



MARIA MATUSZCZAK

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(A Pawiak prisoner from 9 December 1943 to 24 January 1944)

YET ANOTHER ACT OF THE PAWIAK EPIC

I am going to tell the story of one of my fellow inmates from Pawiak prison, who, together with me and 42 other women, shared cell no. 44 in so-called 'Serbia' (the women's ward).

I was arrested at midday on 9 December 1943. Without any explanations, in an elegant Mercedes car, I was transported to the Gestapo HQ on aleja Szucha, thrown into a small room together with eleven other people of both sexes, from where, after a few hours, I was delivered to Pawiak prison in an ordinary truck, called the "shed."

There was a so-called quarantine in the basement of Pawiak prison, that is ten cells for one person each; 15 or 20 of us were put into one cell like that, depending on the "frequency."

Cell no. 8 – a death cell – where only Polish women sentenced to death and all Jewish women delivered to the Gestapo were thrown (literally thrown), was located right next to cell no. 7, in which I and 16 other people were locked up.

Shouting, moaning, sounds of hitting, orders "Down" or "Shut up! Do not scream!" came to us from cell no. 8 day and night. The period of time between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. was an exception; at that time, the prisoners from cell no. 8 were taken out to be executed by the heroic soldiers of the Third Reich, so that they could put new victims in the hospitable walls of the cell.

On 13 December 1943, prisoners from the men's part of Pawiak prison working on the demolition of the walls of the burnt Ghetto came across a bunker in which a girl was



lying, showing hardly any sign of life. With extreme caution, so as not to draw the attention of the gendarme guarding the place, one of them crawled into the bunker. It turned out that during the April events in the Ghetto in 1943, a fifteen-year-old Helenka S. had been crushed by a burning wooden beam in such a way that both her feet were so burnt that she could not move. She remained alone in the bunker.

There was a well in the bunker and some food in the form of two sacks of flour and finely ground barley. The accumulated rubble perfectly camouflaged the entrance to the hiding place, simultaneously letting a dim sunbeam in, and – above all – not preventing access to air. When she was found by the prisoners, she was extremely exhausted. After having been under the rubble for nine months, eating only raw flour and groats, wearing completely rotten clothes – constantly lying down – she appeared to be a wild animal rather than a living human being.

The prisoners looked after her. On the following day, risking their own lives – they brought her some fat, bread and sugar from Pawiak prison, from the parcels that they had received from their homes. Every day, one of the prisoners sneaked into the bunker and left at least a little food.

Then one day, right before Christmas, our activity at the bunker drew the attention of a gendarme. Furious, mumbling some unintelligible curses in German and threatening the whole group he was guarding with death, he stormed into the bunker and dragged out the wreck of a person who had once been a young girl. He put her against a heap of rubble, moved away a few steps, re-cocked his rifle, fired and... missed.

It was astonishing. He stopped swearing, shook his head a few times, and eventually uttered, "I will spare your life; we will see what happens later. I am taking you to Pawiak prison."

A strange procession entered the walls of Pawiak prison; an angry, panting gendarme escorting a dozen or so prisoners who took turns carrying some object.

The Pawiak prison was buzzing with activity. There were phone calls made to the Gestapo HQ on aleja Szucha and phone calls made back from there. What should happen to Helenka? In accordance with German laws, she should be executed within twenty-four hours. But the Nazi beasts deigned to become interested in the incredible story of Helenka, surviving alone for nine months, and ordered her to be brought to aleja Szucha. There, in front of



the gathered Gestapo “dignitaries,” Helenka had to recount her story in detail. She was treated like a monkey in a circus, touched with fingers, examined from all sides. Nine Gestapo men took Helenka and got in a vehicle. They wanted to be taken to the place in which the girl had been found. They examined the place, were surprised and eventually returned to aleja Szucha. There, after a long debate, one of the *Übermenschen* said to Helenka: “We are going to spare your life. You will work; you are returning to Pawiak prison for the time being.”

After two weeks in cell no. 7 in quarantine, I was transferred to a so-called permanent cell, cell no. 44. This was also where Helenka S. had been put. There were 44 of us in total.

Helenka was so thin that all body positions – except for a lying position – caused her pain. She was the only one out of all of us who was permitted to lie down on her mattress during the day. The Pawiak prison authorities ordered the sanitation unit to have her under their special care. She received food from the hospital kitchen, pap twice a day, energizing injections every day, medicaments etc.

Having learnt about the story of Helenka and received the Gestapo’s permission, the prison *Patronat* provided her with clothes. She received a dress, sweater, overcoat and stockings, in that order. Finally, the crowning gift was a pair of boots. They had wooden soles and green linen uppers, and they were Helenka’s pride and joy. She was recovering fast. She started to digest food in a normal way; every day, her face was becoming less pale and brighter.

Right after New Year’s Day, on 3 or 4 January, 1944, some half an hour after the evening roll-call, we heard the scrape of the key in the lock. It was amazing to us. After the evening roll-call, we were generally given some respite, which we longed for, and unfortunately which was full of fearful waiting. Standing to attention as straight as a ramrod, we heard the voice of a *Scharführer*, called *Mussolini*, because he resembled that total clown.

“Is there Helena S. in this room?”

“Present.”

“Oh, so it is you? Very well.”

The door slammed shut. There was a dead silence. And after a moment, a hubbub of voices. What did he want? Why did he ask about Helenka at that time? Maybe she would already



go to work? Or maybe... Nobody dared to utter what we were all thinking. But the very chief of the Gestapo said that she would not... Helenka did not sleep during that night. She sat on her mattress muttering something to herself. At dawn, she came up to one of her fellow inmates: "Madam, surely they will not execute me. Surely, if they had wanted to kill me, they would not have been looking after me so much and first of all – they would not have given me the boots." That last argument seemed so convincing to Helenka that she smiled now completely calm.

At 11 a.m., the *wachmeister* Stalska entered the cell and with an angelic smile addressed Helenka, "Take your overcoat and come to the administrative office to be assigned to labour." There was a sigh of relief.

Helenka went downstairs, led by the German woman. They went past the administrative office, past cell no. 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 - in front of Helenka, the heavy door opened of cell no. 8, that is the death cell.

That evening, she was pushed in by force and tortured until she lost consciousness; on the morning of the following day, when we were in the middle of our daily terrible walk around the courtyard, she set off on her last journey, through the low iron door that separated the Serbia part from the men's part of the prison, which led her towards freedom but also death. A small, iron, cruel door with loathsome words *Tür zu*.

Two hours later, Helenka's boots returned to the prison storeroom.

[a handwritten comment: Surname Helena Szyldkret]