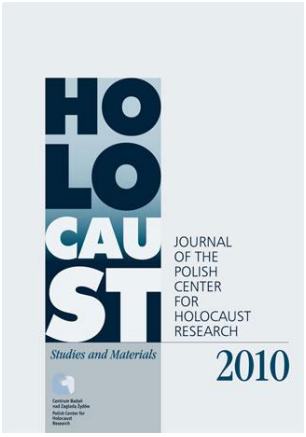


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Gusta Ehrlich's Letters

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Gusta Ehrlich landed in German prison in Krzeszowice near Cracow in July 1942. Uncertain of her future, she wrote a few letters addressed to her daughter Władysława. Although written in a hurry and full of abbreviations that are sometimes difficult to decipher, they are an extremely interesting testimony of the Holocaust. Especially moving is the juxtaposition of the concern of the mother, who wants to ensure her daughters safe living conditions, including financial ones, with her fading hope and growing premonition of a nearing end.

Gusta (Gustawa) Berger was born in 1900 in Bodzów, then in the outskirts of Cracow. She was tied to this city for her whole life. From there came her husband Zygmunt Ehrlich, who was older than her. A year after their wedding in 1922, their first daughter, Władysława, was born. In 1934 their second daughter, Jadwiga (in the text referred to as "Aga"), was born. Władysława was the addressee of Gusta Erhlich's letters written in Krzeszowice.

The family was quite well-off. In the mid 1930s Zygmunt Ehrlich became a co-owner of the Gumatekt firm, which produced asphalt-insulation mix. The other co-owner was engineer Gustaw Ehrlich, husband of Adela Ehrlich, who appeared in a letter as aunt Lo. The family also owned a tenement in Podgórze, but they lived on Bracka Street, near the Old Town Square, close to the firm's offices.[1] In 1938 Gustawa's husband died and she had to take over the responsibility of co-running the firm. According to Gusta's request for baptism, written already during the occupation, she had had many Catholic friends before the war. Her daughters' names are also an indication of her close ties with Polish culture. The language of the letters is correct and suggests that their author was an educated person.

After Cracow had been seized by the Germans, the family probably remained in its place of residence. Presumably, the mother and daughters were initially not recognized as Jewesses. Neither Gusta,[2] Władysława nor Jadwiga Ehrlich was on the lists of people to be deported from Cracow or on the subsequent lists of Jews who

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[1] Archiwum Państwowe w Krakowie [State Archive in Cracow] (later: APKr), 218, Spis przynależnych do stoł. król. m. Krakowa; ibidem, 442, RHB.IX-594, Rejestr handlowy. Until 1934 Gumatekt company was called Gumatect.

[2] Gusta Erlich who appears in some archival documents is a different woman with the same name and surname, born sixteen years after the author of the letters.

were to move to the ghetto. Moreover, in the State Archive there are no applications for issuing their Jewish *Kennkarte*. To ensure her and her children's safety, in 1940 Gusta decided to receive baptism and convert to Catholicism. Presumably, she did not fully realize that in the world of Nazi race laws such a change was meaningless. The future neophytes were prepared for the sacrament by a Franciscan – Father Joachim Bar. It is known that during the occupation the monk admitted other Jews as members of the Church as well. Salomea Friedman and her two children were preparing for the sacrament together with Gusta and Władysława Ehrlich. This woman could be the Mrs. Friedman mentioned in one of the letters.

In March 1941 Władysława Ehrlich married Leopold (Poldi) Rindel. Their marriage certificate can be found in the Blessed Virgin Mary parish in Cracow. The groom was born in Cieszyn in 1916 and his parents' names were Adolf and Handa née Serog. Before the German occupation he worked in a chemical fertilizer factory in Borek Fałęcki, probably in the Solvay firm. Their marital happiness did not last long, for already in August 1941 Leopold Rindel was arrested by the Gestapo and put in jail on Montelupich Street in Cracow. He was subsequently transferred to Auschwitz on 14 January 1942, where he was given the camp number 25 532. He figures in the files as a Catholic and a Pole. Initially, Władysława was receiving letters from her husband, but they stopped coming in 1942.[3] Today we know that Leopold Rindel died on 21 September 1942.[4]

Realizing the increasing risk, Gusta Ehrlich decided to move out of the city to the village of Tenczynek, located west of Cracow. On the basis of the letter we might assume that she was staying at a certain Mrs. Drabik's. We do not know how Ehrlich's company, i.e. Gumatekt, was operating formally during that time. Unfortunately, neither Gusta Ehrlich nor Gumatekt appears in the documents of the *Hauptgruppe Gewerbliche Wirtschaft und Verkehr in der Distriktskammer für die Gesamtwirtschaft in Krakau*.[5] Furthermore, the register of companies being incomplete, it cannot be established whether the company was placed under trusteeship or it operated as an "Aryan" company. Similarly, the exact position held by director Zięba, who appeared a couple of times in the letters, remains unknown.

But it is certain that Gusta Ehrlich was transported from Tenczynek directly to the jail in Krzeszowice.[6] According to recollections of the local inhabitants, the communal jail was a gloomy place and it was regarded as the Krzeszowice equivalent of the prison on Montelupich Street. People had the worst recollections of the commune secretary Bruno Kochański and the local "blue police" superintendent Józef

[3] APKr, 446, I.3.ZG. 301/47, Zeznanie świadka Włodzimierza Bobownika.

[4] *Księga pamięci: transporty Polaków do KL Auschwitz z Krakowa i innych miejscowości Polski Południowej 1940–1944*, ed. F. Piper, J. Strzelecka (Oświęcim, 2002), 788.

[5] APKr, 319, Main Group "Economy and Movement" in the Regional Chamber for General Economy in Cracow, which took over the duties of among others the pre-war Cracow Chamber for Commerce and Industry.

[6] This small town was called Kressendorf during the occupation. Hans Frank chose the local grand palace of Count Potocki to be his summer residence.

Niejadlik. After the war Kochański was sentenced to death, among other things for shooting Jews. The sentence was executed on 4 May 1949.[7] Gusta Ehrlich landed in this very jail, and the letters sent from there were the last news from her.

Gusta Ehrlich's daughters' fate can be reconstructed on the basis of documents and certificates. The younger one, Jadwiga, was sent to a convent near Warsaw already in 1942. According to post-war witness testimonies, her letters were also coming the following year. In 1943, the German authorities learnt about Jewesses hiding in the convent, and they were later executed. Władysława was arrested in 1943 and deported to the camp in Płaszów. From there she spent some time in the ammunition factory in Skarżysko, and then in the Ravensbruck camp, where she was liberated by the Allies. After the war she settled in the United Kingdom.[8]

Gusta Ehrlich's Letter to the Metropolitan Curia in Cracow[9]

To the Most Reverend Metropolitan Curia in Cracow

I, the undersigned Gusta Ehrlich, widow, born on 16 March 1900 in Bodzów, kindly request that I and my daughters Władysława, born on 20 September 1923 in Cracow, and Jadwiga, born on 3 March 1934 in Cracow, be permitted to receive Holy Baptism and I justify my request as below.

Since early youth I have been friends with Catholic girlfriends, thanks to which I had the opportunity to have a closer look at Catholic life. At that time I learnt the precepts of the Catholic faith, I learnt how broadly the Catholic religion defines love of one's neighbor, and finally I learnt how much joy and consolation faith in redemption can bring. Already in my youth I decided to receive the sacrament of Holy Baptism, but I could not do it for reasons beyond my control. I learnt then the Christian religion on my own, and recently I got to know the religion thoroughly under the enlightened guidance of the Most Reverend Father Joachim from the Franciscan order.

In the times we live in, harsh and turbulent, one seeks consolation and redemption, and they are only to be found in honest and fervent prayer to Him who came to redeem the world. And although I am not a member of the Catholic Church, I regularly attend the Services, because I believe with all my heart and soul in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Sprit and in the truths preached by the Church, and this prayer and faith bring me full consolation.

Hence, I kindly ask for me and my children to be allowed to receive the sacrament of Holy Baptism so that I can raise my children in this faith by life in humility and Catholic virtue and that I can become a worthy member of the Catholic Church.

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[7] A. Fujarski, *Kronika miasta Krzeszowic 1939–1945* (Krzeszowice, 1993), 20, 27.

[8] APKr, 448, I.1.ZG 203/47, Zeznanie Szymona Górskiego.

[9] The original is in the Cracow Metropolitan Curia Archive.

I attach my marriage certificate, my daughter's birth certificate and the certificate of leaving the Jewish community.

Cracow, 4 March 1940

Notes:

I testify herein that since the beginning of January this year I have been preparing Mrs. Ehrlich and her daughter Władysława for the sacrament of Holy Baptism.

Father Joachim Far, Francis.

Cracow, 5 March 1940

Letters Written by Gusta Ehrlich in the Krzeszowice Jail, Presented by Her Relative Hanna Margulies Née Rotberg

Sunday, 19 July 1942

My Beloved Daughter! And what should I write to you during these last hours of my life from this vestibule to the other world. I have greatly sinned toward you, my children, and I myself am doing the greatest penance. The thought of you is driving me mad, although I am not ashamed to admit that I do not want to die also on account of myself! I want to stay alive! I want to experience something, I want to see you again at your husband's side and I want to bring Agusia to something. But what can my wanting do. This is an unfortunate coincidence and the most tragic thing is that it would not be difficult to get me out of here, but nobody is coming and I cannot communicate with anybody, and I can write officially only a couple of words once a week. – So I cannot delude myself.

And since despite my death your life needs to continue, because such is the law of life, I want to give you Władzia a few instructions and material explanations. I gather that somebody will help you to decipher [them] as well as to raise Agusia. I know that when Poldi comes back both of you will take care of her. If, God forbid, anything happens to Poldi, in my opinion you should complete your education in order to come to an independent position. Put the technical university [education] into practice. A draftswoman position should help you in that and it will make you independent from even the best husband. And get married after graduation from the university. Do not get angry that I am writing about it today, when Poldi is alive and we wish for him to return with all our heart. But later I will not be able to advise you about anything, and you know that I have quite a sound outlook on other people's lives. And if it should happen that Agusia is going to live at your place, then it should not be longer than till the 15th or 16th year of her life. Then she should live with strangers instead. Do not laugh Władzia! I am giving you good advice! You cannot have a younger woman at home, not even your own sister! But lavish warmth on her. For the nearest period, i.e. until the end of the war, I do not advise you anything, because it does not always go as planned. Work however you can. Yesterday the parcel and the address written in your writing were like a bright ray to me. Yesterday I washed myself and undressed for the night for the first time since Monday.

And now the finances. I do not know what [is left] from [the things of] the Felician Sisters. I think that everything is lost and that is why I am not giving any instructions. I am only sorry that as a result of that Romek's family have lost everything, but unfortunately I cannot do anything about it. They have a life which I already lack.

I attach the key to the casket which is at Bronia's. In the box there is a brooch and ring, Jadzia's wedding ring and a diamond, Lusia's ring. The rest is ours, so if need be sell it – it will give you a few thousand to surely allow you to survive.

At Zięba's (Mery will help you get it, just in case I attach the receipt) there are:

6 barrels of "Gum II"

12 or 11 ½ barrels of Maxic. asphalt.

Director Zięba needs to be paid for two years – I think 600 zl. Konturek will help you sell the asphalt. Recently he was offering as much as 5 zl a kg. If not by his agency then Dach will take it. If he does not pay so much, he will pay less. With the Gum turn to director Dytrych. Maybe they will need something, and if not ask in Dach to take care of the sale. The barrel register is at Bronia's in the nightstand drawer. It is a carbon copy of Szymek's last report of June 1940 written on foolscap. On one copy on the side it is indicated which barrels have already gone to Herbewo[10], Ziel.[11] and Reychan[12]. You can also demand return of these empty barrels from these companies. They are always worth a couple of hundred zlotys. Out of the sale of the Gum S.S. needs to get zl 1,200 = which I owe him for the manufacturing machine.

At Mrs. Gabrych's there are still over 200 of those five-liter, rusty ones. I have also written to engineer Kępa about taking care of the sale. Ask Mrs. Gabrych if he had been there or write one more time. You should obtain at least 10 zlotys a piece. There are also lids, but I do not know how many and what kind. She will tell you and help with the sale.

At the Chowaniecs' there is the silverware case. Cutlery set for 12 people – 101 pieces altogether. At the Buczeks' there are the small baskets and other silver objects. Some of it is Ada's, 2 sugar bowls and glasses (one of which is broken) are Lusia's or WW's. The rest is ours.

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[10] Herbewo Herliczka-Bełdowski-Wołoszyński Zjednoczone Fabryki Tutek i Bibułek S.A. w Krakowie. Before the war it was one of the biggest companies of the tobacco industry in the city.

[11] Zjednoczone Fabryki Maszyn, Kotłów i Wagonów L. Zieleniewski i Fitzner-Gamper, a big pre-war enterprise. After its placement under German trusteeship it was changed over to war production (e.g. mines were produced there). In the factory there operated a sabotage-intelligence group organized by engineer "Dornbacha," S. Dąbrowa-Kostka, *W okupowanym Krakowie* (Warsaw, 1972).

[12] Emilie Reychan, German (RD), lived on Krupnicza Street and ran a tobacco firm. Her husband Stanisław Reychan owned before the war a shipping firm, APKr, 319, IPHKr II 317, no. 10665/2215; S. Reychan, *Pamiętnik dziwnego człowieka: ze Lwowa do Londynu* (Kraków, 1992).

At Reychans' there is an American cabinet for records.

At Rzepa's an American jalousie cabinet and a small shelf for paper. At the janitor's a small wardrobe with shelves, the one near their cupboard. The Łaziks' typewriter at Mrs. Huchrowa's. At WW's there are the mattresses from Ada's bed, which is at Bronia's. One nightstand is at Józia's. At present I owe SS 1,831 zlotys in cash = plus as above from the sale of Gum, 1200 zlotys = try to pay it back. And the settlement with aunt Lo is as follows. From the bill of various [expenses] I should get 3,748 zlotys = WW gave for this at the beginning of the war 2000 zlotys = And recently she owed Jadzia 500 = and me 1,000 = I was to pay back Marysia for them 1,600 and [I] was to collect for Jadzia ca. 1,600 = that is altogether ca. 4,700 = and for this I got from Mrs. Kurdziel 1,350 = and from her janitor 1,000 zlotys. = I did not pay Mrs. Kurdziel for velvet ribbons: 5 ribbons ca. 3 1/2 cm and 7 ribbons ca. 1 1/2 cm.

How much WW owes me I do not know, it was he who kept the books. But do not count on what people owe me, Władzia. If they come themselves (Mrs. Friedman, Mrs. Szewczyk, etc.) then it is good, if not, then it shall be an offering for Our Lord.

And aunt Lo will always help you if she can regardless of the calculations. Maybe you will survive the war, after you sell [*sic*!] your part of the house you will have money for the studies.

Oh and Paraśka! Try as hard as you can to pay her back. I met her on Sunday, she does not need it now, only after the war.

Here, I leave this letter, the watch, fountain pen and lorgnette with the prison warder. He was instructed to give it to Perin after my departure. The prison warder should be given at least 5 zlotys for each day of my stay. Both he and his wife grant many of my requests and they are doing more than they are allowed.

There is no doubt that everything is Mrs. Drabik's fault. And she had the cheek to come here the very next day with a proposition that I should give her a declaration that I owe her money and that she would take the furniture, and in return she would raise Aga. What extreme perfidy. Luckily, they did not let her see me, for I am not sure if I could control myself. She told all that to the prison warder's wife, that she had already been to the police superintendent, that she knows [him?] perfectly from Zabierzów, etc.

I am writing to you about it for after the war. Even though nobody and nothing can bring me my life back, such a viper should be taught a lesson.

I could write a lot more, Władzia. All that I have not told you about my love for you both, which I might not have shown on the outside – but which you should not doubt despite appearances, Władzia.

I am not writing about my stay here. The company is beyond one's wildest imagination. It is a pity that I will not be able to tell you about all of this. The other thing is that everybody is taking care of me. At the moment there are 17 of us and 6 straw mattresses and 5 blankets, and imagine that from the first moment I have had both a blanket and a straw mattress all for myself. Even though I need to give away

my bread every day, so it is dearer than in an elegant hotel, it is good that at least I have such an opportunity. For money you can have everything here, for the prison warder's wife buys everything and one can have lunch from Filipowska[13] and fruit and vegetables, simply everything. But as it is easy to imagine I do not have much appetite. I am forcing myself so as not to die of starvation, for a miracle might happen and I might get out alive. For I have always believed in miracles, so maybe also this time a miracle will happen to me.

The rest of the space I have left for possible days of even such life as granted to me.

Sunday afternoon

My fate has been half decided. The prison warder has just told me that tomorrow they are taking me, that they already know everything about me. It is difficult to focus. I am under unbearable stress. I have a feeling that when they come for me I will not withstand it.

Dach should be paid for Franek Starościk is supposed to pay that. – Zosia Or. should be paid 100 zlotys, which I took from her at the last moment.

Farewell my beloved Władzia and Agusia! Do not think badly of me. I am miserable enough in these last moments of mine. Forgive me the harm I am unwittingly doing you. I shall bless you from the other world.

Give my regards to all my acquaintances and friends.

I do not know if SS is in Cracow. Give him my regards. I think that after my death he will change his opinion on women, although I do not care about it anymore. I think that he will give you advice and some guidance.

I cannot think calmly about Aga.

Farewell my children!

Receipt to dir. Zięba
Bronia's keys
Key to the box
Children's school reports and Alinka's photo
Watch, fountain pen, lorgnette and pencil

Blanket, towel and pyjamas to be collected from the prison warder. He needs to be rewarded. Both were trying to relieve me in my lot.

The tablecloth is at Mrs. Bobownik's. Marysia has been paid. She, such a good soul, was still bringing me food here.

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[13] Maria Filipowska ran a restaurant in Krzeszowice and her partner Franciszek Filipowski sold alcohol, APKr, 318, IPHKr 453. Adam Fujarski recalled that there was a rumor going round in the town that the Filipowskis had problems with the above-mentioned Bruno Kochański, who learnt about that family's alleged Jewish origin. Big bribes convinced him to give up the issue. A. Fujarski, *Kronika miasta Krzeszowic*, 24.

Monday morning

Does anybody understand what deathly sweat is. What each minute of waiting and trembling at every sound is.

Monday evening

A day granted. But nobody knows how my heart is pounding and how stressed I feel hearing steps in the corridor.

21 July Tuesday morning

I am still here. No ray of hope. Completely abandoned. Each companion has visitors, only not me. I wrote to Mery. I had to buy the right to write from an inmate who was allowed to write and I was counting on getting the reply yesterday. But nothing came. I read *Goniec* everyday, counting on seeing a message for me – also nothing. Has everybody already given me up?

22 July Wednesday evening

I am still alive.

At the Starościks' there is 50 kg of superphosphate and 50 kg of cinder. They should load it onto a horse wagon and take it back.

In the association at the millinery's there is my white felt. Silk for a dress and Angora wool for a back-closure blouse at the dressmaker's.

26 July Sunday evening

Today 14 days have passed, that is the deadline given me by the military police for reflection and revealing the engineer's address. No ray of hope. I am totally abandoned. Tomorrow my fate should be decided.

28 July Tuesday morning

The trial of my nerves continues.

30 July Thursday morning

I still exist. I really do not know how my nerves will withstand it.

31 July Friday morning

Still nothing. – If it lasts longer the bugs will eat me alive. I am bitten and scratched to blood.

4 August Tuesday morning

And so it seems as if it is over. Yesterday evening the superintendent of the military police in Zabierzów himself came to me.[14] As I had predicted I immediately

[14] The author was probably visited by Otto Zeiss, the superintendent of the Zabierzów Gestapo, notorious for his cruelty. He executed Jews together with Kochański in Krzeszowi-

broke down and told him everything except for the engineer's address, which he wanted the most. I am waiting now but it is clear that after having confessed my origin I cannot expect anything good.

I do not care about anything anymore.

Translated by *Anna Brzostowska* and *Jerzy Giebułtowski*

ce. Poles living near Krzeszowice associate his name mostly with bloody pacification of the village of Radwanowice.