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Destruction and Heroism

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My Visit to the Mezritsh Ghetto by Yaakov Czelemenski of New York

Translated by Jerrold Landau

I was familiar with the city of Mezritsh from before the war. I went there many times as a representative of the Bund and the professional unions. I was very familiar with the market place and the charming alleyways, with the small wooden or brick houses. Mezritsh was a city of Jewish workers, primarily of brush workers. The brush trade was completely in Jewish hands, and was conveyed from father to son. Jewish workers were also employed in other trades, primarily in tailoring. Prior to the war, I knew the horse-cab driver Mordechai Zuker, known by the nickname Honik, very well.[1] He was tall, strong and jovial. Mordechai Honik was a simple Jew, and did not know much about politics. His two daughters, though, were dedicated Bundists from their early childhood.

Then, I went to Mezritsh once again. This time, it was no longer as the Bundist worker Yankel Czelemenski that I traveled, but rather the Pole Czeslaw. As I traveled in the train wagon, I felt a deep uneasiness. I knew that it was a long way to the city by train. How would I be received there? Evening had already begun to fall, and it was dangerous to go about in the dark. It was also not healthy to walk about in the zone that was designated for the Jews of Mezritsh at a late hour.

I sat there worried, and I was unable to dismiss the unpleasant thoughts. Suddenly I heard one of the passengers call out to another, "What are you doing here? How are you permitted to travel by train?"

All of the passengers turned their head to the person who was asked the question. I saw that he was a Jew - slight, short, and wearing the Star of David armband. The Polish passengers did not display any enmity toward him. He sat there immersed in his own thoughts and worries. The Jew answered the Pole, whom he apparently knew:

"I am from the Mezritsh Jewish organization. I have received a special permit to travel."

I was relieved.

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It was already dark when the train stopped in Mezritsh. The Jew got on to a horse-drawn wagon with a few Polish passengers, and I quickly sat down near him. The Polish driver whipped the horses, and the wagon clanged off in the direction of the city. I quietly said to the Jew in Polish.

“Excuse me, I need your advice.”

He turned to me with a surprised look, and I calmed him, “I am a relative of the horse-cab driver Mordechai Honik. I want to visit my family.”

The Jew trusted me. Mordechai Honik was known in town. He asked, “Do you want to go to him at such a late hour?”

“No. Perhaps you can direct me to someplace where I can spend the night.”

“You are wise to do this,” the Jew agreed. “You are not familiar with this place, and you can run into difficulties. In a few minutes, we will pass by a Jewish bakery. You will get off there, and you will be able to spend the night. If you cannot sleep, you will at least be warm.” Soon the Jew told me, “Here it is.”

I paid the driver and got off. I opened the door of the bakery. A pleasant warmth and the aroma of bread struck me. The baker with a full beard, wearing a white apron stood near the hot oven. Beside him was his worker, a youth with strong arms. Troughs filled with dough stood around them. The elongated loaves of bread lay on the stone floor. The baker, an elderly Jew, looked at me with suspicion and a bit of fear, but I quickly calmed him, “I am a Jew. The horse-cab driver Mordechai Honik is my relative. I have come to be with him, but I want to go in the morning.”

The baker smiled and said, “It is doubtful that you will be able to sleep here, but you will certainly warm up your bones.”

He told me that a few months previously; he also had a guest, a woman from the JOINT[2], who promised him a few sacks of flour. I understood that he was referring to the comrade Itka

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Lazar-Melman. She was a courier for the JOINT, and also carried out missions for the Bund.

I was unable to sleep. I had a nap, and then woke up again. Various thoughts fluttered around in my head. I remained in the bakery for the entire night, until the first rays of blue light came through the door. The baker gave me a glass of hot tea and a piece of tasty bread. I bid him a very friendly farewell and set out. I

knew where the horse-cab driver lived – in a small, poor house on the left side of the Brisk Lane. I began to meet more Jews, all wearing the armband. It was a cold day. I arrived at the door of the horse-cab driver and knocked on the door. Mordechai Honik himself opened the door. He looked at me with suspicion and did not recognize me. I said to him:

“Good morning. It appears that you do not recognize me.”

My Yiddish words calmed him. He stared at me with one eye, and then his face suddenly brightened, “A Jewish acquaintance. I drove you from the train to the city several times.”

He opened the door wide and I entered. The entire house consisted of one room and a kitchen, and had the ambience of gloomy poverty. Only he himself, the horse-cab driver, stood there smiling and happy with my visit. He was a widower, and his young daughter lived with him. An older daughter, Golda, was married and lived somewhere else.

He sat me down at the table. Even before I was able to say anything, he ran to the kitchen, where two wooden twigs were burning, and put on a kettle of water. I said to him:

“Do not trouble yourself. I have not come for long, and every minute is important for me. I want to see your daughter Golda.”

“Oy Golda!” He suddenly remembered that during my previous visit, I waited for his daughter and son-in-law. “She will be very happy at your arrival,” he said cheerfully. “Wait here for a moment, and I will bring her here.”

He put on a short jacket and went out. I remained alone, and felt exhaustion from my sleepless night and the cold. My eyes were pounding from weariness. It was not long before the door opened. Golda

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Zuker, her husband and friend Avraham Zdanowicz, and finally, the elderly Mordechai Honik all entered.

Golda Zuker was tall with black hair. She was full of goodwill and energy, and was firmly decisive. Golda was one of the last members of the Bundist organization in Mezritsh. Before the war, she had travelled to Warsaw from time to time on Bund missions. She had even come to Warsaw during the time of German occupation. Her husband Zdanowicz was exactly the opposite – easygoing, calm, and slow in talking and movement. He was a brush worker by trade. He greeted me cheerfully.

The father, Mordechai, prepared glasses of tea for us, and kept his distance. He understood the reason for my visit, and he pretended not to see or hear.

Golda Zuker had been a Bundist from her youngest childhood years. She was educated in SKiF[3], the Bundist youth organization and later in the Yugnt-Bund Tsukunft.[4] In Mezritsh, the revolutionary city of the brush workers, our movement was quite large. There, the Bund had a large organization, professional unions, a youth organization, and a sports club. It also ran a school and organized cultural activities. Now, all this was in ruins and the groups had dispersed. I asked about many members. At every second name Golda sadly said: "not here", "in prison", "in a work camp", "in Russia", "lost". I asked her to convene a meeting of the remaining committee.

She left with her husband, and I stayed behind. The elderly Mordechai Honik wanted to cheer me up a bit. He was a joker. He always had a witty word, as he also had now; but this time, he did not have the power to drive away the heavy mood. Finally, he sat across from me and said:

"You came on a bad day. A terrible thing happened here yesterday."

He told me that the Gestapo had shot the rabbi on the street the day before. The Mezritsher rabbi was short and hunchbacked. He was known for his scholarship and his kind heart. The Germans wanted to deport him, but he did not want to present himself, so he went into hiding. The Gestapo took 25 Jews from the city as hostages and ordered that if the "Jude" did not present himself, all 25 Jews would be shot. When the rabbi

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found out about this, he went to the Gestapo. There, they tortured him, and then took him out to the street and shot him. The entire city was now in a dark mood, feeling demoralized.

Before long, Golda and her husband returned. With them were: Moshe Ezra Edelsztejn, the chairman of the Bund organization; Hershel Borowski, an active Bundist since the Czarist period; Alter Sztokman, a former city councilor and communal representative; and Moshe Grynbaum, the chairman of the youth.

The meeting took place in a tense atmosphere. The chairman Moshe Ezra Edelsztejn gave an accounting of Jewish life in Mezritsh in terse words. There was no ghetto yet, but rather a designated zone; the situation was, however, intolerable. In the surrounding area, the Nazis had emptied out the towns and deported the Jews to Mezritsh. Jewish Mezritsh was suffering from hunger and terror. There was no bread for the arriving refugees to eat, nor was there any open floor space area upon which they could rest their heads. The entire economy of the city was in the hands of the Germans. Before the war, there were two Bundist representatives in the community. Now, neither of them wished to cooperate. The reason was the same as in many other cities: demoralization and corruption had spread widely within the Judenrat. Not far from Mezritsh, nine kilometers from the city, the Germans created a work camp in which they had imprisoned several hundred men. Golda Zuker, who looked like a Christian, served as the contact

person between the city and the camp. Together with her sister, she went to the villages to purchase products for the camp inmates. She also bought butter, eggs and milk for the Jewish children of Mezritsh.

The committee members also brought me up to date on the brush cooperative. They had a large stash of pig hair hidden away in a warehouse.[5] From time to time, they would see a bit of the remaining reserves, and use the proceeds to help the members of the brush workers union as well as the women and children who were left without their breadwinners.

As in all cities, the Germans would regularly snatch people in Mezritsh. The Germans could have obtained their quota of Jewish workers through the Judenrat, but the purpose of the snatchings was to turn the city into a wild forest in which a human hunt could take place, indifferent to the fact that the Jews comported themselves with a great deal of courage and dignity. On the previous May 1st, the workers acted in a particularly poignant manner. They

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moved in groups throughout the city, in silent gatherings. No words were spoken, no songs sung. The entire city was awestruck by this unprecedented demonstration. The Bund continued to be active; the movement now consisted of small groups, and the youth groups also convened. The bulletins and other literature that were sent from Warsaw were read with great interest. This illegal literature raised the morale of the members in those dark times.

At the end of the meeting, I gave them my report from Warsaw and from Bund workers in several other cities. I told them that the central committee was planning to convene a country-wide conference, and I asked them to select a delegate from Mezritsh. If they did not want to do so in my presence, they could do so later. I informed them of the financial situation of the party organization and the leadership institutions in Warsaw, which had to concern themselves with other cities as well. The Mezritsh committee decided to give me the large sum of 25,000 zloty. The chairman then turned to the youngest of those present, Moshe Grynbaum, who was sitting at the periphery of the group and said to him:

“You are the youngest among us, and you have the greatest chance of surviving. The money should be given from your hands. (He indeed survived and moved to America.)

It was very moving when the youngest member, with trembling hands, presented me with the gift for the Bundist Party.

Before ending the meeting, the oldest Bundist, Hershel Borowski, took some drinks from the cabinet, and said:

“This is all that remains from the good times. May we all remain alive to make banquets for our guests. Let us now drink a le-chayim.”

There was only just enough for each person to wet their gums. At the very end, I gave them a package of newspapers, and the members left the house together in a better mood.

In the evening, when it was already quite dark, I went to the house of the Zdanowicz comrades and spent the night there. The couple had three beautiful daughters, and Golda hugged them together. Her work -- wandering through the villages in search of food products, and her contact with the work camp -- were all fraught with

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danger. She always parted from her children as if she was seeing them for the last time.

Golda got up early in the morning and prepared to go to the camp. She invited me to come along, if I wished to see the camp. She said that my visit to the camp would provide great encouragement to our comrades who were imprisoned there.

We set out from the house onto the grey, cold street. The camp was located nine kilometers from the city, but we had to stop along the way in several villages to purchase food. We planned to arrive at the camp at 5:00 p.m. when the prisoners were forced back to their prison from their various workplaces. The prison was surrounded by barbed wire. Comrade Golda was given good advice from her interaction with the farmers. She purchased the items she needed at each location. We then proceeded through narrow, side-routes between the villages until we arrived at the main highway that led directly to the camp. Sparse forests spread out on both sides. Golda gave me a sign, and I looked ahead.

I saw the camp before me. I saw the fence that was made from narrowly spaced blocks, bound together with heavy rows of barbed wire. Wooden barracks stood inside the camps, but there was no trace of any people. Only by the tower, right near the highway, was there an S.S. man patrolling with a gun. Golda looked at her wristwatch and said, "They will be coming soon. We should travel alongside routes so as not to be obvious. When we see them, we will go to them." (There were also a few Poles who had things to sell to the captive Jews.)

We moved along a side lane, not far from the main highway, for five or ten minutes. Suddenly, we heard hundreds of footsteps. We separated and quickly advanced onto the highway. I saw before me a dense, marching group. Two or three S.S. men and a few Jewish "supervisors" walked on either side of the group. The Jews were exhausted and could barely drag their feet. They soon noticed Golda, who without any hesitation approached one of the marchers and gave him the packages. Neither the S.S. men nor the Jewish kapos were disturbed, even if they had seen. Within a minute, the entire group was confined inside the camp, and the gate was locked behind them.

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I started to leave, but suddenly from inside, from the other side of the fence, I heard a sorrowful cry. I hastily turned around and saw that an S.S. man was standing right next to the fence, murderously beating a Jew with a wooden stick. The Jew was a middle-aged man with a short beard. His entire beard was covered with blood. From a group of Jews who were standing huddled together a few steps away, a young lad burst forth and tried to cover the beaten Jew with his outstretched arms. Blood soon began to flow from his face too. The S.S. man ordered the young lad to grab the bloodied Jew by the armpits and dance around the camp with him. I looked at comrade Golda. Like me, she stood there, shuddering. She indicated to me that we should leave, and we set out for home.

We were both silent for a long time. She later identified the Jew who was the victim of the beating, and said that the young lad who had run to protect him was his son.

We returned to her home in a somber mood. When I entered, her husband told me that a comrade of ours from Ostrolenka, a former Bundist councilor and his wife, were at one of the collection points to which the Jews were forced as they were driven from the surrounding towns. The three of us set out for there. The "guest house" was located in a dark building. Jewish families - men, women and children with their luggage, packages, and remnants of their meager belongings - were sprawled out over the entire floor.

When we reached our Ostrolenker comrade, we stood motionless - like stones. Stolarczyk, our comrade, sat on a bundle of belongings. On the floor near him lay his sister, covered with a cloth. She was dead. Comrade Golda called to him by name, and after a long while, he raised his head. He then lowered it again and fixed his gaze upon his dead sister. He sat there motionless, as if he himself was dead. A little later, he raised his head and said:

"She died a few hours ago. She is gone. She is waiting for me."

I had no strength to approach him. I felt as though I was being strangled.

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We went out in silence. At the doorstep, I told my companion that, without question, we had to get him out of there as quickly as possible. Golda said that the comrades would promptly deal with the dead woman, and find a place for the man to live. When we returned home, a few comrades were already waiting for us; but I had no more endurance or energy to speak with anyone.

Despite my exhaustion from lack of sleep the previous night, I was unable to sleep, and I tossed and turned in bed the entire night. In the morning, I visited two dear friends and their two daughters, and I then I continued on my journey to Lublin.

Golda's maternal premonition that she might not see her children again each time she set out to conduct her holy work proved to be true. Comrade Moshe Grynbaum told me that one day Golda left the ghetto in order to make arrangements for 25 Jewish children to be housed with farmers. This was her final journey. Golda never saw her husband or children again.

Her younger sister Chantshe met the same fate. She went out to purchase food and never returned. Golda and Chantshe, the two courageous daughters of the horse-cab driver Mordechai Honik, were both brave populists and dedicated Bundists. They both willingly offered themselves on the altar of public service.

Translator's and Editor's Footnotes

Zuker means 'sugar' and Honik means 'honey'. return

The Joint Distribution Committee. return

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sotsyalistishe_Kinder_Farband return

Yugnt Bund Tsukunft - was the youth organization of the Bund. For more information see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsukunft> return

The brush industry in Mezritsh used the bristles from pigs in the manufacture of their brushes. return

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