

# The Uprising in Sobibor

By a participant, THOMAS BLATT

ONE April day [1943], I together with the last Jew of the little town of Izbica, Poland, entered the gate marked "Sondercommando — Sobibor." It seemed to me I was entering a beautiful settlement. This was a death camp? Little paved streets, flowers alongside. On the right, a side rail resembling a railway station — a platform nearby. Little tidy houses in Tyrolian style. At the cross-streets wood carved signs giving directions to the baths, canteen, theatre, etc., as for example, a waiter with a tray to point the way to the mess hall. I noticed, too, that the villas ironically had names like: *Gottes Heimat* (God's House), *Schwalbennest* (Swallow's Nest), and others no less idyllic. Surely it was not possible for such a spot to be an extermination camp!

Our group was halted on the way to the gas chambers, and a fat SS man selected a few of us, including myself, a youth of 15, as replacement for workers, who had just been gassed. The remainder, including my mother, father, and brother, went the way of NO RETURN...

Under the direction of Sasha Pechersky, Leon Feldhandler and a few others, a secret group was formed to organize an uprising and destroy the camp. From a few plans they chose the following:

On a specific day, between 4 and 5 P.M., certain prisoners would lure the Germans and Ukrainians under some pretext to an unsuspected place and silently kill them. Meanwhile, those prisoners who had access to the Ukrainian guard's rooms as "*Putzers*" (shoeshiners), and others, would steal available guns and bring them to the carpenter shop.

About 5 P.M., when the bugler as usual sounded the end of work, all would return to the barracks for roll call. Now the last act would be played — the open revolt. All of us would throw ourselves on the gates and barber wire. A special group would take the weapon storeroom and cover the escape...

The hands of the clock moved lazily to the fateful hour. It was Oct. 14th, 1943. The sun was inclining slowly in the west. It was a beautiful day... Would I live to see tomorrow?

It was close to 4 o'clock. All was quiet. Everything appeared normal. The tension was unbearable. I watched through the open door for the arrival of the conspirators.

The hands passed four. Not again postponed!

“They’re coming,” whispered my friend Wycen. I looked out and saw “Kali Mali” coming through the gate with a basket... His real name was Szuajero, and he was a Russian Jew, an engineer, about 25 years old. He was led by Benia, a Kapo, also in the conspiracy, giving it a natural look. (With a Kapo they had authority to move freely between sections.) They hid in the clothing of the storeroom.

A young boy named Fibbs went up to a German standing nearby, and asked, would he be so kind as to go to the storeroom to try on a new leather coat, especially set aside for him? (Better clothing was saved and sent to German families.) Unsuspecting, he entered.

So It had begun. I left my regular place of work and went to the sorting area next to gate one. As usual, a certain Dutch Jew was standing guard to prevent movement between sections. Because he was so close to the storeroom, my job was to see if he realized what was taking place (he was not in on the plot), and to prevent him, or anyone else for that matter, from leaving or going in.

Tension mounting, I watched the storeroom door.

Meanwhile, in one of the many areas of the storeroom, a few “subdued” prisoners were sorting clothing: children’s to children’s, men’s to men’s, women’s to women’s. Off to one side, lay the bait — shiny and smooth — a long leather coat.

The SS man entered. The workers bent to their tasks. An order from the Kapo, and two inmates fetched the coat and helped the German into it. In a split second, like in a film, the picture changed. The imprisoned arms could not move from the sleeves. The flash of an axe in the hands of Kali Mali, and the Nazi fell with a split head. The workers finished him off with their knives and in a moment the body was covered with piles of clothing, and the blood was covered with sand. The trap was waiting for the next victim.

Fibbs came-out of the storeroom and called the next German. I was no longer tense. I became relaxed and calm. I knew there was no turning back now. “The die was cast.”

At Fibbs’s beckoning, the SS man Beckman started for the storeroom. He got to the door, hesitated for a moment as if sensing something, then headed for the valuables storeroom, where gold and diamonds of the dead were kept. Here, despite unfavorable conditions, he also was liquidated. The next victim was SS Stoybel.

Then a 10-year-old boy named Drescher, sent as a courier from the first section, arrived and told us that the vice-commandant of the camp, Untersturmfuerer Neumann, had been killed there, as well as Grenzschutz, Getzinger and the Ukrainian guard Klatke. He gave us a blow-by-blow account:

Neumann, on horseback, was approached by a tailor who asked him to try on his uniform which was ready (the shops in the camps worked

exclusively for the Germans). The tall handsome officer tied the reins and went in. He took off his holster with revolver, then his jacket. Pretending to measure him, the tailor positioned him with his back to the Jewish accomplice. Once, twice, with the hatchet, and the German went to the other world. Only the loud neighing of his horse broke the stillness...

Grenzschutz was killed in the shoemaker's shop. When he put on his shoes for a fitting, Arkady Wycen, standing behind him, carefully took aim, and with one blow of the axe, finished him. They had barely time to hide his body and cover the blood with sand, when in came Klatke, the Ukrainian, calling his chief to the telephone. He never left. In similar fashion Getzinger was liquidated.

All was well so far. I stood and waited impatiently by the gate. The older Jews, realizing by now what was going on, began to complain — that it was all unnecessary — we would have been able to live a while longer in peace — and now what will happen?

"My Dutchman," now suspecting something, asked why SS Wolf was still in the storeroom. Nervously I explained we were making a revolt, and Wolf was finished. He wanted to warn a friend in another section, but I explained he couldn't leave. However, realizing I wouldn't be able to keep him, and he could unwittingly betray our action, I called a tall Jew named Sender, who forcibly took him into the labyrinth of suitcases, and under threat of death ordered him to be quiet.

A bugle resounded from the tower — the end of work. The Kapos led the inmates to the dormitory barracks. Everything appeared as usual. Only then did I notice how many people still did not know what was going on. Whoever was aware was not thinking of bread — he was getting ready. The line for rations, at first almost as long as usual, quickly melted down...

The decisive moment was drawing near. Procrastination could be dangerous; the absence of the Germans could be noticed. I was in the locksmith's shop in the first section, run by 20-year-old Stanislaw Sjmyzner. He was examining a rifle that the 10-year-old "bootblack" Drescher had stolen from the Ukrainian guards and smuggled in with a sack of brooms.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, the SS supervisor of barracks construction appeared. He was asked to go to the barracks concerning a "broken" bunk. There he, too, was killed with an axe.

In the roll call square there was now intensified movement. Some were bidding each other farewell, realizing they might never see each other again; others prayed; those more practical searched feverishly for money and valuables, which not so long ago had absolutely no worth, and now in case of a successful escape would be indispensable.

The guards, stationed on towers and among the barbed wire fences, for the time being suspected nothing. They probably thought this was usual for

this time of day in preparation for the roll call. Nervously we waited. The tension mounted.

## The Escape

Bulges in jackets and coats betrayed the presence of axes and knives behind belts. One more minute, and the revolt, inspired by the fury of revenge and hope, would burst forth. I saw Sasha Pechersky, the organizer of the rebellion, standing on a table, addressing the crowd: "Brothers," he said, "our moment of destiny has arrived. Our organized group has killed most of the Germans. Now all of us will rise up against our oppressors. We don't expect to survive. Our real objective is to destroy this death factory, to render it useless and, in fighting, at least to die with honor. However, whoever should by chance survive, he should remember his duty is to be a witness — to tell the world what happened here."

Somebody shouted "Hurrah, hurrah!" Suddenly there was pandemonium. The crowd rushed toward the main gate. A Ukrainian guard, riding through just then, was toppled from his motorcycle, and gun taken, before being trampled to death by the onrushing prisoners. The guards were completely taken by surprise. Their superiors already killed, they awaited their orders in vain. Some 15 feet from me I saw a guard, stunned, rifle in one hand, turning around on one spot.

I found myself among a group running towards the main gate. Already behind us was the gate of the rally square; we kept on running.

Suddenly shots. It was the German cook. Protected by the canteen wall, he was shooting from behind the corner. The remainder of the Nazi crew began to rally from their stupor and opened disorderly fire. I was at the forefront, under fire. We retreated a few yards. The masses, however, pushed us forward, till I found myself with a few others in the guards' corridor between barbed wire fences. Possibly, in the confusion, we had run into the entrance. In this way, we did not have to pass two barbed wire fences, and a wide deep and steep moat filled with water — they were already behind us. Ahead of us, only one more barbed wire fence (we had already shut off the electricity), and 15 yards of mine fields.

We stopped. Someone was trying to cut a hole in the wire fence with a shovel. Beside him stood Stanislaw, rifle to shoulder, calmly aiming and shooting in the direction of the machine guns. I marvelled at his composure.

Our group was crawling through. Behind us new escapees pressed on, and not waiting to crawl through, tried to climb over the fence. While I was only half-way through, the fence, under the combined weight of so many, fell on top of me. Possibly this saved my life, for lying under the wires, trampled by the stampeding crowd, I saw mines exploding every few

seconds. Although we had planned to touch them off with bricks and wood, no one did. They couldn't wait, they preferred sudden death to a moment more in that hell. And I realized, had I gotten through, I would have been killed with them.

The combined noises of rifles, exploding mines, grenades and chatter of machine guns assaulted my ears. Corpses were everywhere. The Nazis kept a distance, shooting, and in our hands were only primitive knives and hatchets.

The first wave of escapees had passed over me. I had to think fast. I tried to extricate myself. It was relatively easy. I simply slid out from under my leather coat (stolen in preparation) and left it tangled there.

I ran through the mine fields, jumped over the wire fence holding the sign "caution — mines," and I was outside the camp. Now to make it to the woods ahead of me. It was so close...

Ahead of me — stooped figures, running cautiously. We were the last of the fugitives. Down I went a few times, each time thinking I was hit. Each time I got up and ran further.... 100 yards... 50 more yards... 20 yards... and at last — the forest...

Behind us — blood and ashes.

## Postscript

Watching the *Holocaust* [on TV], I was taken by surprise by the dramatization of the actual revolt in the death camp Sobibor, of which I was a part.

It was realistically done. However, it gave the impression that *only* Russian prisoners-of-war organized the revolt. I would like to set the record straight. The prisoners-of-war, like all the rest of us in that camp, were *Jews*. The organizers were mixed — civilians from ghettos, with a few Jewish prisoners-of-war. What is worth noting is that the Germans themselves, referring to Sobibor, used the words "Jewish uprising," in their official documents (AMSW — the files of the German gendarmerie #107-K2). Only twice was the word "uprising" used by the Nazis: once, referring to the Warsaw Ghetto, and again regarding Sobibor.

The Sobibor uprising was the most efficient and successful revolt in any German camp during World War II. Ninety percent of SS leaders were killed, and over 300 prisoners escaped. Of these, unfortunately, only 30 survived the war and 14 are alive to-day.

*December, 1978*

Mr. Blatt's Credentials  
(Translation)

Jewish Historical Institute  
WARSAW

Warsaw 10. V. 1957

General Swiarczewski Blvd. 79

L.Dz. 789/57 S.G.

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that Tomasz Blatt, son of Leon and Felicija, born on April 15, 1927 in Izbica, stayed during Hitler's regime in the ghetto of Izbica (District of Lublin). In October 1942 he ran away from the ghetto but having been recognized as a Jew, he was put in prison in Stryj (District of Lwow) from which he succeeded in escaping at the end of January 1943. On returning to Izbica he was taken with his parents and his brother in April 1943 to the extermination camp at Sobibor. Tomasz's family was gassed immediately on their arrival in the camp. On October 14, 1943, during and uprising in the camp, together with other prisoners, he regained freedom. Following this he was hiding out in various hideouts until the liberation of July 22, 1944.

The above statements were certified on the basis of materials from the archives in the Jewish Historical Institute.

Chief of Archives

Director of JHI

Stamp

(signed) T. Berenstein

Prof. B. Mark