

The Ghetto

BEFORE I was due to leave Poland a meeting was arranged for me — on the order of the Delegate of the Polish Government in London and of the Commander of the Underground Army — with two men who, formerly eminent in the Jewish community, were now directing the work of the Jewish Underground. One was the head of the Zionist organization, the other was the leader of the Jewish Socialist Alliance, the Bund. The latter also had the dangerous and arduous task of directing the work of a special department of the Delegate of the Polish Government which organized relief for the Jewish population and attempted to smuggle the most valuable inhabitants out of the ghetto.

We met at twilight in a huge, empty, and half-ruined house in the suburbs. The fact that they were both present at the same time was significant. It meant that the material I was to be given to transmit to the Polish and Allied governments contained nothing of a political nature and was not limited to either group. It constituted the expression and contained the information, sentiments, requests, and instructions of the entire Jewish population of Poland as a unit, a population that was at the moment dying as a unit.

What I learned at the meetings we held in that house and later, when I was taken to see the facts for myself, was horrible beyond description. I know history. I have learned a great deal about the evolution of nations, political systems, social doctrines,

methods of conquest, persecution, and extermination, and I know, too, that never in the history of mankind, never anywhere in the realm of human relations did anything occur to compare with what was inflicted on the Jewish population of Poland.

The two men were unforgettable, less like men than incarnations of mass suffering and nerves strained in hopeless effort. Both lived outside the ghetto but were able, by secret means, to enter and leave it as they pleased and carry on their work there. Inside the ghetto they looked, talked, and acted like the other inhabitants. To carry on their tasks outside they succeeded in changing their appearance so completely as to go absolutely undetected by the keenest scrutiny. The Bund leader in particular, with his distinguished gray hair and whiskers, ruddy complexion, erect carriage, and general air of good health and refinement, passed easily as a Polish 'nobleman.'

Before the war he had been a well-known lawyer with an excellent reputation as an expert in criminal law. Now he appeared before the German authorities as the owner of a large store, prosperous, dignified, and unruffled. How great an effort of will this pose must have necessitated I realized later when he accompanied me to the ghetto. The air of well-being and savoir-faire seemed to vanish instantly. The well-groomed Polish merchant underwent a sudden transformation and became a Jew, one of the thousands of wretched, exhausted, starving Jews that the pitiless Nazis tormented and hunted with inhuman vindictiveness.

The first thing that became clear to me as I sat there talking to them in the silence of the darkening Warsaw suburbs was the complete hopelessness of their predicament. For them, for the suffering Polish Jews, this was the end of the world. There was no possible escape for them or their fellows. This, too, was only part of the tragedy, only partially the cause of their despair and agony. They were not afraid of death, itself, and, indeed, accepted it as something almost inevitable. Added to this realization was the bitter knowledge that in this war, for them, there could be no hope of any victory whatsoever, none of the satisfaction which sometimes softens the prospect of death. The Zionist leader made this clear to me at once.

'You other Poles are fortunate,' he began. 'You are suffering, too. Many of you will die, but at least your nation goes on liv-

ing. After the war Poland will be resurrected. Your cities will be rebuilt and your wounds will slowly heal. From this ocean of tears, pain, rage, and humiliation your country will emerge again but the Polish Jews will no longer exist. We will be dead. Hitler will lose his war against the human, the just, and the good, but he will win his war against the Polish Jews. No — it will not be a victory; the Jewish people will be murdered.'

It was an evening of nightmare, but with a painful, oppressive kind of reality that no nightmare ever had. I sat in an old, rickety armchair as if I had been pinned there, barely able to utter a word while the torrents of their emotion broke over me. They paced the floor violently, their shadows dancing weirdly in the dim light cast by the single candle we could allow ourselves. It was as though they were unable even to think of their dying people and remain seated.

After we had talked a while, after they had tried for a while to convey to me some idea of what their plight was like, the Zionist leader, holding his head between his hands and crying like a whipped child, burst out:

'What's the good of talking? What reason do I have to go on living? I ought to go to the Germans and tell them who I am. If all the Jews are killed they won't need any leaders . . . But it's no use telling you all this. No one in the outside world can possibly understand. You don't understand. Even I don't understand, for my people are dying and I am alive.'

The older man tried to calm him, laying one hand on his shoulder while the other clenched and unclenched nervously at his side.

'We have work to do,' he said, 'and very little time to do it. We have to talk to the point.'

There was a pause while the Zionist leader struggled to regain his self-control. At length he smiled wistfully and apologized.

I told him that his apology was needless and that there was no need to worry about offending me by being overemotional. I understood how things were.

'I am here to help, if I can,' I added. 'I will be in London soon and in a position to obtain audiences with the Allied authorities.'

'Will you really?' The Zionist leader interjected hopefully. 'Do you think you will get to see Roosevelt and Churchill?'

'Perhaps. Or if not, then certainly someone close to them. I am going on an official mission on behalf of the Polish Underground. I will be accredited by the Polish Government in London. My status will be official and you must give me your official message to the outside world. You are the leaders of the Jewish Underground. What do you want me to say?'

They hesitated for a moment as if to consider all that they had to say and to select the phrases that were closest to their true feelings, that expressed their plight and their desires most significantly. The Bund leader spoke first, resting his hands on the table as though it helped him to concentrate on what he was about to say.

'We want you to tell the Polish and Allied governments and the great leaders of the Allies that we are helpless in the face of the German criminals. We cannot defend ourselves and no one in Poland can defend us. The Polish underground authorities can save some of us but they cannot save masses. The Germans are not trying to enslave us as they have other people; we are being systematically murdered.'

The Zionist broke in.

'That is what people do not understand. That is what is so difficult to make clear.'

I nodded my assent. The Bund leader continued:

'Our entire people will be destroyed. A few may be saved, perhaps, but three million Polish Jews are doomed. This cannot be prevented by any force in Poland, neither the Polish nor the Jewish Underground. Place this responsibility on the shoulders of the Allies. Let not a single leader of the United Nations be able to say that they did not know that we were being murdered in Poland and could not be helped except from the outside.'

This was the solemn message I carried to the world. They impressed it upon me so that it could not be forgotten. They added to it, for they saw their position with the clarity of despair. At this time more than 1,800,000 Jews had been murdered. These two men refused to delude themselves and foresaw how the United Nations might react to this information. The truth might not be believed. It might be said that this figure was exaggerated, not authentic. I was to argue, convince, do anything I could, use every available proof and testimonial, shout the truth till it could not be denied.

They had prepared me an exact statistical account of the Jewish mortality in Poland. I needed some particulars.

'Could you give me,' I asked, 'the approximate figures of the murder of the ghetto population?'

'The exact figure can be very nearly computed from the German deportation orders,' the Zionist leader informed me.

'You mean that every one of those who were presumably deported was actually killed?'

'Every single one,' the Bund leader asserted. 'Of course, the Germans kept up a pretense that this was not so. Even now, when there can be no doubt, letters are received from people whom we know to be dead, cheerful letters in which they inform their families and friends that they are healthy, working, and living on meat and white bread. But we know the truth and we can put you in a position to confirm it with your own eyes.'

'When did these deportations begin?'

'The first deportation order came in July. The German authorities demanded five thousand persons a day. They were supposed to be sent out of Warsaw to work. They were sent directly to the execution camps. It was then raised to six, seven, and finally to ten thousand a day. When Czerniakow, an engineer who was Chairman of the Jewish Community, received the Germans' demand for ten thousand people daily to report for "work," he committed suicide. He knew what it meant.'

'How many were "deported" altogether?'

'Over three hundred thousand. More than one hundred thousand are left and the deportations are still going on.'

I turned pale. It was now the beginning of October, 1942. In two and a half months, in one district in Poland, the Nazis had committed three hundred thousand murders. It was, indeed, the report of an unprecedented species of criminality that I had to bring to the outside world. But my report was not merely to be based on their uncorroborated word-of-mouth stories.

They offered to take me to the Warsaw ghetto so that I could literally see the spectacle of a people expiring, breathing its last before my eyes. They would take me into one of the many death camps where Jews were tortured and murdered by the thousands. As an eye-witness I would be much more convincing than a mere mouthpiece. At the same time they warned me that if I accepted

their offer I would have to risk my life to carry it out. They told me, too, that as long as I lived I would be haunted by the memory of the ghastly scenes I would witness.

I told them that I had to see these things for myself. Soon I hoped to reach the other side of the barricade and to have an opportunity to convince what was left of the civilized world of the facts. Unless I had first-hand acquaintance with what I had to report I did not feel equal to the task.

It was settled, then, that, as soon as possible, arrangements should be made for these visits to take place. I was to return to this house again to continue our discussions of how I could most effectively present their case to the rest of the world. I left them still standing in the nebulous, wavering light, two dejected shadows that wished me good night with a feeble warmth that denoted a trust in my person rather than any confidence in our enterprise.

When I returned again the scene and their persons had altered as little as the circumstances they described. No more fitting place for our conversation could have been imagined — the desolate ruin of a house, the dismal silence interrupted only by our voices and the moaning wind that seemed constantly on the verge of extinguishing the candle that cast wan, irregular patches of light into the blackness.

For a while we discussed my forthcoming trip to the ghetto, disposing mechanically of details like my attire and behavior as though we were pushing them out of the way of more important topics. Finally I asked them what they wanted me to say to the British and American authorities if they asked me how they could help. The answer I got was bitter and realistic. They talked like men who knew that most of the proposals they had to make could not be put into execution, who did not even hope they would be executed, but who had to offer them as the only possible means of putting an end to the suffering of their people.

The Zionist leader spoke first:

'Germany can be impressed only by power and violence. The cities of Germany ought to be bombed mercilessly and with every bombing, leaflets should be dropped informing the Germans fully of the fate of the Polish Jews, and we ought to threaten the entire German nation with a similar fate both during and after the war. We do not believe in and do not aim at a slaughter of the German

people but such a threat is the only possible way to check the German atrocities. Such a warning backed up by force might frighten the German people into putting enough pressure on their leaders to make them change their practices. Nothing else will.'

'We know,' the Bund leader added, 'that possibly this plan cannot be carried out, that it cannot fit into Allied military strategy, but we can't help that. The Jews and those who wish to help them cannot afford to approach this war from a purely military standpoint. Tell the Allied governments, if they want to help us, to issue official declarations to the German Government and people telling them that the consequences of continued persecution will be mass reprisals, the systematic destruction of the entire German nation.'

'I understand,' I said. 'I will do my best to tell them and make them understand what you have told me.'

'We demand still more,' said the Zionist leader. 'Hitler has said that all Germans, wherever they live or whatever they think, are one compact racial group. He has united them into a single army with the purpose of dominating the world. He is conducting a total war against civilization and his avowed purpose is to destroy the Jews completely. It is an unprecedented situation in history and can be dealt with only by unprecedented methods. Let the Allied governments, wherever their hand can reach, in America, England, and Africa, begin public executions of Germans, any they can get hold of. That is what we demand.'

'But that is utterly fantastic,' I said. 'A demand like that will only confuse and horrify all those who are sympathetic with you.'

'Of course,' the Zionist answered. 'Do you think I don't know it? We ask it because it is the only rebuttal to what is being done to us. We do not dream of its being fulfilled, but nevertheless we demand it. We demand it so people will know how we feel about what is being done to us, how helpless we are, how desperate our plight is, how little we stand to gain from an Allied victory as things are now.'

They paused for a moment as if to let the knowledge of their true condition sink into me. I felt tired and feverish. More and more these two frantic figures pacing the floor in the shadowy room, their steps echoing in the hollow silence, seemed like apparitions, their glances filled with a burden of despair, pain, and

hopelessness they could never completely express. Their voices were pitched very low, they hissed, they whispered, and yet I continually had the illusion that they were roaring. It seemed to me that I was listening to an earthquake, that I was hearing cracking, tearing sounds of the earth opening to swallow a portion of humanity. One could hear the cries and shouts of the frantic people falling into the chasm.

'It is impossible,' they hissed, raising their fists as if threatening all those who were on the other side of the barricade. 'The democracies cannot calmly put up with the assertion that the Jewish people in Europe cannot be saved. If American and British citizens can be saved, why can't evacuation of even the Jewish children be arranged on a large scale, of Jewish women, of the sick, the old? Offer the Germans an exchange. Offer them money. Why can't the lives of a few thousand Polish Jews be bought by the Allies?'

'How? How can this be done?' I asked, bewildered by these turbulent, desperate suggestions. 'It is opposed to all war strategy. Can we give our enemies money, can we give them back their soldiers to use against us in the front line?'

'That's just it. That's what we're up against. Everybody tells us, "This is contrary to the strategy of this war," but strategy can be changed, strategy can be adjusted. Let's adjust it to include the rescue of a fraction of the unhappy Jewish people. Why does the world let us all die? Haven't we contributed our share to culture, to civilization? Haven't we worked and fought and bled? Why do they fight for all the others? Why was it never said that strategy and tactics would be changed to correspond to the methods applied by the Germans to the Jewish population?'

I stood up suddenly.

'What plan of action do you want me to suggest to the Jewish leaders in England and America? They have something to say about the course of this war. They can act for you.'

The Bund leader came up to me in silence. He gripped my arm with such violence that it ached. I looked into his wild, staring eyes with awe, moved by the deep, unbearable pain in them.

'Tell the Jewish leaders that this is no case for politics or tactics. Tell them that the earth must be shaken to its foundations, the world must be aroused. Perhaps then it will wake up, under-

stand, perceive. Tell them that they must find the strength and courage to make sacrifices no other statesmen have ever had to make, sacrifices as painful as the fate of my dying people, and as unique. This is what they do not understand. German aims and methods are without precedent in history. The democracies must react in a way that is also without precedent, choose unheard-of methods as an answer. If not, their victory will be only partial, only a military victory. Their methods will not preserve what the enemy includes in his program of destruction. Their methods will not preserve us.'

He paused and for the first time released my arm from his grip. He paced about for a moment nervously and then came to a halt in front of me. He spoke slowly and with great deliberation as though each word were costing him an effort.

'You ask me what plan of action I suggest to the Jewish leaders. Tell them to go to all the important English and American offices and agencies. Tell them not to leave until they have obtained guarantees that a way has been decided upon to save the Jews. Let them accept no food or drink, let them die a slow death while the world is looking on. Let them die. This may shake the conscience of the world.'

I sank into my armchair. My whole body felt chilled and sore. I was shivering and I felt the pulses in my temples pounding. I rose to go.

'One moment more,' the Zionist leader said, 'this we did not intend to tell you, but I want you to know it. We do not demand such sacrifices from our leaders abroad out of cruelty. We expect to make them here ourselves. The ghetto is going to go up in flames. We are not going to die in slow torment, but fighting. We will declare war on Germany — the most hopeless declaration of war that has ever been made.'

The Bund leader appeared startled at first and then bent toward me to add his confirmation. He whispered delicately as if afraid that someone was lurking behind the wall or that the wind might take up his words and scatter them so that the plan would come prematurely to the ears of the Gestapo.

'We are organizing a defense of the ghetto,' the words trickled slowly from his pursed lips, 'not because we think it can be defended, but to let the world see the hopelessness of our battle — as

a demonstration and a reproach. We are even now negotiating with your commander for the arms we need. If we get them, then, one of these days, the deportation squad is going to get a bloody surprise.'

'We shall see,' the Zionist concluded, 'whether we Jews can still obtain the right to die fighting and not — as Hitler has ordered — to die suffering.'

Two days later I went to the Warsaw ghetto with the Bund leader and another of the Jewish Underground. The Germans, had, of course, designated the poorest district in Warsaw as the site of the ghetto. The houses were all old and shabby, and no more than two or three stories high. The streets were narrow and without more than a semblance of a pavement or sidewalk. Great gaps had been torn in this collection of hovels by the German bombardment and no repairs had ever been attempted — the heaps of rubble remained as they had fallen. A brick wall about eight feet high had been built around the entire, desolate area, from which all the 'Aryans' had been evacuated and into which more than four hundred thousand Jews had been forced.

I wore an old, shabby suit and a cap pulled down over my eyes. I tried to make myself look very small and thin. At my sides walked two typical inhabitants of the ghetto, wretched-looking, dressed in rags, scrawny and half-starved. We had reached the ghetto by a secret passage that must have been obvious to anyone who scrutinized the district at all carefully.

Adjoining the wall on the outside was a large open court that likewise surrounded nearly the entire ghetto. One of the buildings on this court was so constructed that its front door opened into the Aryan district, while an exit from its cellar led directly into the ghetto. This building gave many Jews the opportunity of contact with the outer world. With bribery, circumspection, a willingness to take the risk of being caught, and a thorough knowledge of the confusing cellars, the passage had become comparatively easy. Indeed, at that time, the building had become like a modern version of the river Styx which connected the world of the living with the world of the dead. Now that the Warsaw ghetto no longer even exists, destroyed in the heroic 'defense' my friends had promised, I can mention the building and its cellars with impunity. Now the friendly building can no more help the

unfortunate Polish Jews than I can harm them by revealing its secret.

Is it still necessary to describe the Warsaw ghetto? So much has already been written about it, there have been so many accounts by unimpeachable witnesses. A cemetery? No, for these bodies were still moving, were indeed often violently agitated. These were still living people, if you could call them such. For apart from their skin, eyes, and voice there was nothing human left in these palpitating figures. Everywhere there was hunger, misery, the atrocious stench of decomposing bodies, the pitiful moans of dying children, the desperate cries and gasps of a people struggling for life against impossible odds.

To pass that wall was to enter into a new world utterly unlike anything that had ever been imagined. The entire population of the ghetto seemed to be living in the street. There was hardly a square yard of empty space. As we picked our way across the mud and rubble, the shadows of what had once been men or women flitted by us in pursuit of someone or something, their eyes blazing with some insane hunger or greed.

Everyone and everything seemed to vibrate with unnatural intensity, to be in constant motion, enveloped in a haze of disease and death through which their bodies appeared to be throbbing in disintegration. We passed an old man standing against a wall staring lugubriously and with glassy eyes into space, and although he barely moved from his spot, he, too, seemed to be strangely animated, his body tormented by a force that made his skin twitch in little areas.

As we walked everything became increasingly unreal. The names of streets, shops, and buildings had been printed in the old Hebrew characters. My guides informed me that an edict had been issued forbidding the use of German or Polish for any inscriptions in the ghetto. As a result many of the inhabitants could not read the names at all. From time to time we passed a well-fed German policeman who looked abnormally bloated by contrast with the meagerness of those who surrounded him. Each time one approached we hastened our steps or crossed to the other side as though we had been contaminated.

We passed a miserable replica of a park — a little square of comparatively clear ground in which a half-dozen nearly leafless

trees and a patch of grass had somehow managed to survive. It was fearfully crowded. Mothers huddled close together on benches nursing withered infants. Children, every bone in their skeletons showing through their taut skins, played in heaps and swarms.

'They play before they die,' I heard my companion on the left say, his voice breaking with emotion.

Without thinking — the words escaping even before the thought had crystallized — I said:

'But these children are not playing — they only make-believe it is play.'

We heard the sound of a large number of footsteps rising and falling in unison. A group of about a hundred young men were approaching us. They marched in formation in the middle of the street and were accompanied by policemen. Their clothes were torn and dirty like the rest but they were obviously stronger, better-nourished. The reason was apparent. As they passed us I noticed that each carried a ragged bundle from which protruded the end of a loaf of bread and some green vegetable tips.

Their physical condition was indubitably better than that of their neighbors. But there was something uncanny, robotlike, about their appearance. They walked stiffly. The muscles on their faces seemed to have set rigidly into a mold of habitual, unbroken fatigue. Their eyes were glazed and blank and focused straight ahead as though nothing could distract their attention.

'Those are fortunate,' the Bund leader informed me. 'The Germans still find them useful. They can work repairing roads and tracks. They are protected as long as their hands last and their muscles move. Everyone in the ghetto envies them. We supply as many people as we can with forged documents proving that they hold similar jobs. Otherwise they would be murdered. We have saved thousands of lives this way. But this cannot work much longer.'

Frequently we passed by corpses lying naked in the streets.

'What does it mean?' I asked my guide. 'Why are they lying there naked?'

'When a Jew dies,' he answered, 'his family removes his clothing and throws his body in the street. If not, they have to pay the Germans to have the body buried. They have instituted a burial

tax which practically no one here can afford. Besides, this saves clothing. Here, every rag counts.'

I shuddered. A phrase came to my mind which I had heard often and thought I had never fully comprehended till that moment: *Ecce homo* — behold the man.

I saw an old, feeble man staggering along, lurching against the walls of the houses to keep from falling.

'I don't see many old people,' I said. 'Do they stay inside all day?'

The answer came in a voice that seemed to issue from the grave.

'No. Don't you understand the German system yet? Those whose muscles are still capable of any effort are used for forced labor. The others are murdered by quota. First come the sick and aged, then the unemployed, then those whose work is not directly connected with the German war needs, finally those who work on roads, in trains, in factories. Ultimately, they intend to kill us all.'

Suddenly my companions seized my arms. I saw nothing, did not know what was happening. I became frightened, thought I had been recognized. They rushed me through the nearest entrance.

'Hurry, hurry, you must see this. This is something for you to tell the world about. Hurry!'

We reached the top floor. I heard the sound of a shot from somewhere. They knocked at a door. It opened half-way to disclose a white, emaciated face.

'Do your windows face the street?' the leader asked.

'No, the courtyard. What do you want?'

The Bund leader slammed the door shut furiously. He rushed to the opposite door and battered upon it. It opened. He pushed aside a young boy, who ran back into the room with frightened cries. They urged me to the window, pulled down the shade and told me to look through the slit at the side.

'Now you'll see something. The hunt. You would never believe it if you did not see it for yourself.'

I looked through the opening. In the middle of the street two boys, dressed in the uniform of the Hitlerjugend, were standing. They wore no caps and their blond hair shone in the sun. With

their round, rosy-cheeked faces and their blue eyes they were like images of health and life. They chattered, laughed, pushed each other in spasms of merriment. At that moment, the younger one pulled a gun out of his hip pocket and then I first realized what I was witnessing. His eyes roamed about, seeking something. A target. He was looking for a target with the casual, gay absorption of a boy at a carnival.

I followed his glance. For the first time I noticed that all the pavements about them were absolutely deserted. Nowhere within the scope of those blue eyes, in no place from which those cheerful, healthy faces could be seen was there a single human being. The gaze of the boy with the gun came to rest on a spot out of my line of vision. He raised his arm and took careful aim. The shot rang out, followed by the noise of breaking glass and then the terrible cry of a man in agony.

The boy who had fired the shot shouted with joy. The other clapped him on the shoulder and said something to him, obviously complimentary. They smiled at each other and stood there for a moment, gay and insolent, as though aware of their invisible audience. Then they linked their arms and walked off gracefully toward the exit of the ghetto, chatting cheerfully as if they were returning from a sporting event.

I stood there, my face glued to the window. In the room behind me there was a complete silence. No one even stirred. I remained where I was, afraid to change the position of my body, to move my hand or relax my cramped legs. I was seized with such panic that I could not make the effort of will to take a single step or force a word out of my throat. It seemed to me that if I made the slightest movement, if a single muscle in my body so much as trembled, I might precipitate another scene such as I had just witnessed.

I do not know how long I remained there. Any interval could have passed, I was so completely unconscious of time. At length I felt someone's hand on my shoulder. Repressing a nervous start, I turned around. A woman, the tenant of the apartment, was standing there, her gaunt face the color of chalk in the dim light. She gestured at me.

'You came to see us? It won't do any good. Go back, run away. Don't torture yourself any more.'

My two guides were sitting motionlessly on a dilapidated couch, their heads between their hands. I approached them.

'Let's go,' I said, stammering. 'Take me out of here. . . . I am very tired. I must go immediately. I will come back some other time. . . .'

They rose quickly and silently and placed themselves at my sides. We clattered hurriedly down the broken staircase without saying a word. In the streets I almost broke into a run while they kept up with me as best they could. I kept going this way, at a half-run, through the door and cellars of the secret building until we reached the door that led to the other side.

It is hard to explain why I ran. There was no occasion for speed and, if anything, our haste could have aroused suspicion. But I ran, I think, simply to get a breath of clean air and a drink of water. Everything there seemed polluted by death, the stench of rotting corpses, filth and decay. I was careful to avoid touching a wall or a human being. I would have refused a drink of water in that city of death if I had been dying of thirst. I believe I even held my breath as much as I could in order to breathe in less of the contaminated air.

Two days later I repeated my visit to the ghetto, to memorize more vividly my visual impressions. With my two guides I walked again for three hours through the streets of this inferno, the better to testify the truth before the leading men and women of the free countries of the world. I reported my experiences to outstanding members of the British and American governments, and to the Jewish leaders of both continents. I told what I had seen in the ghetto to some of the world's great writers — to H. G. Wells, Arthur Koestler, members of the P.E.N. Club — as they could describe it with greater force and talent than I. I told it to others, too, less well-known and to one, in particular, who will never be heard from again.

In London, five weeks later, a meeting was arranged for me. To me, it was one of innumerable such meetings and not the most important. Since my arrival in London I had been swamped with literally hundreds of conferences, conversations, contacts, and reports. I had been involved in them from 9:00 A.M. to midnight every day, with hardly a respite or an intermission except for absolute necessities. This time I expected one of the leaders of

the Jewish Bund. His name was Szmul Zygelbojm. He had been in Poland until 1940, had worked in the Jewish Underground, had been a member of the Council of the Warsaw ghetto and had, I believe, even been held for a time as a hostage by the Nazis.

We were to meet in the Stratton House, near Piccadilly, a noisy beehive of a building in the street of the same name, the seat of the Polish Ministry of the Interior. When I entered one of the small rooms Zygelbojm was already there, sitting in an office chair and waiting quietly. I was tired and studied him casually while we introduced ourselves. Since the war I have had to deal, without exaggeration, with thousands of people and always with an insufficient amount of time. Consequently, I have had to learn to size up character at a glance. It had become a fixed habit with me to define quickly the mentality and habits of anyone I met so as to do my work most effectively in the shortest possible time.

To me, Zygelbojm looked like a type I had often encountered among Jewish leaders. He had the hard, suspicious glance of the proletarian, the self-made man who could not be cajoled, and was constantly on the alert for falsehood. His early life had probably been severe — he may have started out by running errands for a tailor or perhaps had been a street cleaner. I shall have to be careful and exact, I thought.

'What do you want to hear about?' I asked.

'About Jews, my dear man. I am a Jew. Tell me what you know about the Jews in Poland.'

'Are you entitled to see the material I received at the joint conferences with the leaders of the Jewish Bund and the Zionists?'

'Yes, I am. I represent the Jewish Bund in the Polish National Council and I was one of the leaders of the Bund in Poland.'

I began my story in a cut-and-dried fashion. I had finally, after much experience, mastered a kind of formula for these situations. I had found that, on the whole, the most effective way of getting my material across was not to soften or interpret it, but to convey it as directly as possible, reproducing not merely ideas and instructions but the language, gestures and nuances of those from whom the material came. That has been my job — faithful, concrete reproduction.

Zygelbojm listened intently, thirstily, with an avid desire for information it was impossible to satisfy. He sat rigidly with his

legs far apart and braced, his body inclined forward, a hand on each knee. His dark, wide-open eyes were staring fixedly at a point on the ceiling far behind me. They never blinked. The expression on his face hardly varied, not a muscle of it moving, except for the occasional contortion of his cheek in a nervous tic.

'Conditions are horrible. The people in the ghetto live in constant agony, a lingering, tormenting death,' I was reciting almost by rote. 'The instructions their leaders gave me cannot be carried out for political and tactical reasons. I spoke to the British authorities. The answer was the one your leaders in Poland told me to expect — "No, it is impossible, it can't be done."'

Zygelbojm rose abruptly and advanced a step or two toward me. His eyes snapped with anger and contempt. He dismissed what I had just told him with a sharp wave of his hand that made me feel as though I had been slapped in rebuke.

'Listen,' he almost shouted. 'I didn't come here to talk to you about what is happening here. Don't tell me what is said and done here. I know that myself. I came to you to hear about what is happening *there*, what *they* want *there*, what they say *there!*'

I answered with brutal simplicity and directness.

'Very well, then. This is what *they* want from their leaders in the free countries of the world, this is what *they* told me to say: "Let them go to all the important English and American offices and agencies. Tell them not to leave until they have obtained guarantees that a way has been decided upon to save the Jews. Let them accept no food or drink, let them die a slow death while the world looks on. Let them die. This may shake the conscience of the world."'

Zygelbojm started as though he had been bitten and began to pace around the room agitatedly, almost breaking into a run. Worried lines formed between his contracted eyebrows and he held one hand to his head as though it ached.

'It is impossible,' he finally said, 'utterly impossible. You know what would happen. They would simply bring in two policemen and have me dragged away to an institution. Do you think they will let me die a slow, lingering death? Never . . . they would never let me.'

We talked at great length. I gave him all the details of my

instructions. I told him all I knew about the Jews in Poland and all I had seen. He asked innumerable questions, wanted more and more concrete and even trivial details. Possibly he felt that if the picture I gave him was clear and minute enough, he could suffer together with them, be united with them. He asked me what the houses looked like, what the children looked like, what were the exact words of the woman who put her hands on my shoulder while I was watching the 'hunt.' What was my impression of the Bund leader, what did he wear, how did he talk, was he nervous? He asked me what the corpses of the dead Jews on the ghetto streets looked like and did I remember the words of the child dying in the street.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Ah, I forget.' You can't talk Yiddish, you are not a Jew.'

I did my best to satisfy his thirst for facts and details, emptying my memory of everything that it had stored up for just such an occasion. At the end of the interview I was utterly fatigued, my powers of response completely sapped. He looked even more tired, his eyes nearly starting out of their sockets, and the tic occurring with increasing frequency. We shook hands, Zygelbojm gazing directly into my eyes, intent and questioning.

'Mr. Karski, I'll do everything I can to help them. Everything! I'll do everything they demand — if only I am given a chance. You believe me, don't you?'

My answer was rather cold and impatient. I felt tired, frustrated, strained. So many interviews, so many meetings . . .

'Of course I believe you. I feel certain you will do all you can and all they demand. My God, every single one of us tries to do his best.'

At the bottom, I think, I felt that Zygelbojm was boasting or, at least, thoughtlessly promising more than he could perform. I felt nettled, harassed. He asked so many needless questions which had no place in the interview. 'Do I believe?' What difference did it make if I did or did not? I no longer knew what I believed and what I did not believe. He had no right to perplex me further. I had enough of my own troubles. . . .

Some weeks later I had all but forgotten Zygelbojm in the endless grind of interviews and meetings. I was sitting in my room in Dolphin Square during a brief respite, resting, when the tele-

phone rang. I deliberately let it ring three or four times and then picked up the receiver reluctantly. It was an employee of the Stratton House.

'Mr. Karski, I was told to inform you that Szmul Zygelbojm, a member of the Polish National Council and Representative of the Bund in London committed suicide yesterday. He left some notes, saying that he did all he could to help the Jews in Poland but failed, that all his brothers will perish, and that he is joining them. He turned on the gas in his apartment.'

I hung up.

At first I felt nothing at all, then a wave of mingled shock, grief, and guilt. I felt as though I had personally handed Zygelbojm his death warrant, even though I had been only the instrument. Painfully, it occurred to me that he might have found my answer to his last question cold and unsympathetic. I had become, I thought to myself, so cynical, so quick and harsh in my judgment, that I could no longer estimate the degree of self-sacrifice possible to a man like Zygelbojm. For days afterwards I felt all my confidence in myself and in my work vanishing and I deliberately forced myself to work twice as hard in order to avoid these intolerable reflections.

Since then I have often thought about Szmul Zygelbojm, one of the most tragic victims of this war and its horrors. For Zygelbojm's death did not have a shadow of consolation. It was self-imposed and utterly hopeless. I wonder now how many people can understand what it means to die as he did for a cause that would be victorious, yet with the certain knowledge that victory would not stave off the sacrifice of his people, the annihilation of all that was most meaningful to him. Of all the deaths that have taken place in this war, surely Zygelbojm's is one of the most frightening, the sharpest revelation of the extent to which the world has become cold and unfriendly, nations and individuals separated by immense gulfs of indifference, selfishness, and convenience. All too plainly, it marks the fact that the domination of mutual suspicion, estrangement, and lack of sympathy has progressed so far that even those who wish and strive for a remedy by every possible means are powerless and able to accomplish pitifully little.

CHAPTER 30

'To Die in Agony...'

A FEW days after my second visit to the Warsaw ghetto, the Bund leader was to arrange an opportunity for me to see the Jewish death camp.

The camp was located near the town of Belzec about one hundred miles east of Warsaw and was well-known all over Poland from the tales of horror that were circulated about it. The common report was that every Jew who reached it, without exception, was doomed to death. The Bund leader had never been in it but had the most detailed information in its operations.

I was to go on a day when executions were scheduled. The information was easy to obtain because many of the Estonian, Latvian, and Ukrainian attendants who worked there under Gestapo supervision were in the service of Jewish organizations. Not from any humane or political consideration, but for money. I was to wear the uniform of one of the Estonians who would stay home while I went in with his papers. I was assured that chaos, corruption, and panic prevailed in the camp to such an extent that there was no chance of my disguise being penetrated. Moreover, the whole expedition was perfectly organized in advance. I would go through a door habitually guarded only by Germans and Ukrainians, for an Estonian might sense a stranger in me. The Estonian uniform, itself, constituted a pass, so that my papers would probably not be inspected. To make the camouflage more foolproof, still another bribed Estonian militia man would