

Ernst Israel Bornstein

The
LONG
NIGHT

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Chapter One

Life in the Ghetto

On 1 September 1939 we were woken up early in the morning by bursts of thunder. We could not decide if it was exploding bombs or thunderous gunfire. At the same time, the radio ordered that the country be defended: by way of anti-aircraft defence, by way of service of the Red Cross and the digging of trenches. The war between national socialist Germany and Poland had undoubtedly begun. Planes were continuously cruising overhead, but we could not see if they were our planes or that of the enemy. Towards the afternoon, news had spread that the German army had crossed the border and had already advanced thirty kilometres into Poland. Strangely, this news did not scare me. At first, it did not occur to me to go to one of the air raid shelters. I was full of curiosity but unafraid as I watched the planes manoeuvring overhead and I felt that a new chapter in history had begun.

The hopeless situation of the Jewish youth, under the ultra-nationalist Polish regime of Colonel Beck, meant that I too yearned for change in our current circumstances. Admittedly, I only had vague ideas of how these changes should come about, they were just dreams

and premonitions. By chance, at lunchtime during an air attack I was with the Chief of Police of our town. I observed how the hands of this much-feared man trembled so violently that he was unable to smoke his cigarette because of the shock of the exploding bombs. This man, whom the whole town feared and revered, stood hidden, cowering and trembling under the stone staircase. I was shocked by this image, and I was suddenly filled with foreboding as I realised that the situation was far more serious than I wanted to admit at that moment.

This was also the first Friday night when Shabbat¹ was not sanctified. It made me sad that this regular family celebration went silently by, unmarked. Many of our neighbours assembled in our flat and we listened together to the boastful speeches of the Polish military leaders who promised that the German invaders would soon be defeated and chased away.

News reports came thick and fast. Shocked Polish soldiers spoke of regiments of German assault infantry rolling towards us in trucks. The atmosphere became oppressive and my appetite for interesting experiences evaporated. Slowly it became clear to me that the planes were all of German origin and the Polish Army was unable to resist the German invasion. On Saturday morning we watched the municipality buildings being evacuated. Public life and traffic had come to a standstill. Rumours abounded that German tanks were already close to town, and that the German army's capability to perpetrate acts of violence should be feared.

With little hand luggage, my father, a few neighbours and I made our way to the next village to the east. My other relatives had fled the day before. The streets were packed with refugees, many pulling oxen, cows and goats behind them. Others pushed small carts filled with all their worldly goods, on top of which sat crying children.

1. Shabbat is the seventh day of the Jewish week and the Jewish day of rest. On Shabbat, Jews recall the Biblical Creation account in Genesis in which God created the Heavens and the Earth in six days and rested on the seventh. Shabbat commences at sundown on Friday evening and concludes at sunset on Saturday night.

Children who had been lost by their parents were screaming for them in this chaos. The whole exodus appeared eerie and unruly. Artillery shells whistled overhead and filled us with fear and dread. We were only able to progress slowly because the army blocked the road. I saw frightened faces everywhere. Everything seemed to be disintegrating. Rumour had it that hundreds of spies dressed up as Polish soldiers and officers among the fleeing masses were signalling to the German planes overhead. A Polish officer rode at our side. Next to him, tied to a horse, walked a soldier, apparently a German spy. The outraged masses shoved and beat him. On Sunday at dawn, we arrived at my grandmother's in Pilica where my mother, brother and sisters were waiting. In the afternoon, families were discussing whether to flee further or to stay put. The advance of the German troops put a stop to the discussions. Front line German soldiers had already forced their way into the village. When we awoke the next morning, the roads were swarming with German tanks and soldiers. Neighbours said it was not as bad as we had been led to believe. The soldiers seemed amiable, they were chatting to the men, gave out chocolate to the children, and did not harm anyone. Our youngest aunt went out into the street to check whether this was true. After a while she returned and confirmed that this was the case. Several hours passed without further trouble. Suddenly, wild shots were heard. We peered out of the window on to the street and we were just able to see how German soldiers threw themselves on to the ground and fired their weapons. A neighbour came with the news that next door to us, German soldiers were already taking away men from the flats. We ran down to the cellar and hid. Almost immediately, soldiers appeared in our flat and ordered, "All men out!" Heavy steps and wild screams rumbled above our heads, "Cursed bloody lot! Where are the men?" For a moment we held our breath, then flashlights were shone into our faces. With kicks, we were driven out onto the street at gunpoint where several men were already assembled. After we had been joined to a larger group, several soldiers marched us to the market square. Hundreds of men stood pushed together surrounded by soldiers with loaded machine guns. Some soldiers shot their guns into the air to increase the general panic. Then an order resounded, "Stand in rows of five! Get on with it! March! March! Quick! Line up!"

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So we marched out of the village to an unknown destination until we stopped in front of a large factory hall into which we were herded with screams and beatings. Immediately the older men gathered together to choose a delegation which would find out why we were being held prisoner. After their return, the men told us that someone had shot at the German soldiers from a hiding place and that every tenth man amongst us would be shot if we did not identify the guilty one. Our delegates demanded in German, Polish and Yiddish, "Whoever possesses a gun should step forward!" But no one came forward. Finally they pleaded with us urgently that those who possessed weapons should come forward. The elders of the town assembled themselves around the rabbi and discussed how to avoid a massive bloodshed. Finally a few old men approached the elders of the town and informed them of their decision to sacrifice their lives for the remainder of the community. I pressed more closely against my father who stood calmly but sadly to one side. He was full of gloomy premonitions, "We ran away too late", he said to me, "we should have left Europe a year ago, that would have been the right thing to do". We were led under heavy guard by the soldiers, out of the factory hall into an open field and we were ordered to lie down. Everyone was trembling with fear, because he believed he could be that tenth one whose life would be forfeited. At this moment a few military cars stopped in front of us. A high-ranking officer stepped out and gathered the remaining officers around him. After a few minutes consultation we were ordered "Get up! You can go home again! You are free!"

Afterwards we found out that German soldiers really had been shot, whereupon the commander had ordered that all the Jews should be herded together and every tenth one shot. Meanwhile the local police tracked down the real culprits. They were a few highly motivated Polish soldiers who had resolved to fight back regardless of the odds. They had taken cover in a church tower and from there they had shot the German soldiers.

We were able to return to our grandparents' home. My mother's eyes lit up with joy upon our return. In our fullness of joy, we set aside our anxieties and put the best possible interpretation upon events. We concluded that the Germans had nothing nasty in mind

and their precautions were intended only to strike those who were guilty; we would have nothing to fear if everyone behaved as they should. However, more threatening news reached us from other towns. We were told that hundreds of men had been shot and, in the chaos of the occupation, whole villages had been resettled. There were contrary rumours that, in some small towns, peace and order reigned. In those towns the German occupiers ordered business to continue as normal and the shops to reopen; with one word they ordered life back to normal, making no distinction between the treatment of Jews and non-Jews.

Here in the small town of Pilica the initial tensions also subsided. We could see how the soldiers chatted with people in a peaceful manner, nobody was harmed, and slowly our fears were eased. We did not want to give credence to rumours about prisoners being shot, along with other atrocities which were apparently happening in other cities. There was a deep-rooted belief among Jewish people that the Germans were highly cultured and known for their humanitarian and liberal ideals, a nation of poets and thinkers. The older Jewish generation recalled encounters with the pre-1918 Germany that had inspired trust and respect. Therefore most Jews were inclined to believe that the different atrocities they had heard about were the inevitable consequences of a few riotous front-line soldiers, and in the main they hoped to trust the humanitarian ethos of the German people once the front-line troops had been withdrawn.

After a two week stay, my family decided to return to our home town of Zawierce. On our way back we encountered endless units of the German Army marching eastwards. However, on the way we were neither impeded nor harassed. When we finally arrived home we saw large placards ordering all male Jews aged thirteen or over to assemble in the large textile factory. The order was already one week old so we ignored it. The Jews that were already interned in the large factory halls were held for a further ten days and finally released.

The German invasion of Poland was completed quickly. The German occupying army tried hard to restore daily life. However, some restrictions on Jews were imposed: we were banned from leaving our home at night, and prohibited from assembling for prayer or

for any other reason. The synagogue was locked and Jewish pupils were excluded from all schools where normal lessons were taking place. Increasingly and ruthlessly, we were made to do all kinds of work. Men were forced, especially on Shabbat and on the Jewish festivals to work. One day, on Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement, our holiest of days, I was taken with many others to work, unloading coal at the railway station. On this, our most sacred fast day, we were herded into the wagons that were guarded by two young soldiers. The coal dust burned our eyes and dried our mouths but they did not allow us to leave the wagons for a drink. We were unaccustomed to heavy manual labour, and, as our hands burned from the shovelling, one of the young soldiers who was good-natured allowed us to take a break. However, when his much stricter superior appeared he conformed to his more severe attitude. This bullying made our situation abundantly clear. Still we wanted to try and emigrate. We contacted different consulates and for a while nourished hopes which then tragically faded away. On the whole, we submitted to the deceptive judgement that the war could only last a few months. Once the war was concluded there would definitely be the possibility of emigration. So we exercised self-control, despite the tyranny and deprivation of our rights, and understood they would only last as long as the war. We really did believe that the work we were forced to undertake by the occupying forces would be the worst that could happen to us and when necessary must be patiently borne.

A few months after the end of the Polish campaign, our region, Polish Upper Silesia, was annexed to the German Reich. Our town, which was always known by the Polish name Zawiercie, was renamed "Warthenau". The Germans coerced all non-Jewish Poles to declare themselves "Volksdeutsche"². The Germans pretended to them that they would rise to become the "Herrenvolk"³. Many groups resisted, especially members of the Polish socialist party, the PPS⁴, many of

2. Ethnic German

3. Master Race

4. The Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, PPS) was one of the most important Polish left-wing political parties from its inception in 1892 until 1948. It was established again in 1987 and remains active.

whom were arrested to break the resistance of the Poles. Above all the first new “Volksdeutschen” were Polish businessmen who displayed pictures of Hitler and swastikas in their windows. At the same time, Jews were forced under threat of heavy penalties, to wear white armbands with yellow stars on which the word “Jude” was imprinted. So we became marked people, second-class citizens.

On the orders of the Gestapo, the “Judenrat”⁵ was established in order to collect a substantial sum of money and to put several hundred men at the disposal of the German authorities each day for various jobs. I had to present myself for work every other day. We were busy washing the roads, cleaning the police stations, maintaining the stables for the horses, and also we had to undertake various transport tasks. Often there were insufficient numbers of people at the Judenrat’s disposal. Therefore the German police seized young men by force from their homes.

Beginning in 1940, Jews were uprooted from the border area close to the towns of Teschen and Kattowitz and resettled in our midst. A few hundred families arrived in our town. These exiles left their homes with just one suitcase of clothes and were totally destitute because all their money had been confiscated. We were confronted with the hopeless misery of the exile for the first time. We had to make space in our home for a few of the exiled families, share with them the little we had and give them money so they could purchase ration cards to procure the most basic provisions. Ultimately, all those in need were assisted by Jewish welfare. They set up soup kitchens where the needy could eat for free and they distributed food without charge. Amongst the families who took refuge in our house was a family with many children from the Polish-German border town of Tarnowitz. The father of the family, Mr Hadda, was a proud German nationalist, and had been an army officer in the First World War. He had fought in Upper Silesia in the Battle of Annaberg and had received a high military decoration for his heroic deeds. He proudly recounted how, due to his initiative, Annaberg had been defended and retained in the German Reich. Every day he preached to us that

5. Literally “Jewish Council”, in effect a puppet Jewish administration

the harassment and persecution to which the German Jews were subjected must surely be a mistake. He said, "It's only meant for Jews from the East". Often he even used the term "der Führer" with pride and respect. He thought the persecution of German Jews was only a precaution made necessary by war, and as soon as the war was over their rights would be restored. Even the military decorations, awarded to this enthusiastic German patriot for his brave fight in defence of the German Fatherland, were of little help to him. In 1943 he and his family together with other Jewish residents of Zawiercie were taken to Auschwitz and gassed and burnt.

Spring of 1940 revealed its first bloody traces. In one night, twelve people, mostly young men, were arrested, immediately disappeared and were never heard from again. It was rumoured that for the sake of security the German officials wanted old communists in their safe keeping. There were only a few old communists among those who were arrested. Our neighbour, Yehuda Grünkraut, was woken that same night by the Gestapo. He had to dress hurriedly and go with them. Grünkraut was an active member of the Zionist movement "Bejtar", a right-wing nationalist party. Grünkraut's arrest could be traced back to a denunciation. In general, denunciations became more common and Poles were the main perpetrators. The Poles announced themselves to the Gestapo as "Volksdeutsche" and presented themselves as eager helpers. They willingly volunteered lists of names to prove their commitment. People in whom the Gestapo had no interest were frequently arrested merely because their name appeared on these lists. After a few weeks Grünkraut's parents received a parcel of clothes and the news that their son had died from heart failure. During this time I once fell victim to confusion over names. As already mentioned, the "Judenrat", on behalf of the Jewish community, had to contribute a very substantial sum to the German municipal authorities. As the sum could not be collected in time, the Gestapo arrested thirty Jews who were all elderly and affluent citizens. The name Bornstein was also on the list. So it was that one day, when I happened to be at home alone, I was arrested by two Gestapo officials. Together with a few other suffering companions I was taken on a lorry to Sosnowitz where

the ss had a training camp. There young members of the ss were taught how to deal “correctly” with subordinates and prisoners. For the first time in my life, I spent day and night in close proximity to the ss. It turned out that we were to be guinea pigs for the ss. We spent the nights fully dressed in draughty sheds lying on hard wooden boards. Early each morning we were woken by a piercing whistle. We received a cup of black coffee and a piece of bread, and then were driven out onto the exercise yard. Then began endless punishing exercises to which most of us were unaccustomed. Those who collapsed were helped to their feet with beatings. Thus a few days passed in constant hounding. Later, they sent us home without explanation.

We found terrible changes in our hometown. Suddenly we encountered such unaccustomed restrictions and limitations that the humiliations we had so recently endured paled into insignificance. Jewish families who lived near public offices and officials had been forcibly resettled in other streets and parts of the town. These measures grew in scale until their true purpose could not be concealed from even the most well-meaning person. It emerged that the plan was for us to live in a ghetto in which we would soon be confined. As Jewish people continuously streamed in from outlying areas, pressure on living space constantly increased, not to mention the financial and social crisis. Educated and clerical workers in particular were forced out of their jobs and had no opportunity to build up a new existence or to establish a new livelihood.

We viewed the future with trepidation and prepared ourselves as best we could. There were persistent rumours that labour camps were being built from which there would be no escape for Jews, so during the summer we strove to get hold of heavy winter shoes and clothes. However, a few Poles still found ways and means to come into our ghetto and provide extra groceries and other things that were no longer available to us. Textiles were particularly valuable for bartering. Slowly our worldly goods were depleted by bartering.

The constant strain and danger and our efforts to eke out our daily existence distracted us for the time being from all our future plans. This nightmare existence must eventually end. We long since

lost the possibility to control our destiny. We all knew that escape from this imprisonment was doomed to fail.

Soon the abusive treatment to which we were subjected was intensified. A new decree compelled Jews to hand over their businesses to trustees. Jewish businesses were then transferred to several hundred Germans newly settled in the area. A few hundred Jewish families had to vacate their homes to make room for “*Volksdeutsche*”. As the ghetto became forever smaller, the little space that remained became overcrowded with those who had been made homeless yet again as they were forced to find shelter with other Jewish families. In the late summer of 1940 the “*Judenrat*” received an order to make several hundred men available for work. They were to be used for the building of the motorway. When I discovered my name was on the dispatch list I fled and hid for two weeks in the neighbouring town. Only when the transport left for these forced labour camps did I return. In the meantime a few of my friends had been abducted. The grief of their relatives was so overwhelming that, understandably, I did not dare to meet them as, once again, I had escaped the abduction.

We had hardly recovered from this shock before the next one followed. Acute poverty and slave labour became the order of the day. We became fair game for the German police and occupying authorities, as each one of them had the power to confiscate Jewish possessions and to round up and abduct Jewish people. We were surrounded by harsh German guards. Our oppressors were eagerly supported by those malicious Poles who had become “*Volksdeutsche*”. There were also some Poles who had a good relationship with us Jews. Mostly, they were simple labourers or small farmers, religious and upright Catholics, who seized every opportunity to help us. Admittedly their efforts were not without danger because those willing to help us had to fear the power of those influential Poles who were ill-disposed towards us Jews. Therefore we could not expect vital aid. Our escape was blocked by an impenetrable wall. We were blockaded by a large section of the Polish population and the occupying forces isolated us from the outside world. Systematic anti-Jewish propaganda, both written and pictorial, filled so many heads with prejudice that when meeting a Pole one never knew if they were well or ill

disposed towards Jews. Occasionally, thanks to a fortuitous sequence of events, an individual was able to escape, but never whole families. Which responsible family head, be it father or son, could abandon their families in such desperate times? We had no alternative but to face up to the growing horror with which we were confronted with each passing day.