

ASSOCIATION OF THE ROMANIAN JEWS

VICTIMS OF THE HOLOCAUST

HOLOCAUST:

SURVIVORS RESPOND

Translated from Romanian by Petre Maria

(second year student at the College of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University)

Translation edited by Alexandra Beris

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Leonard Zaicescu – Survivor of “The train of death”

Question from the audience:

Please relate an instance you experienced during the tragic events of June 1941 in Iasi.

...We are standing in the courtyard of the police headquarters, gathered from all corners of the old Moldavian city, chased and hunted down like animals, and humiliated – young and old, men and women alike. A sea of people, all carrying death in their hearts. Thousands and thousands of souls, too many for anyone to count. And all of them Jews. Only Jews. Around us, a chain of gendarmes and SS troops, ghostly faces half-concealed by steel helmets, fingers on the trigger of their guns .

On the edge of the crowd, policemen and officers were stirring and screaming, all fully armed and accompanied by combat-dogs, ready to charge the prisoners and rip them apart at the slightest prompting.

Here and there, nests of machineguns could be seen, camouflaged by leaves and grass. Executioners with faces distorted by hatred were hitting us whenever they felt like it, using whatever was handy – rifle barrels, crowbars, pistol holsters. Incessantly, they kept hurling insults at us, trying their best to humiliate us.

“Judas, faster, move your ass! Back off, kike! Five steps back!” And again they would poke us with the bayonet, to make room for other unfortunates walking in through the gates of the police station.

Swept by the pervasive general unrest, our minds overwhelmed by the darkest thoughts, we could hardly control ourselves. Why were we here, for so many hours, without a bite to eat, without a drop of water? What was to come? Questions we could not answer, and which made us shiver. No one was privy to the destiny awaiting us. Then suddenly, rumors began to fly in a whisper, one more alarming than the other, one more maddening than the other. Throughout all that humming riddled with bad omens, my dad was squeezing my hand and trying to give me courage:

“They’ve all gone mad! Let’s not lose our temper! None of this can be true. You’ll see... we’ll go home!” Words which, evidently, even he didn’t believe ...

For some time now, uncertainty and the threat of death had ruled over that mass of people. The sun had risen in the sky, and the first cool morning hours had been replaced by a burning, drenching heat.

“Water, please...” – a tiny voice carries through. “I’m thirsty... water...” But who’s to take notice of the small boy with blond, curly hair?

We had all succumbed to a nameless fear, unable to find respite. Close to me, a still vigorous man kept mumbling strange words in a low voice, like a litany. In a deep trance, the man was humming his burial pray. I raised my eyes toward him and saw a frozen face bathed in tears. Oblivious to everything, he kept muttering the words that accompany Jews to their grave: *Eil mulei rahamin soihein bameroimim ...* As I stared at him, he seemed to understand my silent question.

“Nobody’s waiting for me at home anymore. My parents have been murdered, my wife and my child as well. Now, it’s my time to go” – spoke the stranger whose name I would never know.

It reeked of blood and death around us, and that smell had thrown us in a state of narcosis. It was as though our thoughts had been obliterated, and our senses numbed. Suddenly, the frail silence reigning for a moment was broken, pierced by the voices of German officers bellowing commands. The orders were repeated in Romanian. Then the rangers, police officers and servicemen of the Wehrmacht took firing position. A moment later, fire was opened on living targets. A deadly torrent of lead swept over the captive Jews, seeding dread and doom. Hell had descended on Earth!

The police courtyard, where the dead and living were intermingled in a pool of blood, was adjacent to the famous cinema ‘Sidoli’ on Victor Place street. Separating the two was a massive wall approximately 2 meters high, lined with glass chips along its top edge. A terrible obstacle for anyone who would consider escaping. But in those moments of endless madness when all reasoning dies, driven by hope and despair alike, many of those convicted without guilt or trial headed precisely toward that impassable obstacle. Some managed to scale the sharp ridge, shredding their garments in the process, their bare flesh slashed open, gushing blood. It was there, by that wall, that most found their death – among them my father’s brother, uncle Lupu. The massive glass and concrete structure quickly turned into a deadly wailing wall! But there was no other way out! That wall had to be scaled at all costs. That’s what I was thinking, along with all the others racing toward life or ... toward death. It was then that I thought of my father, who had lagged behind, likely wounded by a bullet. As I turned to him, he simply pushed me forward, encouraged me to go on:

“Run along! May God be with you!” And then, using all my strength to climb that hostile concrete mountain, I found myself near the top before I even knew it, palms covered in blood and knees smashed.

Through the maddening roar of shotguns, cries and moans, I heard someone calling out my name. It was a faint voice, like an illusion, a familiar and desperate voice. For a split second, I thought that it was just a figment of my mind. But then I turned my head and saw Aurel back there – Aurel Schwartz. It was really him, my class-mate and best friend, nicknamed “Pumpkin” by some because he was plump and clumsy at the gym. Aurel, my faithful comrade, was several feet below me and desperately trying to reach the top. He was not yet thirteen, the age of adulthood in the Jewish tradition. I held my hand out to him, to pull him up that last stretch. But at that very moment misfortune struck: A blast of machine-gun fire resounded briefly, like a shrill bark. I felt Pumpkin wince as though hit by lightning, then slowly relax his grip. It was the last handshake I would exchange with Aurel. The bullets pierced his chest, putting an end to his life. Not even thirteen...! My best friend, Aurel Schwartz, was the first one to die before my very eyes.

For a split second that could have cost me my life, I stopped to look at him. Up to this day, I can still see that image: the unnaturally widened eyes, the face frozen as though in a deep, eternal wonder. I started sobbing, deep hiccups curtailing my breath. And I just stood there, on the “death wall”, unmoved amidst

the stream of bullets whizzing by. Then, as though in a dream, I felt myself propelled over the wall and landed on the other side, where so many desperate people hoped to find salvation.

The one who pushed me off the wall , actually saving my life , was now clutching my hand and yelling at the top of his voice, to make sure I understood him:

“Hold on to me, death is everywhere. Toward the cinema!”

Only then did I recognize Tolea, the Macabi striker, under that face covered with a mixture of sweat, dust and blood . He was the first one to rescue me from the grip of death and guide my steps toward life!