

The Ghetto Slaughters in Stolin, Rubel, and David-Horodok through the eyes of a survivor

Introduction

A letter dated January 11, 1946, describes the details of the murders perpetrated on the Jews of the cities of Stolin, Rubele and David-Horodok. The letter was received from a young man named Michael Nosanchuk by his brother Boris Nosanchuk of Windsor, Ontario, Canada. The author of the letter was the sole survivor of his family and one of a mere handful of Jews who survived from the above mentioned cities. Miraculously he saved himself in the midst of the massacres.

The letter is given here, exactly as it was written, unedited. It needs no commentary.

The letter

Today is the luckiest day of my life. That is how I felt upon reading a letter written in my brother's hand.

How many days and nights have I thought of only one thing. Will you ever know of the dark fate which befell us? Fleeing the ill-fated ghetto from the Germans' murderous hands, to wander in muck, woods and swamps, all alone in a manner worse than an animal. My only thought was how does one inform my brother and sister? Will at least one of our family know of my death and what I went through?

More than once I wanted to put an end to my life, but thinking of you strengthened my will to live. I kept on hoping, perhaps I will live. And so I endured all with the greatest of courage.

In 1941, about the 16th of Av (it was a Sunday as far as I remember), there took place the gruesome pogrom in David-Horodok. With the excuse that labor battalions were being formed, all men, including children the age of twelve, were gathered, beaten and driven out of the city. They were shot and many were buried alive.

I was then in Rubel, unaware of anything. I was possessed with a desire to catch fish, so I went out on the river. Our Aunt Goldie's son, Jacob, remained at home and sat around the table where he made harnesses. With him were gathered all his hasidim friends. I invited him to come with me, but he began to make sport of me and joked that he would come with a wagon and pick up the fish. I left alone.

About five in the afternoon, I heard the shooting of guns, one after the other. My heart felt that something is wrong. My heart was pounding harder and harder. I hid myself deep in the bushes and waited until someone approached from the village.

The first bearer of the bitter news was Marko (you remember him). As soon as he spotted me he started waving to me that I should go back. With tears in his eyes, he told me that every Jewish man in the village was shot and all boys 16 and older.

My God! I couldn't believe it! A few hours ago, everyone sat at his work, some at smithing, sewing, harnessing. Suddenly they are all dead! Jacob too. A short while ago, he was jesting, working. And now, he is lying dead. Why? My God! Why?

Fifty-three martyrs were murdered then. I couldn't believe it. There was not 53 men in the village. I went in the bushes and started counting each one by name. I reached only 47, but realized there were between them, six children holding their father's hands. (Your wife) Hanna's father and Gittel's husband - your brother-in-law, were among them. Jacob wrote a short note before they shot him. I never got it.

They were gathered near the church. They - the S.S. and local collaborators, put them in a small building which was part of the fire department. They tied their hands behind them and took them out in rows of three, clubbed them, led them to the barns and shot them. Between them were fathers holding their children by the hand. Three bullets hit Jacob before he hit the ground. Remember dear brother how strong he was?

After what Marko told me, I went to our friend Audeus Zues in Horisha. The murderers saw immediately that I was not among the slaughtered and started to search for me, but our friend Audeus hid me on the little island on the River Horin.

In Stolin, it was still calm. The bloodthirsty S.S. avoided Stolin for the time being. Audeus' son Feodor went to Stolin to tell our parents and our brother Maishe that I am alive. I didn't know if anyone was still alive in Stolin after what happened in David-Horodok and Rubele. Feodor brought me a letter. I recognized our brother's handwriting. He advised that I should come to Stolin. Soon the news reached me that they also shot all the men in David-Horodok and chased out the women and children from the city. Everything was done by the S.S. commandos who came from Luniniec and local collaborators.

The poor unfortunate women and small children from David-Horodok and Rubele were driven out and in their presence, all their possessions were looted. I have no words to describe what they went through. From Chaiyeh, Jacob's sister, they tore off Jacob's boots which she wanted to have as a memory of her brother. I heard their cry from the little island, but I could not help them. The members of the population called Meschany helped to chase them out of the city. The sick who could not walk were shot. The women with small children couldn't take anything with them, and yet tried to manage with the children on their arms, to carry a few things which the wild mob, thirsty for the loot, took away from them. If somebody had shoes on, they made them take them off.

Where to go? The only place was the city of Stolin which the S.S. missed.

In Stolin, a Kehillah was formed. Dr. Berger, a German Jewish refugee, was the president. With much effort and money (raised as bribes for the Nazis) they permitted the poor women to come to Stolin. For 35 kilometres they walked, barefoot, hungry. Some kind people gave some food and water, even shelter in a barn. But there were many which used this unfortunate, helpless moment of the poor innocent women. They spat on them, beat and raped them. A few even died on the road. And everybody considered them lucky that this was the end of their suffering. And this was true, because not one of the poor women survived the liquidation of the Stolin ghetto - they just suffered longer.

I saw all the women and children, tired, hungry, raped, walking slowly toward Stolin. I couldn't show myself because I would have been shot on the spot. After a few days, wearing the clothes of a country man, I made my way to Stolin where everything was more or less under control.

We tried to accommodate the poor women and children. We shared our homes, the schools, synagogues, every public place. All the barns were filled up. The biggest problem was food. Everybody tried to prepare as much food as they could for the horrible days ahead of us. There was no time to think about it now. We shared with them everything we had.

My sister, having seven children, didn't think about what will happen later. With the help of other women, she baked bread and tried to feed the hungry and exhausted widows and orphans. The poor women - most of them believed that their husbands and fathers were really working, and they hoped to see them again. It seems that the murderers forced a number of people before the slaughter to write letters to the families. The Meschans from David-Horodok brought the letters and sucked the last piece of clothing or jewellery from the women in exchange for the letters.

The women believed deep in their hearts that this was all an illusion. They wanted to believe that God wouldn't do such a thing. I knew the men would never come back. But I didn't want to spoil their wife's little bit of hopeless hope. They were murdered by the S.S. stationed in Luniniec with help from the local residents of David-Horodok. From Luniniec they came to Lachina, David-Horokok. That was on a Sunday. With the excuse that there are damaged roads and a bridge to be fixed, all men 16 and older had to be gathered in one place called the Grebli, near the bridge of the River Horin.

There were about 2,700 of them. They marched them 10 or 12 kilometres from the city, put them in rows and machine-gunned them one row after the other. They told the poor victims to get undressed for inspection in case somebody had a weapon. Many were only wounded. Just the same, they put them in the graves, one row on the top of the other. The ground was trembling and shaking. The people were still alive in the graves and tried to get out. No one got out alive. The fresh, warm blood flowing and the dead bodies pressing on them - vanished in agony.

Our holidays - the New Year and Yom Kippur - got nearer. On New Year, in the evening, we had services at the synagogue. The second day of Rosh Hashana, the S.S. arrived in Stolin. I can't describe the way they were driving through the streets. Through the windows we saw their murderous faces. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Our house was surrounded and three drunken, bloodthirsty faces of the locals rushed in the house and dragged our brother away. How they missed me, only God knows! This was the last time I saw our brother Maishe. Three days later we discovered that he was tortured to death. They stabbed him repeatedly with daggers, tore him limb by limb and poured salt and iodine on the wounds.

Shpetrik, the teacher, was with him in the same room. They let him go. A month later he died.

Our brother died the second day of Rosh Hashana 1941. Around midnight his sacred soul breathed its last in the jail of Stolin. Our sister Gonia watched the jail through her window across the street and she noticed a wagon coming out of the gate and she recognized our brother's jacket. She came to me crying "We lost our dear brother!"

Six months later, a policeman told me where our brother's body lay. We found his body in a shallow grave. We buried him in his Tallis (prayer shawl) near Aunt Goldie's grave. Lyova, his son, wept and said the Kaddish prayer. The face of our martyred brother was beginning to decay. However I recognized him - his beautiful hands were not quite touched. We buried him stealthily for fear of the S.S. For me, there started after our brother's death, those dreadful days.

I remained but one of the entire family, surrounded by orphans and widows. I looked at the children and my heart would go out for them.

Aunt Goldie sustained herself, but suddenly started to ebb. During Hannuka her soul breathed its last in our house. All the widows of Rubele mourned her. We had a quiet funeral because the S.S. forbade funerals. But we could not think long of our beloved departed ones. Upon me fell the heavy burden of all orphans and widows.

There was a Minyan in our house. Our dear father, may his soul rest in peace, said Kaddish with Lyova for the soul of our brother, the martyrs of Rubel and for Aunt Goldie. Father didn't talk too much, he would bite his lips in silence. Often he would scold the women when they cried, but he himself, often wept.

One dared not show oneself in the street after seven in the evening. We would sit near closed shutters. We had to wear the yellow stars, even the children in the crib. It was forbidden for us to walk on the sidewalk. Just like cattle, we had to walk in the middle of the street.

Our sister Gonia and the children used to come to us through the garden and we spoke of you many times. You can't imagine how I felt when our sister's children were all beastly raped. Our little Chava, 14 years old - poor children. Their eyes when they looked at me: Why? Why? What have we done?

And I am helpless. Might as well be dead.

Before Pesach (Passover) 1942, Gonia was driven out of her home and immediately afterwards we were driven out too. Rumours started to spread that a ghetto was being established in Stolin. It didn't take long. With our bare hands we put up the barbed wire high and spread very little so no one could go in or out. Two gates were watched day and night by the police.

We received an order to transfer into the ghetto. To describe the picture is impossible. You could take with you only what you could carry. Our father took his cane and slowly walked away from the home he worked so hard to bring us all up in. We left everything behind. I had to carry Rachel, our sister's child. She was very sick and they put us in a small room. Chaiyeh, our Uncle Jacob's little boy, me and our parents. There was hardly enough room to stand.

In the ghetto, we started a different life. One couldn't bring anything in, one couldn't carry anything out. The death rate reached 12 daily. Many times I saw how a mother threw a wrapped bundle - a child - on the wagon. People were swollen, deformed. I would look at our parent's swollen legs and a shudder would run through my body.

Every day we were driven to work, mainly to dig ditches about three kilometers from Stolin, in Dolin. They said this was for security reasons. The S.S. and the Gebits Kommisar were stationed at Radzivil's Palace. We dug our own graves. Our pay was daily beatings. The young S.S. used to come and watch us and beat us with the butts of their guns, with whips and with our own spades. Many times I was beaten so hard that my right jaw was cracked. My right hand was infected and for life I can't open it completely. My ear was swollen from the blow of the butt. We could not complain. To whom?

The professionals, like tailors, carpenters, cobblers, worked day and night and their pay was a daily beating. The villagers took advantage of us. Each one of us used to wear something extra to trade in for a piece of bread. As soon as the S.S. found out, they used to check our pockets. God forbid if a piece of bread was found. Bit by bit, we were destroyed morally, mentally and what kept me alive, I don't know.

When somebody died, we didn't mourn. We said at least they will not suffer. I could not stand to wear the yellow stars. They were pressing on me like tons of weight. We all knew what will happen to us later. Somehow we had informers which for good pay, brought to us the bad news about what was happening to the Jews in other cities.

No other subject was discussed but food. We somehow found ways to smuggle food into the ghetto. And again the dark rumors started to circulate that all the Jews in the ghetto will be shot. And then, the horrible day came.

Until the ill-fated day before Rosh Hashana, 7,000 people lived in the ghetto of Stolin. We dug our own graves in the Dobrin forest. Everything was planned ahead. All perished. The graves were ready.

They were all disrobed first, led to the graves and shot. Hundreds were buried alive. Children - some were only slightly wounded and the villagers who were watching, out of mercy, so that the children should not suffer, split their heads with spades.

As long as I live, I will never forget the last night in the ghetto. I can't forget the voices of our beautiful young girls: "We want to live! We want to live!" The night was dark. And police with flashlights were cruising around the barbed wire outside. They got the poor people in more of a panic. They kept on shooting non-stop. From time to time, I ran out and back to our parents. We kissed each other and pressed your pictures to our heart. Father said his prayers, looked at me with beautiful sad eyes.

He looked like he begged me that I should forgive him for bringing me into the world. Mother washed herself. Said prayers and was ready to die.

I envied our holy parents. I couldn't go like this. I just couldn't wait until they will come and get me. Mother looked at me, and just like she read my mind, she begged me: "Leave us! Leave us! You must remain alive. There has got to be somebody alive to tell what happened to us!" I said I couldn't leave them alone, that we will die together, but our mother insisted I should go.

I left our parents with one thought. To ease the last moments of our parent's lives, with the thought that I remain alive. And this is how I left our dear parents. Thousands of times I cursed the moment that I left them. How I often wanted to lie entwined with them like all of our martyrs, embraced in death.

I walked out with a broken heart. All I had with me were the clothes I was wearing and Father's pocket watch which he gave me as we bade goodbye forever. Where to go? Everywhere I see frightened people, crying, praying, looking for some place to hide. What to do? No place to go! I met Vellia Molotchnik. He started kissing me and begged me that I should go with him. He dug out a little hiding place, enough for two. "Let's try," he told me. I had nothing to lose.

For 18 days after the massacre in the ghetto, I lay in the cellar - a living grave. I kept thinking of plans to escape. My heart told me that if I could escape from this grave to outside of the ghetto, then I will survive. I told Vellia that I can't go on like this any more. The S.S. and villagers knew that some people are still hiding, but they took their time. Often, they were near us - we heard their voices, but they were busy looting and they knew there was no place for us. Even if a Jew did go out from the ghetto, there was a price set. Whoever catches a Jew will get a suit of clothes. We paid for our blood with our own goods. People hunted Jews and brought them in to get a shmate - a rag. That was the biggest tragedy.

Vellia's wife and 18-month-old daughter were hiding close to us. We heard at night, the baby's voice crying "Mama! Mama!" Vellia said "My daughter is alive! Can you hear!" "Yes, I hear," and we were happy and thought maybe at least a handful of us will survive.

But a couple of nights later, we didn't hear Rivele's voice crying "Mama" any more.

The police and the S.S. were close and Rivele was hungry and started to cry. The mother put a blanket over the baby and Rivele smothered to death. In the middle of the night we crawled out of our grave and went to see how the mother and baby were doing. Can you imagine dear brother, a mother's face? Smothering to death her own child? She held the baby in her arms and would not let go. My friend fainted. After he came to himself, he told me "Michael, bury my baby. I can't do it."

My heart was like stone.

I couldn't believe that I could do a thing like this. But I had to do it. I loved the child. After this, Vellia told me that he would remain with his wife. I went by myself to the little grave, I couldn't stand it. And I decided not to waste time and wait for certain death. I found Vellia's brother and his mother and sister still alive. I told my friend Nissel - we loved each other - "Let's try at night and get out of this graveyard." He told me "I have no desire to live. I will not leave my family."

We kissed each other and I told him that I am going or at least try to get out of here.

I looked for an escape on the 18th night after the massacre. While wandering in the dark of the ghetto, I saw nothing but broken doors and window, destruction and desolation reigned everywhere.

All the houses, where once upon a time, were full of life, became empty shells. And I kept imagining that I will stumble upon the body of a slaughtered martyr. My hair stood on end. One thought remained with me - To live! To live!

At that moment, I bumped into a live person. Without thinking, I approached him immediately. For a moment, I thought another unfortunate like myself was wandering and trying to escape. But how surprised I was when I saw before me a tall man with a big sack under his arm. We were both speechless. "Who are you?" he asked me. I told him my name was Michael, I am a Jew and I am trying to get out of the ghetto.

He looked at me and said "I am as you see, a thief. I am going around at night and pick up things from the empty houses. Why should the Germans have it all? I hope you don't mind. I will go and pick up some things and I will meet you at this place. I am working with a policeman. He lets me in every night. He gets his share."

He told me he could get me out of the ghetto. Could I trust him? He asked if I had anything to pay him with. What could I possibly pay him with after living so long with nothing. Then I felt in my pocket our Father's watch. I showed it to the thief and he said it would do. He said he'd come back for me after he was finished his looting.

I couldn't believe it, but I had no choice. I said that I would wait. The man left. I didn't know what to do. I fell on my knees and prayed to God. Which god, I don't know. Our God was sure not with all of us.

I hid myself in the dark in case he came back with the police. I heard a whistle, I don't know how long it took him, but waiting for him in the dark, I thought it took hours. He got me out of the ghetto. Father's watch saved my life. A watch for a human life!

The feeling of breathing in the fresh air outside of the ghetto is hard to describe. The thief said goodbye to me, and told me to be careful because people are hunting Jews.

What happened and how I survived I'll have to tell you when we will meet. Dear brother, my eyes are tearing writing all this. I see all our beloved ones always in front of my eyes. Day and night, I am thinking I am thinking about them. I can see you reading the letter and your heart is broken. I hate to write this gruesome letter, but I have to so that you should know and all the others who lost their beloved ones.

Well, as you see, I survived, broken up, destroyed. How and what will happen in the future, I don't know. I will try to find any way to come to you. I will be in touch with you wherever I will be. I hope my letter will find you all well. I am far away from you at this moment, but my heart is with you. Ethel, our sister, her address I don't remember and I could not write to her anyway. Shmuel, our Gonia's son, is alive. He is somewhere in a labor camp in Siberia. I will find out more about him and will be in touch with you.

With all my love. Regards and kisses for Hanna and the children.

Your brother Michael.