

Revolt '43

On 2 August 1943, an uprising broke out in Treblinka II camp. The one-day rebellion did not succeed to liquidation of the camp staff and destruction of gas chambers. Most of the prisoners died, and several hundred escaped.

“You’re not alive anymore but you can’t die” – the words of the inner dialogue between consciousness and determination resounded in the mind of the prisoner Richard Glazar. The question was raised: “What are you afraid of then?”. “The moment I’m naked,” the answer came. “You see, you’ve been here too long, you’ve waited too long, you’ve seen too much...” [9;92]. Such thoughts were probably present in the minds of all prisoners sentenced to temporariness in the death factory of Treblinka II. However, only a few were able to overcome the fear and disbelief in the sense of resistance. After all, at the final stage of the preparations for the rebellion, less than sixty out of about 840 prisoners were involved in the preparations, and the command consisted of 10-12 people: the highest in the camp hierarchy, they formed the Revolutionary Committee [6;39-40.Also:9;92-93.More:14].

In the first months of 1943, the terror practised so far by the camp staff weakened a little bit: “Recently, the workers have stayed longer in one place and this has been of great benefit to us,” wrote Jachiel Rajchman in his memoirs, “because in such way we could get to know each other better. We’re getting trust in each other and we’re starting to think about the ways of getting out of here”. [10;84.Also:4;4] At that time, the transports of people sentenced to death in their masses were less frequent, and the camp authorities sought to justify the further existence of the camp [15;16]. This can be used to explain that specific sticking to the community of executioners and victims with a suspended death sentence. In the case of the former, their vigilance has weakened: “The Germans and the Ukrainians do not anticipate anything” – said Jankiel Wiernik and asked a rhetorical question – “They killed millions, it’s their routine, and today they are afraid of this miserable handful of people?” [8;33]. For the latter, the primary goal was to destroy “the hell on earth” [12;165]. Their other activities were only a derivative of that goal, the means to achieve it.

Everyone involved in the plans – of the revolt, rebellion and uprising – had to play their part. All of them were the most important. The locksmiths made the key to the arsenal, the young boys stole the weapons, and the former military men guaranteed to use those properly. The mechanics had access to flammable agents, and the “dentists” – prisoners serving in the robbery of Jewish property by the Germans – provided gold and money: resources necessary in case the conspirators managed to escape from the camp. Even though many had doubts: “The prisoners realised that the fight was hopeless for them, that their last day was coming, but the desire for revenge and to be done once and for all with this factory of death, prevailed over everything.” [5;3.Also:12;157] And those who even fractionally believed that they would survive had one more goal: to show the world the truth about the “horrific slaughterhouse” of Treblinka [10;100.Also:8;33].

The date of the uprising was set for 2 August 1943, at 4.30 p.m. It is likely that the Germans suspected a disturbance of the “order” they had previously established. They were supported in this by Jewish informers. The head of the “lower camp”, who supervised the admission area and the administrative and residential area, had to anticipate it: “Küttner also chased around the whole camp to find out what was cooking.” [5;4]. The time of the uprising outbreak had to be changed to 4 p.m. due to the danger of it being nipped in the bud.

“Run away, the Russkies are coming”, shouted Berek Rojzman to the guard standing on the tower near the barrack, not far from the fields adjacent to the camp. “Run away, but leave your rifle.” [7;210-211] Mira, that guard, was wearing shorts and sunbathing at that time. When the first shots were fired, he ran away from his post immediately. Was that him who was described by Jachiel Rajchman with the following words: “The Ukrainian who was on guard next to the barrack is lying on the ground like a slaughtered hog and his blood is leaking. His weapon is already in the hands of our man”? [10;92]. In his account written shortly after his escape from Treblinka, Jankiel Wiernik recalled that one of the means, perhaps the only one that served to “deceive” the wachmanns, was gold. Those who were supposed to keep order in the camp quarter subordinate to them gave in to temptation. This is how Wiernik characterised that form of “neutralising” the opponents: “They had a predilection for gold and they used to trade with the Jews all the time. When the shot was fired, one of the traders approached the tower and showed

the Ukrainian a gold coin. The guard completely forgot that he was at the post; he left his rifle and ran down with a rush to swindle the Jew out of the treasure. Two other Jews were already waiting for him on the side. They grabbed him, finished him off and took the guns.” In the opinion of the revolt commanders, the towers were the first and most important point in the activities planned: “If they started throwing bullets at us from above, we wouldn’t escape with our lives.” [8;34]

At the same time, the insurgents set fire to the camp buildings to cause panic among the guards. Within several dozen of seconds, the flames covered a significant part of the buildings: “The fires broke out in all parts of the camp, which resulted in a heavy smokescreen”, recalled Samuel Rajzman [5;6. Also:10;92] This was the result of work done a little earlier by one of the disinfectors: “He usually carried out disinfection of the barracks, and on that day he poured the liquid on all the buildings that were to be burned down”, recalled Stanisław (Szulem) Kon [3;4].

The guards, like some of the wachmanns from the watchtowers, were confused by the events. So when the insurgent group ran towards them shouting: “Revolution! The war is over!” and “Revolution in Berlin!” they put their hands up: “We’re taking their weapons away”, recall Jachiel Rajchman and Richard Glazar. This attitude of the guards was far from the expectations of the German command. Samuel Rajzman judged them with the following words: “»Heroes« in the fight against naked women and children are helpless this time.” [5;7]. They surrendered or died at the hands of the insurgents.

The fights within the camp, from the first shot, the explosion of a grenade and the fire passing from barrack to barrack at lightning speed, to the breaking of the gates, the inner ones, separating the extermination part from the so-called utility part and the entire extermination camp from the rest of the world, took less than ten minutes. At last, the thing expected by the prisoners happened – a chance to leave the execution site: “Run away, all of you! Run away! To the woods!” [9;97] Richard Glazer called on all those who were only able to do this. Most of them weren’t. The bullet could reach anyone. Like Hans, who was in the fight. He couldn’t keep running. He fell just next to the gate. There was no fear in his gaze: “With his whitened, trembling lips he only begged: ‘Finish me off, in the name of the one you don’t believe in’ “. The fact

whether one was helping another or harming one another in terms of moral values, will remain a mystery to those who took part in this drama. After all, Samuel Willenberg showed his friend a death camp and said: "Look where your children and wife are." [12;163-164] When he looked, he shot him in the head...

Those who were able to run, had the last remaining obstacle – entanglements: "Killed prisoners stood, straightened up like monuments, amid the tank barriers. The human mass forming some kind of a bridge lied on barbed wire and barriers" [12;165.Also:9;97] Not all of the towers were taken over by the insurgents, so the guards immediately responded with fire. Immediately afterwards, the Germans and their subordinate ethnic guards set off in pursuit: "The murderers are chasing us with machine guns in their hands. A car is chasing us along with them. There's a machine gun on its roof that shoots in all directions." [10;93]. Out of the 750 prisoners involved in the fight, less than two hundred managed to escape from the death factory. However, it was just another stage of their struggle – struggle for survival...

They were running away in droves. The groups comprised of several to several dozen people. However, quickly, under the influence of constant panic, distrust of fellows, for fear of betrayal by the inhabitants of the villages adjacent to Treblinka, the former common goal – escape, was losing its importance. It was all about the chance to survive. So the majority decided to go further on their own. They were stranded and fought for survival. Literally.

Like Jankiel Wiernik. First he ran away in a group. It was quickly broken up by the wachmanns. He was the only one who managed to escape. He was already approaching the forest wall. He was really close to it. He heard first: "Stop!" and a moment later a shot and at the same time he felt a strong pain. But the wachmann's revolver jammed. It was the only chance. Desperation and good luck worked. He stopped: "I pulled the axe out of the belt. I approached him and cut his left breast with an axe. He fell at my feet screaming "J... twaju m...". I was free and I ran into the woods." [8;34]. After several days he reached Warsaw. With an axe...

Like Richard Glazer. He was also running away with his comrades. They stood at the crossroads wondering which way they should go: to the forest or to the bog? Most of them chose the forest.

He and Karel Unger opted for the wetlands. They got there: "I dive underwater, swim a little, crawl back to the shore on a muddy bottom. I get some air and dive again" [9;97]. The sounds of cars chasing the prisoners, shots, human screams mixed with the barking of dogs were reaching them. They spent almost six hours in muddy water. They survived. After many weeks of wandering, they got captured by the German services and were sent to the labour camp in Mannheim. They stayed there when, in spring 1945, they were liberated by the American army...

Like Jachiel Rajchman. There were 20 of them first. They reached the young forest. There were too many of them. It was quickly decided to split into two smaller groups: "We lie down for a few minutes and suddenly we see Ukrainians with a few SS men surrounding the forest and entering it. They come across the other group and immediately shoot them all". The survivors wandered through the woods at night and rested during the day. They were looking for support among the locals, unsuccessfully. Only in exchange for the "Treblinka" property they received some food: "He gives us bread and a little bit of milk and wants gold for it. We give him two watches." In the end, the group breaks up. Rajchman wandered alone. Although he found support from Poles, he was equally in danger. In the evening, an inhabitant of the nearby village came to the hosts at whose place Rajchman stayed and who supported him. He yelled at the doorstep: "Jew, follow me." He explained to the neighbours: "Did you know those bandits set Treblinka on fire? I'll get an award for him!" [10;98]. Once again, Rajchman had to run away. Despite the obstacles, he managed to survive. First at friendly Poles, and then in Warsaw.

Like Samuel Willenberg. He quickly separated from a group of several dozen people as soon as it reached the village adjacent to Treblinka. He continued to wander alone. He was looking for shelter: "I searched out a place in a haystack. I barely positioned myself in the hay when I felt that I was lying on somebody. At dawn, it turned out that at least four people stayed in the haystack overnight. No one has spoken a word to anyone. One was afraid of the other. As soon as the sun came up, my companions vanished without saying goodbye. Everyone went in a different direction". He reached Kostki. There, on the railway station wall, he saw a poster: "It warned against helping the runaway prisoners and reported that there were typhus spreaders between the bandits. The arrest warrant said that the runaway prisoners can be recognised by their shaved heads." [12;166-176]. Despite the threats, he reached Warsaw. Not only did he survive. He

also took part in the Warsaw Uprising...

Did those people believe they would survive? Perhaps... After all, they were among no more than a hundred Treblinka prisoners who survived the war. Some of them went to that place again. In late autumn of 1945. The road leading to the place of extermination was enveloped in fog. Perhaps it was due to the fact that for hundreds of thousands of inmates its end was the final stop in their lives? During their journeys, they argued: where, who and how? There were numerous questions and there were no clear answers to them: could it have been done earlier? why was it done so late? was it worth it? However, the closer to the place of execution, the more the travellers became withdrawn. All of them together and each of them individually examined their own conscience. Perhaps in this very place, familiar one, in silence, everyone was asking only one fundamental question: why, against everything – not my wife, not my son, not my mother and father – only I was the one who survived?

They came to witness... Everyone was overwhelmed by the burden of the place. Especially those who had worst experiences from there – former prisoners. They were powerless in the face of the only one image that was permanently imprinted in the memory: human tragedy. Maybe they could feel the same smell: of bodies and bones burned, charred, turned into ashes? Just like the sweet taste of the blood no longer useable for anyone? Maybe the previous experience, including the fact that they survived, had given them strength? “Survivors from Treblinka jump into the pits. With trembling bare hands they touch the decaying remains of the corpses, they want to show that they are not disgusted”. The judge who was present during this on-site inspection pointed to the edge of one of the huge pits. A small fragment of the skeleton, the “child’s foot”, protruded from the mixture of earth and sand: “One of the survivors is running in that direction”, wrote Rachela Auerbach, who came with a committee of inquiry and former prisoners, in her reportage. “He wraps a bone in a newspaper like a pious Jew used to wrap an etrod. He wraps the bone in his coat and then puts it in his breast pocket and hugs to his heart”. After that, he just said: “Maybe it’s my son’s leg whom I took with me.” [1;53,60] There was truth in those words, common to all. Absolute truth. Everyone could have experienced this tragedy...

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Photo: Treblinka extermination camp set on fire by rebelling prisoners

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