



MIECZYŚLAW RYSIŃSKI

Like a lens, Sulejów concentrated all the problems of struggle and martyrdom of the Poles and Jews in the occupied country. Just as in many cities in Central and Eastern Poland, the majority of residents of Sulejów were Jewish. The war came there on the wings of the squadrons of German aircraft in the first days of September. The German air force ruined the town almost completely. Over a thousand casualties were buried under rubble. The Jewish community residing in the center of Sulejów suffered the most in the midst of the burning town. The town was destroyed so badly that the Germans could not establish a ghetto there. From the first days of the occupation the Nazis were terrorizing and murdering the population. Rampant terror reached its highest point during large-scale arrests and deportations of the town residents (mostly the youths who were eager to fight) to extermination camps and during the operation of chasing out about 2,000 Jews from Sulejów, rushing them to Piotrków and transporting them from there to Treblinka in October 1942. My friend Josek Rozenzwaig was in one of the columns departing for Piotrków. I saw him jog next to his mother in a dense crowd, rushed along by the Nazis. When in these unusual circumstances I was saying goodbye to my friend, who used to live next to me with his family, I didn't expect it to be our last meeting. I never received the letter which he promised to send me from his new place of residence.

Within the first months of the occupation, Sulejów was attacked by the locusts of the SS, then by the Vlasov army, and by all sorts of slant-eyed Asians in German uniforms. The fascist beasts settled in school buildings, in the fire station, and in the houses of the Jews who had been murdered. They manifested their presence in the town by singing the same, irritating melody over and over again, looting what was left of the residents' property, raping women, and hunting down the resistance members and Jews who were in hiding.

My family and relatives were constantly fearing death. My mother's village, which currently constitutes one of the side streets of Sulejów, was a base for partisan units and shelter for Jews, who were wanted by the Germans. All the residents of the village of Obdzież were related to one another, since the entire village used to belong to the Baliński family.

A wooden chapel stood at the edge of Obdzież, right by the path leading to the forests of the Kielce and Tomaszów regions. It had been there since the period of the Piast dynasty.

After the war, a statue of the Mother of God sculpted out of stones from Szydłowiec was placed there. Passers-by can learn from several sentences engraved in its pedestal that it was funded by Jan Jerzy Pański, a famous Jewish resident of Piotrków. This was his way of expressing gratitude to the Baliński family for sheltering him and his daughter (Urszula Marcinkowska-Koehler, residing in Warsaw [...]) and saving their lives. After the war, Yad Vashem awarded three people from the Baliński family medals and diplomas of the Righteous Among the Nations – I was among the people who requested this. Zofia Zaks, her mother and several Jewish children were hiding in the village of Przygłów, near Obdzież. Zofia, who survived the war thanks to the help provided by Poles, became an academic and a social worker. She was, among other things, an organizer and the head of the “Children of the Holocaust” association.

I have strong objections to the opinion often recurring in the western media that during the war Poland became a country of blackmailers and anti-Semites. My observations and terrible wartime experiences led me to believe that people who hold such opinions have absolutely no idea about the reality of life in occupied Poland, or that they elevate random incidents to the level of problems and generalizations which are detrimental to the Polish nation. The hatred which the Poles felt towards the occupiers rendered the development of a large-scale phenomenon of *shmaltsovniks* (blackmailers) and collaborators impossible. The Nazi occupying authorities, separated from the Polish society by a wall of hatred, made use of the help of the local covert and overt *Volksdeutsche*s and of completely degenerate individuals acting as secret agents and instigators. The extensive Polish underground was determined to fight collaborators of all sorts. My opinion in this case is fully supported by the fact that all of the villagers and many residents of Sulejów knew the location of the hiding places of the Jews around Sulejów, and yet there were no *shmaltsovniks* or informers. On the scale of the whole country there were obviously some instances of denunciations and blackmail, but acts of this kind were carried out only by individuals from the margins of society.

In 1943, the Gestapo men aided by the Vlasov soldiers began setting up labor camps for Poles, Jews and Soviet prisoners of war. They set up the camp for Jews in a large square surrounding a closed-down lime kiln. They put up barbed wire over the camp fence, erected guard posts in the corners, and established a Gestapo station and some sort of a kitchen for prisoners next to the municipal butchery. The prisoners were crammed into old stables, warehouses, and a large barn built out of bricks. Plaques with the short text of the Gestapo



chief's order forbidding Poles to contact Jews under the threat of death were put up outside the camp.

The camp's construction was of great interest to the counter-intelligence officer of the 25th Regiment of the Home Army – Stanisław Cichosz, a former soldier of Hubal's unit. Stanisław Cichosz (who operated one of the two medium machine guns in Hubal's unit), together with other Hubal partisans, such as Czesław Moruś and Marian Kuczera, found shelter in the friendly house of my grandparents and my mother's sister. Kuczera and Moruś were recognized and arrested in Sulejów by a colleague from their school years, a man of German descent, who disappeared from Tomaszów shortly before the outbreak of the war and returned during the occupation to perform the function of the head of the Gestapo in Tomaszów. Stanisław Cichosz was also pursued by this Gestapo man, but before he died in combat, he managed to kill many Nazis and their *Treuhänders* [confidants]. Stanisław was like an older brother to me. His alias was "Szczupak", but we simply called him Stach. Since my parents lived in Sulejów, near the camp, Stach asked me to carefully and discreetly observe everything that was going on in its surroundings. I believed that Stach tasked me with something of great importance, so I spent all my free time hiding in the piles of timber (there were two sawmills next to the camp, which used to belong to Jewish families) and watching closely the prison "routines" and registering the horrific scenes of maltreatment of prisoners.

Each morning, columns of prisoners were marched to the Sulejów quarries. They were made to dig trenches and build fortifications. On the way there and back, they were escorted by the Gestapo men and Vlasov soldiers with German shepherds. The emaciated, beaten prisoners in ragged clothes looked horrific. Many of them fell on the ground. Overseers ran up to them at once and finished them off on the spot. The corpses were thrown on top of the carts dragged behind the columns and later buried around the quarries or in the old Jewish cemetery located near the camp.

Having returned from the quarries, the exhausted people stood in long queues to receive a hot brew made out of fodder beet leaves. The prisoners made their way to the kitchen in a line between two double files of overseers armed with long sticks. Each prisoner was hit on their bent back or on the back of the head. They ran to the kitchen quite quickly, but ghastly things happened on the way back. Prisoners holding dishes with the brew by their mouths



were rushed and beaten, so they spilled boiling water on their faces and on the ground. The slithery beet leaves spilled on the ground creating a thick layer of slippery and muddy slime mixed with human blood. Many prisoners fell into the mud and stayed there with burnt faces, finished off with sticks or shot with a revolver by the Gestapo men. Always at the ready, the camp personnel threw the massacred, often still convulsing bodies on top of a platform located nearby, and under the supervision of the Vlasov soldiers transported them to the Jewish cemetery located nearby. Once the last "meal" had been distributed, a group of prisoners gathered after this bloodbath to clean up the mess.

Twice a week the prisoners were escorted to the shallow floodwaters of the Pilica river for a "bath". Naked, terribly emaciated people with ragged, dirty clothes in hand, were herded into water which reached below their knees. They washed up and beat out their louse-infested underwear. A grey layer of tiny insects always appeared on the surface. The lice, which flowed into a stronger current of the river, made for some tasty food for the shoals of roach and other fish. The fish gobbled up the insects so voraciously that water in the area of a moving grey spot was bubbling like in a large cauldron. The armed Vlasov soldiers and Gestapo men standing on the riverbank were roaring with laughter as they watched this odd phenomenon. After a bath of this sort, the Nazi overseers rushed the prisoners back to the camp facilities, yelling and beating them on the way.

Stach listened to my reports and observations with great interest. One day I reported that a group of prisoners supervised by two Vlasov soldiers armed with sub-machine guns were used instead of horses to pull a water cart for transporting water drawn from the bay surrounded by thick willow shrubs. I noticed that this information drew his interest more than my other messages. Shortly after I passed on this information to Stach, two young fishermen started appearing around the bay area. I linked certain facts and became sure that they were members of an underground organization, who on Stach's orders were convincing both Vlasov soldiers supervising the water-carriers to collaborate. Recruiting them made it possible for Stach to establish immediate contact with the prisoners and to use the water cart as an excellent means to secretly supply the prisoners with food and medicine.

As a result of many briefings with Stach, I started organizing and delivering food and medicine for the water-carriers. Some of my friends joined the operation: Henryk Gołdyn, Stefan Wieczorek, Marian Komidaj, and Henryk Jakubczyk. The prisoners wrapped the

products which we delivered in oilcloth and put it in a water-filled barrel through the opening on top. They pushed the products to the back or to the front of the container with a stick, in order to make it more difficult for the guards to discover it during inspection by the camp gate.

We used the water cart to help prisoners for several months, until the moment when the team of water-carriers and the Vlasov soldiers escaped to the Kielce forests. As we had arranged with the leader of the water carriers prior to that (he had suggested to me an alternative plan of smuggling food into the camp in case the water ceased to be delivered by a water cart), we decided to risk delivering bread in the close vicinity of the houses along Błonie Street, located some 25 meters away from the camp fence. There, we were to wait behind the corner of one of the houses for the guards to turn their backs to us. Then we were to quickly run up to the camp fence and throw the food over the fence onto the camp premises. I saw the behaviour of the guards as evidence of their collaboration with the underground organization within the camp. The success of our first enterprise delighted us and gave us so much courage that we didn't even notice that with time we were settling into a routine and becoming unmindful of the danger of falling into traps set by the Germans. One day I felt the blade of the sword of Damocles on my own neck – I was approaching the camp with a sack full of bread on my back, when I suddenly heard a Gestapo chief yelling. He came to see me together with his inseparable friend – a German shepherd trained to bite through human throats – which on his master's command hunted me down in a few leaps and made me stand completely still. His master approached me, spat at me some abuse in German, and rushed me to the Gestapo station near the camp. The Gestapo man shoved me with irritation into a small room, where a traitor from the Sulejów underground organization sat comfortably behind the desk. Before the war he was known for writing slogans such as: "don't buy from a Jew" or "down with Judeo-Communism" etc. on walls. This time he was acting an interpreter.

The two fascists exchanged a few sentences in German, and then the Gestapo man smacked me with a riding crop and yelled in a shrill voice, asking who ordered me to maintain contact with the Jews. His assistant was pulling angry faces, kicking me in the ankles of my bare legs, and demanding that I answer at once. As they were hitting and shoving me, I kept repeating that the bread was intended for the railwaymen whom the Germans had gathered from the entire Piotrków district for the purpose of building a dam on the Pilica river behind Sulejów.



The Gestapo man did not believe my explanation, for after each answer he would yell and hit me in the face. His assistant warned me that my pigheadedness would force the chief to blow my stupid head off in front of the camp gate. At the point when the Gestapo man was very furious, a leader of a Nazi organization of the local *Volksdeutsche*s appeared unexpectedly at the station. I knew this individual, because he used to work with my father at a lime kiln before the war. I sighed with relief for a moment, because the three fascists were engaged in a heated debate with their backs turned. At some point I made the desperate decision to jump through a slightly open door into a narrow corridor, from where I then leaped and landed on my stomach in front of the entrance to the Gestapo station. Terrified, I jumped to my feet and without looking back ran towards a square with timber, where I buried myself under large pinewood logs like a mole.

Stach took my successful escape as a good sign and a reason to rejoice. He ordered me to stop contacting the prisoners in order not to risk the lives of my friends and myself. I suspected that I had been captured by the Gestapo man as a result of a despicable denunciation, and that my father's former colleague had left the door open on purpose (the inevitable defeat of Nazi Germany was coming, so he was probably trying to secure his future), in order to allow me a chance to escape from the trap.

1945 was near. Messages from the fronts were foretelling Germany's prompt defeat and the long-awaited end of the war. Partisan units in Sulejów and its surrounding areas became more active. The Jews imprisoned in the camp in Sulejów were hastily deported, murdered, and buried in the forests. Quite a numerous group of prisoners who were made to bury their own companions in misery were killed at the edge of the mass graves which they had dug for themselves near the old Jewish cemetery ruined by the Germans. The Soviet prisoners of war were made to take the wall of the cemetery apart, smash the *matzevahs*, and transport the rubble for the construction of a dam. An order was issued to plough the sacred burial place of many generations of Jews from Sulejów, in order to eliminate evidence of the crime and the traces of the centuries-long existence of the Jewish community in Sulejów.

I rarely visited the town, I settled almost permanently in my mother's village. I was constantly pestering Stach to let me join a partisan unit. He kept telling me that he didn't think that I should roll dice with death more than I had done so far right before the end of the war. He



believed that we would celebrate the long-awaited day of victory together. The hope for freedom strengthened his desire to marry my cousin Jadwiga.

His will to live was crushed by bad fortune. Several months before the liberation of Sulejów he was killed in an unequal fight against fascists in the village of Prucheńsko near Sulejów. He was buried in an unnamed soldiers' tomb, somewhere in a lost village in the Opoczno region. In my heart and in the hearts of many friends he remains an embodiment of kindness, wisdom and love for the home country.

Shortly after the liberation of Sulejów by the Soviet Army, the Polish Army entered the town which had been reduced to ashes. The arrival of the Polish soldiers in Sulejów was a pivotal moment in my life. At that point I decided to devote the rest of my life to the army.