

The victim and the executioner. Part 2

On 13 September 1943, Abram Jakub Krzepicki managed to escape from the extermination camp in Treblinka. He told Rachela Auerbach, a journalist cooperating with Oneg Shabbat, about what he saw and experienced in the “corpse factory”.

(...) The camp was filled with mass, omnipresent death supported by terror. Treblinka resembled “a monstrous, corpse-producing factory.” [4;87] Most victims would not undergo a selection. Sentenced in bulk, they were stripped of what little dignity they had left. The Germans purposefully named the place of execution a “bathing place.” This place, also called a “bathhouse”, was the closing stage of the whole criminal procedure: “In the depths of the forest, boilers were already heated, and ovens were being filled. The Germans and Ukrainians began herding the first batch of naked women and children along the way to the bathhouse. Another wave of cries and screams could be heard. The final, wild run had just begun. Like animals in a slaughterhouse, they instinctively felt what fate awaits them. Nonetheless, some naive women truly believed that they were going to a bathhouse – they took towels and soap with them. On the other hand, men were calmer, more resigned and disheartened. Even if they cried, they did so alone, quietly.” [4;109]

Yet, the Germans’ wickedness was complemented by one more perverse idea. They decided that on their last journey, the Jews should be accompanied by...an orchestra. Due to this, the Germans would prolong the lives of the few Jewish musicians that were among the prisoners. The horror of the moment was intertwined with absurdity: “The sounds of Jewish music mixed with the cries of Jewish men, women and children who were driven to a deadly bath. The Jewish musicians stood and played by the road leading through the forest, gaining the right to live for a few more weeks as a result.” [4;101-102]

The “Bathhouse” was supposed to resemble a cosy, clean bath integrated into the forest greenery, at least according to the creators’ assumptions. This impression was but a mere illusion

– it was enough to take a few steps further to see something more: “Mountains of clay with huge mass graves – still uncovered – with tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of dead “bath-goers.” This was the case at the beginning. Shortly afterwards, at the end of August, the dead bodies started to decompose rapidly due to high temperature; the Germans decided to burn them instead: “Old junk, empty suitcases, and garbage cleaned up from the square were thrown into the graves. They burned day and night, filling the whole camp with clouds of smoke and the stench of burning bodies.” [4;85] Simultaneously, the prisoners themselves were building a crematorium as well.

Many Jews did not survive long enough to meet their demise in the “bathhouse.” They either died on the road or in closed, crowded train cars, waiting indefinitely on the camp’s railway siding. Such was the picture that both the future camp commander – the executioner Franz Paul Stangl – and the survivor Abram Jakub Krzepicki – saw just after reaching Treblinka II. The first impressions, although experienced from a very different perspective, were quite similar: “I began blacking out. I was mortified by what I saw there,” the victim said; “There were only corpses in all train cars. The people inside suffocated from lack of air. The deceased lay on top of each other in layers, all the way to the very roof of the train car”. The executioner had similar remarks: “Arriving at the Treblinka station, we saw (...) a train carrying Jews; some were dead, others still alive. It seemed that they were in there for many days.” [4;79-80. Also: 1;135]

Unloading these cars was one of the first tasks that Abram Jakub Krzepicki and several dozen other prisoners had to perform: “The corpses were swollen, and their stomachs were terribly bloated. They were covered with brown and black spots. Bugs crawled all over them. On some faces, you could see an eerie expression – mouth half-open with the tip of the tongue sticking out. They froze open as if the victims were still trying to catch some air. Many corpses had their eyes open.” The bodies were falling apart: “When we began pulling bodies out of the piles where there were many of them lying on top of each other, individual body parts would break off. The corpses of children – the fastest.” Weak, emaciated, hungry and thirsty prisoners struggled to carry out their orders: “They preferred to carry children’s corpses as they were the lightest. Others carried individual body parts – heads, legs, hands, entrails.” [4;77]

With people dying left and right, treated like items – a dispensable mass of flesh – could the death of an individual even make any impression? Certainly. The emotions felt when you saw the death of your companion, with whom you had shared a place in the cattle cart not so long ago, who gave you what little water he had and even did slave labour alongside you just a moment ago, right before your very eyes made you all the more aware of the imminent end. Because everything was merely an illusion. Abram Jakub Krzepicki saw much. He saw the way an SS man treated a young man who was laying corpses in the grave: “The German believed that the boy was working too slowly. ‘Don’t move, turn around!’ – he ordered – he took his rifle off his shoulder and before the boy could even understand what was going on, he was already lying dead in the pit among the other corpses.” [4;79] He saw men, who had been helping him unload train cars just a while before, try to escape right after the job was done: “They shot one of them before he even managed to crawl out from under the train car. The other made a run for it. He wanted to hide in the crowd among other Jews.” It was of no use: “An SS man apprehended him. The young man showed his worker’s documents, begged and pleaded. But the SS man refused to listen and furiously beat him on the head with a rubber baton. The boy fell. A Ukrainian joined the fray and struck him in the head 3 or 4 times with a rifle butt – as if he was chopping wood. At last, they put a bullet in his head and only then did they leave him alone.” [4;81] The train had left. He saw a girl trying to cheat the death camp reality: she dressed up as a boy. But the guards discovered this ruse fairly quickly. An SS man told her to strip naked and stand by the grave. He killed her without hesitation. Krzepicki also saw a boy who was “only” wounded during an execution. He survived. He had to spend hours lying in a mass grave. He left it after nightfall. He changed his clothes. But alas, this was of no use. He had a fever. He was suffering. And the Germans were ever vigilant. Once more he had to stand in front of the grave pit, once again naked – and this time he was killed. Krzepicki also saw one of his close friends being herded to the bathhouse. He asked himself: should I approach him, shake his hand and go with him? The answer was: “Maybe I should support my friend in his final hour and perish with him. Yet, I was too weak for that – I admit. Maybe the voice telling me to get out of there alive was too strong in my head.” [4;120] The reality in the camp confirmed Krzepicki’s conviction that fighting for one more moment of life but also living for this very fight, is both worth it and necessary. Based on this conviction, he wanted to escape. Even if he was to pay for it with his life. Though his death would be in stark contrast to that of other helpless victims butchered by the Germans. His determination allowed him to succeed: on 13 September 1943, he managed to hide in a pile of

rags during the loading of one of the train cars. He escaped death... [4;133 -134]

But was this way of thinking – thinking about escape – the norm or the exception? After all, there should be as many attitudes as there were prisoners. However, the conditions and atmosphere created by the Germans made any kind of independence impossible. People were ruled only by tension and fear: “No one thought of any kind of rescue or resistance back then. We were too weakened, depressed... too thirsty for a sip of water.” [4;90] Nonetheless, there was no shortage of self-destructive attitudes towards reality, as well as self-incrimination based on the ideology imposed by the Nazi authorities: if we are guilty, we must be punished. Most people whom the executioners allowed to live a little longer were completely passive. They could not – did not want to – refused to think about their imminent death. They said that the “Grossaktion” is underway, so they would have no chance of surviving outside the camp anyway. Others hoped for a quick end to the war and liberation. “It truly was heart-breaking to see how the desire to live made people so childish, so full of hope, which was worth nothing,” Abram Jakub Krzepicki recalled; “Living in the conditions so cleverly created by the Germans made most of the young and healthy people lethargic, incapable of acting and making decisions.” [4;124-125]

The selected fragments of Krzepicki’s accounts not only reflect the horror of death camps but also characterise the mentality of their overseers – the commanders, SS men and wachmanns. Krzepicki had this to say about them: “People – even the youngest children – understand beforehand, they see and feel what is coming. Animals sometimes feel that as well, and humans who see their expressions sympathise with them. But many, many Germans are hard-hearted, they look at people who have the same human reflexes as themselves, and they see nothing, they have no sympathy. They feel no remorse, no compassion for the suffering at all, even though such expressions do exist in German. Natural born murderers and executioners.” [4;117] In this regard, Stangl, one of the guilty of these crimes, spoke in a very different way when explaining his role in the system: “For me, the only way to live my life was to use compartmentalised thinking. I could adjust it to my situation at will. If the ‘subject’ was the government, the ‘object’ – Jews, and the ‘action’ – gassing, then I could say to myself that in my case, there was no fourth element, i.e. ‘intention.’” [1;141-142] The same, temporary world. Seen from a very different perspective. As if the executioner was running away from his victim...

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Photo: Railroad tracks leading to the gravel mine where the Treblinka I labour camp was located (public domain)

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