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AŻIH, "Relacje. Zeznania ocalałych Żydów," sygn.301/442, fols 1-7 (of total of 24)

The Holocaust in Ukraine – The Pogroms of 1941

Translation: *A09 In 1945 Rózia Wagner recalls the pogrom in Lviv*

Rózia Wagner – Lwów

The very first days gave us a foretaste of what was to come. They began to catch the Jews for labour. This task was entrusted to the Ukrainian scum. The first job of those who had been caught was to clean and remove corpses from prisons in Zamarstynowska Street, Łackiego Street and Kazimierzowska Street (the Brygidki prison). It was a horrible work, especially as the Ukrainian and Gestapo overseers treated the Jews as if they had murdered those people, and beat them unmercifully. It was then already that streams of tears began to flow from the eyes of wives, mothers and children of those men who had been caught for labour and never returned home. The following day, Tuesday, saw the beginning of mass excesses perpetrated by the Ukrainians, which the Germans watched with satisfaction until they took over from them after a few days.

Those were days and nights of great terror. Hardly anyone slept in his flat – people were hiding in cellars, attics etc. On that Tuesday, I also found myself in grave danger, which I am going to describe in detail. I lived with my whole family in Zamarstynowska Street in the immediate vicinity of the prison in the same street. Since the early morning of that memorable day, it had been rumoured that the Jews were being caught for the "corpse job." None of the inhabitants of our tenement dared to stick his nose out of the gate, for it was a Ukrainian holiday and they promised surprises. There were particular worries about men. We discovered that the flat of a woman living on the first floor had a very favourable layout. In the kitchen there was a narrow door giving on to a toilet, which was almost invisible from the gallery. This door was concealed behind a cupboard and thus turned into a hiding place for men. As we lived on the ground floor, we were afraid to stay in our flat. The whole family gathered at the above-mentioned neighbour's place. I remained in the gallery and on the ground floor so that, in case of danger, I could give a signal to my sister, who kept watch in the second floor gallery, to tell men to hide in the toilet (There were over a dozen of them,

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and they could not stay in that hiding place all the time.). Naturally, we did not expect that also women were in danger.

It was 11 a.m. They said that the Ukrainians were leading columns of Jewish men and women along the street. But we did not know what was happening. Suddenly, a thuggish-looking youth appeared in the gate. With a sarcastic and hateful expression he said to me and my neighbour, who was with me in the gallery: "Come on young ladies, do a bit of work." My heart stood still. They were going to take us to the corpses. But I went along with him without a word of pleading or resistance, glad that those on the second floor must have seen what was happening and would have time to hide. I had scarcely emerged from the gate of our tenement when I was surrounded by a pack of young rogues. Pushed and prodded, still without comprehending the situation, I walked towards the barracks. In front of the barracks there was a double row of men, women and youths – the scum of the city. Before I had time to take in this scene, I was blinded by a blow on the face. Savage shouting and yelling; someone grabbed me by the hair; tossed from hands to hands like a ball, I arrived at the gate of the barracks, and from there I was propelled by kicks and shoves into the courtyard. I was stunned and half conscious with pain, but I instinctively felt that I should immediately get away from the entrance and start working. So I used the moment when my tormentors were receiving another victim to slip to the centre of the courtyard, which was already occupied by hundreds of men, women and children. "What is there to do?" – I asked my nearest fellow sufferer. "Please, don't talk," – she said. "Bend down and make heaps of sand with your hands, for if any of these youths notices that you don't, you'll expose yourself to more abuse and beating," I needed no more explanations. I got it. I was afraid of working with corpses, but this was much worse. It was not for work that they were bringing more and more unfortunate victims here. I remembered stories about the Chmielnicki pogroms and realized that today it was I and my poor companions who had fallen victim to such a pogrom.

I got to work with exceptional stoicism. Keeping an eye on the entrance gate, I was relieved to see that there were none of my dear ones among the bloodied bodies thrown in every now and then. In the meantime, the "fun" was heating up. Inhuman shouts, broken heads, massacred bodies and horribly disfigured faces of the beaten, covered in blood and

mud – all this contributed to unleashing the basest instincts of the bloodthirsty mob that was howling in ecstasy. Even women and the elderly who lay in a faint and almost lifeless on the ground continued to be frenziedly bashed with clubs, kicked and dragged around. The wild horde sought new sensations. They tore clothes off the wounded and bruised bodies, making no difference between men and women. We, who have already passed through this purgatory and were eagerly sweeping the sand in the courtyard with our hands, watched these scenes with horror, and the blood froze in our veins. And when the insatiable persecutors had stripped a woman completely naked and kept battering her with sticks, German soldiers walking in the courtyard, whom we begged to intervene, answered in a tone of approval: “Das ist die Rache der Ukrainer” [“It’s the Ukrainian vengeance.” – translator’s note]. They were strutting about with a masterful air, taking photos of naked, beaten women: “Das wird in Sturmer sein” [“This will be in *Der Stürmer*.” – translator’s note] – they said, pleased that their countrymen would be able to see the exploits of their husbands and sons fighting for humanity.

After a few hours of our work, during which more and more victims were brought in, the courtyard was clean like a marble floor. We were told to stand against the walls around the courtyard. We felt that our final hour had come. “Now they’ll shoot us,” – a fearful, desperate whisper ran through the trembling mass. At that moment I was indifferent to my fate, but many of us, even men, began to mingle their groans of pain with crying and grieving over their lives, which they were about to lose so young, and their families, which they would never see again. I tried to reason with them that it was all the same whether they died today or tomorrow, for today’s excesses were only the beginning of what was to come. But they did not even understand my words. Everyone was instinctively pushing his way to the rear, hoping that the bullet might not reach that far – perhaps the body of the person in front would shield him. I stood at the very front. After all that I had gone through and seen, I felt overwhelming apathy and disinclination to live on. Besides, I was greatly weakened and could not bear the horrible smell of blood clotted in open wounds.

At one point, I felt relief; I had lost the sense of reality. It lasted a fraction of a second. Someone standing next to me saw that I was fainting and held me up, bringing me round

with the words: “Do sit down, you’re fainting.” I sat on the ground with a feeling of regret that the blissful moment of unconsciousness had been cut short.

The jammed mass of disgraced and battered people followed every move of the leaders of the pogrom in tense expectation of further events. But somehow they were in no hurry to finish us off. The wild rabble was not satisfied with our blood and humiliation. They wanted to derive more tangible benefits from this game.

Streetwalkers with their pimps appeared before the mass of poor victims and, like queens, they ordered that our shoes and other clothes they fancied be stripped off us. Then we were told to hand over our papers – Soviet passports, in particular.

One of the thugs warned that woe betide us if any money, rings or other valuables were found on us. The scoundrel did not even expect what a rich harvest his iniquitous order would bring. From all directions, people began to throw 5 and 10 rouble notes, rings, watches and various other valuables at the centre of the courtyard. They cast them far away from themselves, so that, God forbid, the “lords of our life and death,” 15-year-old brats, would not observe who the owners of those objects were. Those who did not see it, will never believe how many thousands of roubles in banknotes and gold were lying about on the ground, while the heroes of the day scrambled to pick up our property.

(I wish to emphasize that in my recollections written down here, there is not a bit of exaggeration. On the contrary I cannot convey what my eyes saw and my ears heard at the time.)

(I am describing the events in Lwów, but, according to later information from other, bigger and smaller localities, the same things happened everywhere, because they were part of the same prearranged programme carried out by the same “death regiment,” which everywhere used the local scum to make an introduction and always left such a bloody harvest behind.)

I, too, yielding to mass psychosis, threw far away a bag with a considerable sum of money and jewellery that I had on me. I admit that I even regretted having done so, not because I was sorry to lose the money, but because it seemed silly that I was frightened by

the impudent threat of a villain even though I was quite indifferent to death, which I fully expected.

In the meantime, it was getting on for evening, and there were some hints that they would let us go. The cool of the evening revived me a little, so I got up and looked around. In the crowd, I spotted a bloodshot and bruised face of my neighbour from the ground floor, Mrs Kikenes.

I went up to her and was told that my then 16-year-old sister Sala was also in that crowd. I screamed with anguish: that delicate, frail child in this dreadful hell – lonely and abandoned, too! For over an hour, I ran around the courtyard, calling desperately “Salunia [a diminutive of Sala – translator’s note] Basseches.” To no avail. I implored Mrs. K. to come and show me the place where she had seen my sister. However, indifferent to my pain or preoccupied with her own, she would not budge, and she only pointed at the spot where I should look for my sister.

Paying no attention to moans and curses, I pushed my way among people lying on the ground and groaning with pain and weakness. Finally, I found Salusia [another diminutive of Sala – translator’s note] with blood on her face and swollen lips. I hugged her and we both burst into tears. She reassured me that no other member of our dear family had come to any harm, because, unable to open the door, the scoundrels left, taking her along with them.

As ill luck would have it, she too had some of mommy’s valuables and money in a bag, which mom had hung around her neck. Having learnt that they would let us go, the poor thing worried herself to death over the loss of that wealth. Naturally, I tried to comfort her, and then I managed to scrounge a palmful of water to wet her dried-up bloody lips.

In the meantime, there was some stir in the courtyard, and our hopes grew that the rumours about our release were true. Some people already stood in pairs, and the first column had left the courtyard. Here and there one could see the corpses of elderly men and women who had not survived the torture, and people who were dying from their wounds. Unfortunately, no one took care of them. It was still uncertain whether they were letting us go or taking us elsewhere. We stood in a row and after a while we went out into the street. A few more steps and we were home.

Moans and screams all day long ... to think that we are among these wretched people...

On the following day we learnt that the pogrom had taken place all over the city at the same time. The difference was that people taken to Łąckiego Street or to Brygitki never returned. In addition, flats were completely pillaged and whatever could not be carried away was destroyed or even set on fire by crazed individuals. Signs of that vandalism were evident in our tenement, as well.

Such were our first experiences after the capture of Lwów by the Germans.

We spent the following days and nights in mortal fear. They would burst into flats at night, plunder and take men away.

After eight or ten days, the first announcements were posted about restrictions for the Jews. All Jews of both sexes aged 14 years and more were ordered to wear an 8 cm wide band with a blue Star of David on the right arm above the elbow. We were forbidden to get out after 6 p.m., ride on a tram, leave the city, and unrestrained SS men whipped the Jews even for walking on the pavement.

*translated by Grzegorz Dąbkowski*