

Felicja Karay, *Death comes in Yellow. Skarzysko Kamienna Slave Labor Camp*, Harwood Academic Publishers, Amsterdam 1996, pp. XIX, 273, add. 6

The author is well-known in the circle of scholars dealing with the history and conditionings of the Holocaust and maintains close contacts with many (among others, Polish) academic and educational institutions, as well as with groups of former prisoners of concentration camps. She also does not avoid becoming engaged in a wider activity, specifically by conducting numerous courses for both teachers and students which present the problems of the Holocaust in an objective way that is free from prejudice and resentment, trying to describe the relations between the prisoners and concentration camp personnel in as objective a way as possible. Besides the general subject of the Holocaust, the main subject-matter of her research is the history of forced labor concentration camps for the Jews on the territory of the German-occupied Poland, chiefly the forced labor camps of the Hasag concern.¹

The confrontation of the research effort subordinated to all possible academic rigors with personal experience (the author was herself a prisoner of the Hasag camp in Skarzysko-Kamienna and in Leipzig) has resulted in a book which, without any exaggeration, may be referred to as fascinating. This is due largely to the genuineness and vividness of the description of camp reality perceived in many dimensions and evaluated from various perspectives, as well as to the clarity and soberness of judgment (particularly with regard to the motives which guide the behavior of people living in permanent danger of loss of life and questioning all values which they profess, at least in the "normal" reality, which is free from fear of losing their lives), and not least to the visible care for the objectivity in the presentation of the relations between prisoners. The first four chapters of the book are devoted to general comments on the economic and "psychological" reasons for sending Jews to the camp in Skarzysko, which as we know, specialized in the production of munitions. Altogether, around 25,000 Jews became prisoners of the three sections of the camp; they had been sent there due to the lack of a suitable number of Polish workers who, for various reasons, failed to go into employment there.

The first group of Jewish workers had been sent to the forced labor camp at Skarzysko-Kamienna at the end of March and at the beginning of April 1942. Most probably, the idea was to make the Jews go into employment before the decision concerning the final solution of the Jewish issue had reached the authorities of the Radom District. The prisoners in the camp were under the authority of the Hasag concern and not the SS. The dependence on the Radom chief of SS and the police was purely formal; practically the entire organization of the camp, as well as its supervision and everyday administration, were in the hands of Werkschutz which was dependent exclusively on the management board of the Hasag concern. In the autumn of 1942 it was Arthur Ipfling who became commander-in-chief of the Jewish camp. On October 15, 1942, the number of Jewish prisoners in the camp had reached the figure of 4361 only to grow succes-

¹ C.f. for instance, "The Social and Cultural Life of the Prisoners in the Jewish Forced Labor Camp at Skarzysko Kamienna", [in:] *Holocaust and Genocides Studies*, vol. 8, No 1, Spring 1994, p. 1-28; *Obozy pracy przymusowej dla Żydów w Generalnej Guberni*, Tel Aviv 1996, p. 71; *Granaty i poematy. Obóz pracy Hasag-Leipzig*, Tel Aviv 1999, p. VII, p. 228.

sively in the near future. According to the author, the creation of the camp at Skarzysko-Kamienna coincided with the change of attitude within the Polish resistance movement concerning the struggle with the Germans (which could have had a direct impact on the relations between the Poles and the Jews within the camp; the latter had been divided into three sections, the toughest of which was the third). However, one has to admit that the activity of the Polish underground movement did not exert a major influence on the production of the Hasag concern.

The individual sections of the camp were being gradually liquidated until June 1944, and the prisoners from them were transferred to other camps (Leipzig and Buchenwald among others). The most important feature of camp life in Skarzysko-Kamienna was that Hasag allowed prisoners free and unhampered movement within the camp and it did not, in fact, interfere in the relations between prisoners. Due to such an attitude of camp authorities, the relations between the individual ethnic groups making up the camp community, were not so much controlled by camp authorities or supervisors, although the latter did, of course, exert an influence on various situations, but were the effect of a certain dynamism of relations between e.g. the Poles and the Jews which were a consequence of various tensions resulting from concrete situations in which the Poles and the Jews had found themselves (one has to remember that their situation differed quite fundamentally, if only due to the fact that as a rule the Poles had occupied higher functions in the camp hierarchy); among other things, they were the effect of unequal access to certain goods (above all, food) and fundamentally different opportunities of making contact with the outside world. The author's descriptions and analyses deserve careful attention due to their objectivity, although the context of some of the conclusions may lead to various associations, particularly among Anglo-Saxon readers (c.f. for instance, the author's remarks concerning the Polish and German foremen, or else the Polish overseers who were sometimes more eager to oppress a prisoner than to drink a bottle of vodka – p. 89 and 90 – side by side with comments on the Poles' more benign treatment of women workers in the camp). According to the author, the behavior of the Germans also differed quite considerably; sometimes their conduct and methods reminded one more of trade negotiations, rather than the well-known image of German guards in concentrations camps. Consequently, the survival strategies adopted by individual prisoners differed quite considerably, yet as everywhere else, life depended, above all, on whether one had money or something to do barter with. In the initial period of the camp's existence, escapes did occur, but rather infrequently. The attitudes of the Poles differed quite considerably – some participated in head-hunts for the escapees, while others tried to offer help to the fugitives (p. 101).

The chances of survival were increased by the possibility of free movement within the camp and, to some extent, by the prisoners' having free time after work. Thanks to this, the prisoners found it easier to organize themselves in an attempt to avoid death, and above all it facilitated the creation of various forms of artistic expression. The author draws special attention to this phenomenon in her book, pointing out that becoming involved in artistic activity was one of the most important elements of the survival strategy adopted by prisoners in the camp. Naturally, the impact of this phenomenon on various prisoners differed depending on the individual's sensitivity to the message expressed by song, recitation, performance, one's cultural background, education, or simply sensitivity set in motion against all odds and in contradiction to the rules of the cruel world where all that mattered was the ability to survive. All in all, it can be said that artistic activity was a very important element of camp life, one whose importance seemed to grow with the passage of time.

In this complex world, the Polish-Jewish relations were governed by specific laws which were the effect of both old controversies and mutual prejudices due to relations whose roots were in the past, as well as inside and outside of camp reality. The situation of the Poles, compared to other inmates differed mainly due to the fact that they had the opportunity to act as middlemen in trade between the inmates and the outside world. According to the author, it was a very lucrative occupation which brought considerable profits to the middlemen and was often

associated with a most ruthless exploitation of other prisoners, particularly when it concerned food and medicines. This type of policy was supported by Hasag, as the authorities of the concern had consciously taken advantage of all controversies between the Poles and the Jews, to show that by treating the two groups differently and by consciously creating tension between the two communities, one could manipulate them more easily, or else make the Poles, who basically regarded themselves as someone better, potentially more inclined to cooperate with the Germans. It is difficult to say to what extent the above policy had been effective, as the camp authorities were, above all, of the opinion that any improvement in the conditions of life of both Jews and Poles will ultimately increase the costs of labor. In turn, the Poles were not interested in a considerable increase of food supplies to the camp as they were of the opinion that it would lead to a drop of prices (p. 106, 109).

An increase in the number of escapes from the camp in the summer of 1943 had also exerted an impact on Polish-Jewish relations. Some escapees had been saved by the Poles, but there were also cases of the local peasants denouncing them to the camp administration. The local units of the Polish resistance movement, mainly the Home Army, which the author refers to simply as a right-wing organization (a term which is used quite frequently in Western, mainly Anglo-Saxon historiography), did not offer any assistance to the Jews, or else did so on a very limited scale. An improvement in the plight of prisoners which could be observed in 1944, was not the result of outside help, but of a more lenient attitude of the Hasag concern which was simply interested in increasing production, whereas the relations between the Poles and the Jews were improving as the information about the approaching end of the war was gradually sinking in. An expression of the above relaxation was the supply of ammunition to the Polish underground units. A similar situation existed in all sections of the camp, in spite of the differences between them which were due to the specificity of production, the structure of employment as well as social, cultural, and economic divergences between the prisoners.

The issue of the shaping of the Jews' attitudes towards camp reality, depending on the changing conditions of life and the dynamics of relations among people as a consequence of the changing everyday realities, is presented by the author in a very interesting way. The description of the behavior and plight of Fela Markowiczowa illustrates very well the tragic dimension of camp life as well as the dramatic character of everyday choices, as shown on the example of a person occupying a high position within the Jewish community who acted in an extremely brutal and ruthless manner. In May 1944, Markiewiczowa made it possible to organize a performance on the grounds of the "Werk C" section, where work was most exhausting; at the performance, Jewish songs had been sung and there were even attempts to criticize the camp reality. The performance constituted an astounding example of the freedom of artistic expression. It is difficult to say why permission was granted to stage the above performance in the first place, yet the representatives of the Jewish political circles operating in the camp underground movement, recognized it as an important element of the strengthening of the spirit of resistance as well as the inmates' will to survive.

The history of the camp at Skarżysko-Kamienna came to a close in the last decade of July 1944 when preparations had been started to the selection of prisoners. The moment that the fence wires had been cut, some prisoners began to escape. Only about 20 escapees had survived. Some of them had been murdered by Poles. All in all, in the summer of 1944 around 7000 prisoners were evacuated from the camp (out of these about 2/3 survived). Thus, one can say that the number of survivors was relatively big.

According to the author, the last act of the drama of the Skarżysko camp prisoners unfolded in the years 1945–1946 when many former Jewish inhabitants of the town who had managed to survive the Holocaust, returned to Skarżysko and were trying to recover their property. The attitude of the local population was congruent with that of the town authorities – both were equally reluctant to welcome back the new-arrivals. According to Felicja Karay, in February 1946, a mass murder of 5 Jewish citizens who came to stay in the house belonging to Icchak

Warszauer, had been perpetrated. Also, the monument devoted to the memory of the victims of the Skarzysko camp, which was unveiled on May 18, 1987 contains incomplete information which should be supplemented.

While reflecting on the factors which allowed the management of the Hasag concern to control such a large community of prisoners, apart from terror which the author does not seem to attach too great an importance to as a factor which determined the situation of camp prisoners, she points to activities aiming at "making use" of the property belonging to the Jews arriving at the camp as a common denominator bringing together both Germans, the Volksdeutch, the Ukrainians and the Poles. According to the author, in the camp reality anti-Semitism became an additional factor which tended to contribute to the obliteration of ethnic differences as well as divisions which were due to occupying a different position in the camp. A part of Jewish property which went into German or Polish hands, was subsequently used in the barter trade with the Jews. It constituted an important tool which allowed the Hasag concern to effectively control the situation in the camp whose administration, at different levels, had also been entrusted to prisoners cooperating with the Germans in exchange for better treatment. Manipulating the prisoners and their conduct was all the easier due to the fact that they lived in constant fear of being degraded to a lower category, which was equivalent to a death sentence (p. 239). The Jews constituted a part of this system, as its necessary supplement, in the sense that their situation was the worst. This had influenced their way of perceiving the outside reality. And thus, if they were, on the whole, inclined to regard the Germans (and to some extent also the Ukrainians) as enemies representing an almost devilish dimension of evil, the Poles represented for them everything that was once, in a sense, "theirs", but that had suddenly taken on the quality of strangeness and enmity, amid the camp reality. That is why, all instances of taking advantage by Poles of their better situation in the camp reality, were received by the Jews as something even worse than the German cruelty. No doubt, one was dealing here with a well-known psychological mechanism, in accordance with which one is always more inclined to be more critical of injustice or iniquity which is perpetrated by one's friends or relations. Objectively speaking, many Jews had survived thanks to the trade with the Poles; the latter had often taken advantage of the situation and they had charged outrageously high prices in jewelry for food supplies. Naturally, it was a phenomenon which existed not only at the junction point between the camp and the outside world, it also concerned relations among the Poles themselves amid the war realities, but as regards the Polish-Jewish relations, it must have taken on a special significance. Both individual and communal experiences create a certain picture of reality, and are conducive to shaping one's awareness in a very powerful way.

When this picture is preserved and becomes widespread throughout popular consciousness, it begins to live a life of its own and the minute it is preserved in print, the account acquires an additional legitimization and objectivity, obtaining the rank of the only and irrefutable truth. In this situation, it is more difficult to engage in an objective debate and much easier to arrive at rash generalizations. The material and data quoted by the author of the publication, as well as the very structure of her narration, the conclusions and statements of a more general character, should encourage one to take part in an objective and unprejudiced discussion of Polish-Jewish relations both in the camp realities and generally in the past. The courage and objectivity of Felicja Karey are guarantees that such a discourse, which would involve her participation, would be promising and important from the point of view of future perspectives of the dialogue between the Poles and the Jews. The two truths: the "Polish" and the "Jewish" would then serve a genuine understanding of the respective points of view and would have the power to change the negative stereotypes.



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