

# Rosa Robota—Heroine of the Auschwitz Underground

By Yuri Suhl

{EDITOR'S NOTE: "The truth about Auschwitz? There is no person who could tell the whole truth about Auschwitz." These words were spoken by Jozef Cyrankiewicz, Premier of Poland, who was one of the top leaders of the Auschwitz underground.

With each new memoir about that camp a little more of the truth is brought to light, as in the case of Rosa Robota who helped make possible the only revolt there. Yet it was only recently that her role in this uprising became known in many of its details.]

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ON SATURDAY, October 7, 1944, a tremendous explosion shook the barracks of Birkenau (Auschwitz II), and its thousands of startled prisoners beheld a sight they could hardly believe. One of the four crematoriums<sup>25</sup> was in flames! They were happy to see at least part of the German killing-apparatus destroyed; but none was happier than young Rosa Robota, who was directly involved in the explosion. For months she had been passing on small pieces of dynamite to certain people in the Sonderkommando. Daily she had risked her life to make this moment possible. Now the flames lighting up the Auschwitz sky proclaimed to the whole world that even the most isolated of Auschwitz prisoners, the Sonderkommando Jews, would rise up in revolt when given leadership and arms.

Rosa was eighteen when the Germans occupied her hometown, Ciechanow, in September, 1939, three days after they had invaded Poland. She was a member of Hashomer Hatzair and, together with other members, was deeply interested in the organization of an underground resistance movement in the ghetto.

In November, 1942, the Germans liquidated the ghetto of Ciechanow.

deporting some Jews to Treblinka and some to Auschwitz. Rosa and her family were in the Auschwitz transport. Most of the arrivals were sent straight to the gas chambers from the railway platform. Some of the younger people, Rosa among them, were marched off in another direction and later assigned to various work details. Rosa was sent to work in the *Bekleidungstelle* (clothing supply section). Some Ciechanow girls were sent to the munitions factory, "Union," one of the Krupp slave-labor plants in Auschwitz, which operated round the clock on a three-shift basis. Rosa, as well as all the women who worked in the munitions factory, lived in the Birkenau barracks.

One day Rosa had a visitor—a townsman named Noah Zabladowicz who was a member of the Jewish section of the Auschwitz underground.<sup>29</sup> As soon as they managed to be alone he told her the purpose of his visit. The underground was planning a general uprising in camp, which included the blowing up of the gas chamber and crematorium installations. For this it was necessary to have explosives and explosive charges. Israel Gutman and Joshua Leifer, two members of the underground who worked on the day shift in "Union," had been given the task of establishing contact with the Jewish girls in the *Pulver-Pavilion*, the explosives section of "Union." But all their efforts were in vain because the girls were under constant surveillance and any contact between them and other workers, especially men, was strictly forbidden. It was decided, therefore, to try to contact them through some intermediary in Birkenau. Since several of the girls who worked in the *Pulver-Pavilion* came from Ciechanow and Rosa knew them and was in touch with them, she seemed to be the ideal person to act as intermediary between them and the underground.

Rosa was only too glad to accept the assignment. Ever since that day of November, 1942, when she saw her own family, together with the rest of the Ciechanow Jews, taken to the gas chambers, the strongest emotion that suffused her being was a burning hatred of the Nazis, coupled with a deep yearning to avenge the murder of her people. Now the underground gave her the opportunity to express these feelings in the form of concrete deeds.

Rosa set to work and in a short time twenty girls were smuggling dynamite and explosive charges out of the munitions factory for the underground. They carried out the little wheels of dynamite, which looked like buttons, in small matchboxes which they hid in their bosoms or in special pockets they had sewn into the hems of their dresses. These "buttons" would then pass from hand to hand through an elaborate underground transmission belt that led to the Russian prisoner Borodin, an expert at constructing bombs. For bomb casings he used empty sardine cans. The finished bombs then started moving again on the transmission

belt to various strategic hiding places in the sprawling camp. The Sonderkommando had its cache close to the crematorium compound.

Israel Gutman and Joshua Leifer concealed their "buttons" in the false bottom of a canister which they had made especially for that purpose. They always made sure to have some tea or leftover soup in the canister at the time of the SS inspection after work. Since it was customary for prisoners to save a little of their food rations for later, a canister containing some liquid would usually get no more than a perfunctory glance from the inspecting SS man.

One day after work as they were standing in line during the SS inspection, Leifer whispered to Gutman: "I had no time to hide the stuff in the canister. I have it in a matchbox in my pocket." Gutman grew pale and began to shake all over. The SS had been known to look into matchboxes also. He could not stop thinking that they were at the brink of disaster, and the more he thought of it the more nervous he became. So much so that the SS man became suspicious and gave him a very close and thorough inspection. Behind him stood Leifer, appearing very calm. Frustrated at having spent so much time on Gutman and finding nothing, the SS man gave Leifer a superficial inspection and passed on to the next man. This was one time, Gutman writes in his account of the incident, when nervousness paid off well.<sup>17</sup>

Moishe Kulka, another member, recalls that "the entire work was carried on during the night-shift when control was not so strict. In the morning, when the night-shift left the plant, I waited around. A Hungarian Jew I knew handed me half a loaf of bread. Concealed in the bread was a small package of explosives. I kept it near my workbench and later passed it on to a German Jew who worked on the railway."<sup>18</sup>

Rosa was the direct link with the Sonderkommando. The explosives she received were hidden in the handcarts on which the corpses of those who had died overnight in the barracks were taken to the crematorium.

The Sonderkommando, which according to plan was supposed to synchronize its revolt with the general uprising, one day learned through underground sources that it was about to be liquidated. For them it was a matter of acting now or never. Not having any other choice they acted. They blew up Crematorium III, tossed a sadistic German overseer into the oven, killed four SS men, and wounded a number of others. Then they cut the barbed wire fence and about six hundred escaped. They were hunted down by a large contingent of pursuing SS men and shot.<sup>19</sup> (As it turned out the general uprising never took place and the Sonderkommando action was the only armed revolt in Auschwitz.)

The political arm of the SS immediately launched a thorough investigation of the revolt. They wanted to know where the explosives came from

and how they got into the hands of the Sonderkommando. With the aid of planted agents, the SS in a matter of two weeks came upon the trail of the explosives. They arrested several girls from the munitions factory, and after two days of interrogation and torture released them. The investigation continued and soon other arrests were made. Four girls were taken to the dread Block 11 for questioning. Three were from "Union"; the fourth was Rosa Robota.

Gutman, Leifer, Noah, and others whom Rosa knew now expected to be arrested at any moment. They had full faith in her trustworthiness, but they also knew something about the torture methods the SS employed in Block 11. At one point they considered suicide. They feared that what might happen to Rosa under questioning could happen to them too.

In the meantime they watched from a distance how Rosa was being led daily to Block 11 for questioning. Her hair was matted, her face puffed up and bruised beyond recognition, her clothes torn. She could not walk and had to be dragged by two women attendants.

One day the underground decided on a daring step. Moishe Kulka was acquainted with Jacob, the Jewish kapo of Block 11. He asked him if he would be willing to let someone see Rosa Robota in her death cell. Jacob agreed and asked that the visitor bring along a bottle of whiskey and a salami. Her townsman Noah was chosen to see her. The kapo introduced him to the SS guard as a friend of his. The two plied the SS man with drinks until he fell to the floor unconscious. Then Jacob quickly removed the keys from the guard and motioned to Noah to follow him. Noah describes the incident as follows:

I had the privilege to see Rosa for the last time several days before her execution. At night, when all the prisoners were asleep and all movement in Camp was forbidden, I descended into a bunker of Block 11 and saw the cells and the dark corridors. I heard the moaning of the condemned and was shaken to the core of my being. Jacob led me through the stairs to Rosa's cell. He opened the door and let me in. Then he closed the door behind me and disappeared.

When I became accustomed to the dark I noticed a figure, wrapped in torn clothing, lying on the cold cement floor. She turned her head toward me. I hardly recognized her. After several minutes of silence she began to speak. She told me of the sadistic methods the Germans employ during interrogations. It is impossible for a human being to endure them. She told me that she took all the blame upon herself and that she would be the last to go. She had betrayed no one.

I tried to console her but she would not listen. I know what I have

done, and what I am to expect, she said. She asked that the comrades continue with their work. It is easier to die when one knows that the work is being carried on.

I heard the door squeak. Jacob ordered me to come out. We took leave of each other. It was the last time that I saw her.

Before Noah left Rosa's death cell, she scribbled a farewell message to her underground comrades. She assured them that the only name she mentioned during the interrogations was that of a man in the Sonderkommando who she knew was dead. He, she had told the interrogators, was her only contact with the underground. She concluded her message with the Hebrew greeting of Hashomer Hatzair, "Khazak V' Hamatz"—Be strong and brave.

Several days later all the Jewish prisoners were ordered to the Appel Platz to witness the hanging of the four young women—Esther, Lila, Regina, and Rosa.

### *Editor's Postscript*

Despite the risks involved and in constant view of the crematorium compound, there existed in Auschwitz a well-organized underground movement that penetrated every aspect of camp life. Indeed, so remarkably well-functioning was this underground that one of its top leaders, Jozef Cyrankiewicz, was also directing the underground activities in Cracow while being imprisoned in Auschwitz. From time to time couriers from the Cracow underground would smuggle themselves into Auschwitz for instructions.

A question then arises: If the Auschwitz underground was so well organized and maintained such good contact with the outside underground, why was there no mass uprising in Auschwitz on a camp scale? Why was the revolt of the Sonderkommando, a desperate last-minute act, the only significant revolt in Auschwitz?

Bruno Baum, another top underground leader, who worked closely with Cyrankiewicz on a policy-making level (later a member of the chamber of deputies in East Germany), lists the following reasons why this was so (*Widerstand in Auschwitz*, Berlin: Kongress-Verlag, pp. 93-96):

"Realizing that there was no other way out we decided to prepare for an armed uprising. With our friends in Birkenau-Auschwitz II we worked out a common plan and stepped up the gathering of weapons. Comrades outside the camp supplied us with explosives.

"We sent our plans, which included a mass breakout, to Cracow and coordinated our aims with those of the Cracow comrades. If they approved our plans they promised to give us support. With about 140,000 prisoners in the entire camp we were a very important factor for the partisan movement. After our liberation we were to carry forward, together with the Poles, the Warsaw uprising which was already a fact, into Upper Silesia.

"On the way back our courier was shot at by SS-men and taken prisoner. They found our plans he had with him and transferred him to the camp hospital. Despite the torture during interrogation he held up bravely and betrayed no one.

"After our plans were discovered we feared that a mass annihilation of prisoners would take place. But this was not the case. However, the SS took other decisive measures:

1. They reenforced the cordon of guards. Even the large cordon in the distant circle outside the camp that stood guard only in daytime and was withdrawn at night now remained for weeks throughout the night as well. Thus the camp was guarded by a double cordon of guards day and night.
2. Prisoners returning to camp from work were thoroughly searched.
3. The number of informers against us was increased.

"To our astonishment nothing else happened beyond these measures. Later however we learned that the SS employed other means to thwart our plans. Shortly thereafter thousands of Poles were suddenly transported to Gross-Rosen. The SS also began to send off large transports of Jews and other prisoners for work in various parts of Germany. . . . In Birkenau there remained, for the time being, about 5,000 men and about 15,000 women. In the mother camp, Auschwitz, there were, including the women camps I and II, another 11,000 men and about 5,000 women. . . .

"In the meantime some changes took place outside the camp. The Warsaw uprising was ebbing. Near Cracow a Polish partisan general led his division in an attack without coordination with other forces. This isolated act was doomed to failure. He was routed by the German fascists. Because of this and the situation in Warsaw the urge for an uprising in Cracow and in the area of Upper Silesia died away.

"In the light of this new situation we were compelled to draw our own conclusions. We realized that as a result of the mass transports of Poles—only several hundred remained in the Mother camp—and prisoners of other nationalities, our military strength was greatly weakened.

"We were now compelled to change our tactic. The plan for an uprising was abandoned. We said to ourselves, since we can no longer save the camp inmates we must endeavor to send some of our best forces out of the camp so that they could draw the attention [of the outside world] to our camp. . . . In a matter of one week ten of our friends were to be on their way.

"It was agreed upon that Heinz Dürmayer and I should remain in order to carry on with the resistance work in camp. Also Cyraniewicz, who was to leave the camp, was ordered by his Polish comrades to remain."