trap. We could only see mud before us. The only comfort we had for our sacrifice was that freedom urged us to bear it and push ahead. At night we walked and in the daytime we slept, well hidden in some dry spot. It seemed as if the crossing of the swamp would never end and that the obstacles we would still have to surpass would always be harder. Besides the mud, the tall grass hindered our progress. We kept falling and rising only to fall again. The one who was hurt the hardest by all that was Leon, whose leg still carried a bullet he had gotten at the time of the Spanish Civil War and, the air being very wet, hurt him painfully.

As to myself, I suffered with the new boots I had made before the flight. After they had gotten wet, they had tightened and finally made my feet sore. Each step I took was pure torture and as I could not stand the pain, I had to cut a hole in the boots to make walking easier. As a matter of fact, the only things which were left of them were the soles and the tops. In the holes I tucked some cloth torn off my own clothes. Thus by fits and starts we walked for five whole days without food and not knowing where we were going.

We finally finished crossing the cursed marsh. We were happy at that and we were firmly convinced that luck was on our side. We entered some woods and crossed them without difficulty. Soon afterwards, we were surprised by coming to an area on the fringe of the forest, whose trees seemed to have been felled, thus presenting a very familiar panorama. Something unbelievable had just happened.

We were back in Sobibor.

11. Freedom at Last

All of us immediately threw ourselves down to the ground, I opened and closed my eyes many times to make sure that what I saw was real. Perhaps the scenery before our eyes were nothing but a mirage.

It had been a week since we had been crossing forests and swamps, wandering about, but with the firm hope that we were going farther and farther away from Sobibor. Over all that long period we had been hardly able to sleep and we had not eaten a thing. Only a few leaves, which looked edible had served us as food. We were right in the middle of the rainy season and heavy cold showers had been constantly falling, soaking our clothes and not letting us sleep. However, those things had not bothered us, since there was something infinitely greater on which our whole attention was focused to get as distant from that place as we possibly

could and in the fastest way.

When those thoughts stopped floating in my astonished mind I opened my eyes again. Then, from among the bushes which surrounded my head close to the ground, I dared to face the tragic view again. It was really Sobibor and there could be no doubt about that and there was its main gate.

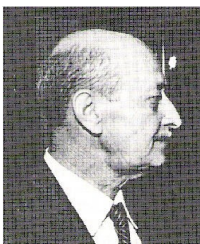
We were so frightened that, not wanting to look at that hideous spectre, we immediately started crawling in the opposite direction, and there we lay. Then we started to think.

As we had no way to orient ourselves we had been circling Sobibor for days together. Maybe we owed our fact of our being still alive to that, since the Germans would never have looked for escaped prisoners so close to their own lair.

We remained like that for the rest of the day, waiting for night to come for us to be able to leave the place. When it got dark we left , in the opposite direction though , since we wanted to avoid the swamp. We thus walked for some may days until we came to a lonely house. It was already night so we decided we would knock on the door. We then heard voices asking who was there.

I shrewdly answered that we were guerrillas and soon the door was opened. Inside the house there was a group of Poles. I told them I had to buy some food. While we waited, we started talking. I then cautiously asked them where we were. They told me the place did not have any special name, however, it was located near Sobibor. I then asked them about the camp nearby.

They could not answer, because they had never heard of it. They said the only thing they had noticed was that trains and trucks often went in that direction. Besides at night they always saw a strange glow lighting the sky. They could not explain the origin of that nor what happened there. They had only heard people say that it was a labour camp, but they did not know what kind of activity was developed there. However, they had heard that something unusual had lately happened there.



Stanislaw
Smajzner

They could not tell me what it had been, but they knew that sixteen coffins had been ordered for the camp. We were exultant on hearing this. Sixteen henchmen had been killed in our uprising. Our vengeance had been crushing. Soon after this dialogue ended we left the house with our supplies and with sure orientation about how to get to the region where Lublin was and which was rich in forests.

When we were leaving, the Poles said that in that town we would be able not only to hide ourselves but also contact the other guerrillas who lived in the woods.

Source: Stanislaw Smajzner Translated from Polish

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