

EHRI Online Course in Holocaust Studies

Ringl/1206(622)

Ghettos under Nazi Rule - Work

Translation: D03 A prisoner's report from a labour camp

Our day in the camp

The bugle calls in the morning, bugle call, get up! – this was the voice of the group-leader. I sprang up from my pallet and dressed fast. We sleep in a brick horse-barn, on straw under blankets. Some have brought little pillows from home, but the majority put their pants or shirts under their heads. By now lean and sun-burnt bodies are getting up from all the pallets. They put on torn and mostly dirty underwear and even shabbier clothes. After washing, the piercing voice of the group leader calls for parade. We assemble in a triple row and do obediently as commanded. Exercises end with lining up at the cauldron for coffee. I took out 20 decagram of bread from my rucksack, cut away the part covered with mould and by now I am eating hastily, washing it down with the black and bitter coffee. Our commander did it even faster, already calling for assembling for work.

That work during harvest is hard now. We help peasants in their fields. Bundling, raking hay, weeding potatoes, draining swamps, carrying stones and logs, splitting wood in the forests and carting it. Plenty of work. Both, group leaders and farmers scold us unsparingly all the time, thus “why do you move so clumsily, faster, lively, hey – again standing and gaping?!” Not a moment for rest, though hands drop of tiredness.

All of a sudden a friend signals the approach of an officer. He is a young man, of medium height, broad, blond with green eyes. I don't know whether it is on purpose that he looks at Jews in such a way that one finds it hard to stand his glance, or whether it is such a natural penetrating gaze. He gets irritated very fast and for the slightest trifle, but he also forgets fast. Entrusted with the care of the camp, he only cares for Jews to work well and fast, but does not care whether they eat well, have shoes or a decent place to sleep, When we heard of his coming, we found new strength from nowhere, forgot hunger and wet shoes and started working with immense energy without a second's rest. He stopped, exchanged some words with the group-leader and drove on. We drew our breath and worked on, slower. At twelve noon, lunch. We each get a bowl of soup. We fish with our spoons for a potato, complain of its scarcity and quarrel. Each one looks in to the bowls of neighbours to see if they have more. After lunch one hour of rest and work again until 7 p.m. For supper 20 decagram of bread and a cup of black coffee. After that – chatting, singing, and again the voice of the group-leader calling us to sleep. Tired, I lie on my side trying to fall asleep, but friends talking loudly do not let me. Bugle!!! Silence as in a graveyard. All fall asleep now, to get up at 5:30 a.m. to work again.