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THE JEWS OF BIAŁYSTOK UNDER THE OCCUPATION IN WORLD WAR II

Białystok under Soviet Rule

Friday, September 15, 1939, German vehicles were rumbling through the deserted streets of Białystok.[1] During just six days in Białystok, the Germans killed more than 100 Jews and vandalized and looted more than 200 Jewish factories and homes.[2] On September 18, the third day of the occupation, rumor had it that the Germans were leaving, to be replaced by the Russians. The arrival of the Soviets in Białystok, as set forth in the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, was on September 20.[3] Throughout the period of Soviet rule, Białystok functioned as the Soviets' administrative center and retained its status as the capital of Western Belorussia until the Germans entered the city on June 27, 1941.

Oppression and persecution of hostile elements – defined as enemies of the state, the people, and the revolution – were an integral part of Soviet policy throughout the period of Soviet rule. The Soviet security apparatus had various criteria for determining who was dangerous. Those most likely to be arrested and deported in the Jewish sector were Zionist or Bund leaders, members of militarist or Trotskyist organizations, expelled members of the Communist Party, former factory owners, wealthy merchants, and refugees.[4]

The life of the Jewish community of Białystok during the period of Soviet annexation should be considered from both the Soviet and the Jewish perspective. From the Soviet perspective, the authorities favored a policy

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[1] KLAUS A. MAIER et. al, Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Vol. 2, Stuttgart 1979, pp. 118-119.

[2] RAPHAEL REIZNER, Der Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum, 1939–1945, Melbourne 1948, pp. 20-23.

[3] MAIER et. al., Das Deutsche Reich, p. 129.

[4] REIZNER, Umkum, pp. 25-26.

of voluntary or enforced assimilation of the Jewish community, identical to, albeit swifter than, the one imposed on the Jews of the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Their objective, which was to destroy the distinctive features of Jewish life, was applied to all Jewish communities in the annexed territories, including Białystok. The Białystok Jewish community suffered more than other communities, however, on several counts: (1) it was one of the largest communities in the annexed territories; (2) it had a large "bourgeois" element; and (3) it had a high proportion of refugees.

As the capital of Western Belorussia, Białystok experienced a massive local Soviet presence and frequent visits by high-ranking party officials. Białystok's local government, with the help of the Communist Party's secret police, had almost total success in implementing its policy of Sovietization. In a relatively short time, Jewish schools, political parties, youth movements, religious and cultural institutions, factories, and literary and artistic endeavors came to a standstill. No doubt, given more time, the Soviets would have implemented all their plans for the political and sociocultural assimilation of Jews. It was only the Germans' entry into the city in late June 1941 that cut this process short. If, however, the Soviets aimed at destroying Jewish culture, the Germans had in mind something far more appalling – the total physical destruction of all Jews.

From the Jewish perspective, the Soviet administration, with its die-hard Stalinists who spread fear and distrust through a policy of oppression and arrests, struck a mortal blow to Jewish community life. Nevertheless, Jewish life in the city appeared to proceed normally, perhaps because centuries of exile had taught the Jews to adapt, perhaps because there was not enough time for the true extent of the tragedy to sink in, and perhaps because the Jews of Białystok considered themselves lucky in comparison with the Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. Whatever the reason, the Jews of Białystok adapted themselves to the new regime. They took on new work arrangements and new jobs. Government shops sprang up, and there was no shortage of vital commodities. Local Jews found employment in the municipality, the local police, and local Communist Party institutions. And although the Jewish community institutions lost their independence, they continued to function. Promising new educational, organizational, and life opportunities opened for Jewish youth. Most important of all, fear of Polish antisemitism receded.

Just as Białystok's Jews were learning to adapt to this new way of life, the Germans entered the city, ushering in a period of destruction and death.

The Early Days of the German Occupation

On June 22, 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union. On Thursday evening, June 27, 1941, Białystok was conquered without a fight. On that day, three companies belonging to *Polizeibatallion* 309 entered the city, whose population, at the time, totaled 105,000. These companies took up position in the city's market square, known as Rynek Kościuszki.[5] On Friday, the Germans gave the order for about 800 Jews to be herded into the big synagogue, which was then surrounded by about 150 Battalion policemen, standing two-deep, to make sure no-one left or approached it. Two trucks drew up and large fuel tanks were unloaded. The synagogue was drenched in fuel, and its doors sealed.[6]

It was early evening when police company commander Heinrich Schneider gave the order to set fire to the synagogue with its human cargo. After grenades were thrown at the fuel-drenched synagogue, the building soon caught fire.[7] The Jews who were imprisoned in the synagogue were burned alive. Nothing remained of the synagogue except a charred shell and its metal dome. This Friday is referred to in the history of the Jews of Białystok as "Red Friday" (*der royter Freitik*), "bloody Friday" (*der blutiker Freitik*), and "Black Friday" (*der shvartze Freitik*).[8] On that day, an estimated 2,000-2,200 out of a total of 50,000 Jews were burned, shot, or tortured to death.[9]

Two days later, on Sunday June 29, the chief rabbi of Białystok, Dr. Gedalyah Rosenman, was summoned to the office of the city's military governor, and ordered to set up a Judenrat within 24 hours.[10] Rosenman

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[5] Yad Vashem Archiv, Jerusalem (YVA), TR-10/823, p. 27; YVA TR-10/912, pp. 5-6. For a list of battalion commanders: YVA TR-11/I 0116, pp. 136-137.

[6] HEINER LICHTENSTEIN, Himmlers Grüne Helfer. Die Schutz- und Ordnundspolizei im "Dritten Reich", Köln 1990, p. 77; YVA TR-10/823, pp. 56-57.

[7] YVA TR-10/912, p. 8; YVA TR-10/823, pp. 58-59; LICHTENSTEIN, Helfer, p. 77.

[8] HAIKA GROSSMAN, The Underground Army (in Hebrew), Moreshet / Sifriyat Poalim 1965, pp. 63, 398. Also: DAVID LEVO, Die Donershtike un Shabesdike, in: YVA M-11/47; YOCHEVED WEINSTEIN, The Burning of the Jewish Quarter of Białystok by the Germans after the Occupation (in Yiddish), in: YVA M-11/36, pp. 2-6. Weinstein relates that according to local Jewish estimates, about 22 streets were burnt down; ZELIK TETENBOYM, Der Royter Freytik, in: YVA M-11/44, pp. 4-5; MICHAL ORSHANSKY, The Burning down of the Jewish Quarter in Bialystok (in Yiddish), in: YVA M-11B/323.

[9] YVA TR-10/823, p. 60; YVA TR-11/I 0116, pp. 50-51; SZYMON DATNER, Pamięc 200.000 Żydów Województwa Białostockiego wymordowanych przez Niemców, Warszawa 1945, p. 13. This estimate is based on a later assessment by the Judenrat.

[10] YVA M-11/18, p. 1, Der Yidenrat in Bialystok (unsigned, written in the ghetto by Pesah Kaplan in February – March 1943). The Polish translation of this chronicle can be found in BŻIH 60 (1966), pp. 51-76.

invited well-known public figures, and members of the community, requesting them to attend an emergency meeting. Among the first to reach the rabbi's house were: Ephraim Barash (former president of the community), who was appointed by Rosenman to be the head of the Judenrat. The following day, the Germans were presented with a list of twelve Judenrat members, as ordered.[11] One of the Judenrat's first assignments was to supply the Germans with a workforce, as well as large quantities of blankets and pillows, fur coats, and leather (for leather soles).[12]

On Tuesday July 1, 1941, *Einsatzkommando* 8 – a subunit of *Einsatzgruppe* B – entered the city.[13] On Thursday July 3, the Germans cordoned off several streets and raided Jewish homes, taking about 1,000 men away to the local military command, where they were kept prisoner. That night, a number of drunken officers arrived, ordered the Jews to stand in line, and interrogated each in turn about his former profession. About 300 members of the Jewish intelligentsia – lawyers, doctors, engineers, and members of the liberal professions – were selected and detained, while the others were sent home. The next day they were taken to the Pietrasze Fields, three kilometers north east of Białystok, where they were shot to death.[14]

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[11] YVA M-11/18, p. 1. There are no official documents on how and by whom the Judenrat was set up. All we know is that this was the first Judenrat, and that at the end of a month, its quorum of members doubled from 12 to 24. However, a number of testimonies provide us with a fairly clear picture of how the Judenrat came into being. David Klemantinovsky's testimony indicates that Wladek Riegert, senior manager of the municipal electricity station, who had been appointed interim mayor by the military governor of Białystok, entrusted Rosenman with the task of setting up the Judenrat: DAVID KLEMANTINOVSKY, Lebn un Umkum im Bialystoker Geto, New York 1946, p. 20. Kaplan's diary indicates that Rosenman was ordered to set up the Judenrat already on the first day of the city's occupation, but Reizner writes that the city's commander summoned Barash as well as Rosenman, and that the two together called a meeting of community activists, informed them of their discussion with the city's commander, and elected the members of the Judenrat: REIZNER, Umkum, p. 43.

[12] Ibid, p. 46.

[13] YVA TR-10/782, pp. 18-24; YVA TR-10/541, pp. 20-22; HELMUT KRAUSNICK / HANS-HEINRICH WILHELM, Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges, Stuttgart 1981, pp. 180-181.

[14] YVA TR-10/541, p. 28. According to this source, this *Aktion* was carried out by members of Einsatzkommando 8, at the bidding of their commanders who were members of the Security Police. Also: YVA TR-10/885, p. 282; DATNER, Pamięc, p. 14; WALDEMAR MONKIEWICZ / JÓZEF KOWALCZYK, Zagłada Ludności Żydowskiej w Białymstoku, Białystok 1983, p. 8; REIZNER, Umkum, p. 47; SRULKE KOT, Khurbn Białystok, Buenos Aires 1947, p. 24.

Battalion 309 left Białystok on July 3, 1941, and on 5 July, Battalions 316 and 322 entered the city.[15] On Tuesday July 8, 1941, Battalion 322, under Gottlieb Nagel, was ordered to conduct a house-to-house search for goods that had supposedly been looted before the Germans entered the city. On 11 July, the German police commander Max Montua issued the following order:

> "All Jews aged 17-45 who have participated in the looting of shops are to be immediately shot. This operation will be carried out in a location far from cities, villages, and large traffic arteries. They [the corpses] shall not be buried in locations accessible to passers-by. No photographs may be taken of the operation, and no spectators may be present. The operation and burial sites shall be concealed from the public."[16]

The *Aktion* began at 5 A.M. on Saturday 12 July, when over a thousand policemen belonging to Battalions 316 and 322 cordoned off areas in the city, broke into Jewish homes, ordered the men into the streets and herded them into the municipal stadium. The order was then given for them to be moved to Pietrasze Fields, a forested area with two or three large gullies that had formerly served as Soviet trenches, where they were to be shot.[17] On Saturday afternoon, trucks began transporting the Jews from the stadium to Pietrasze. They were divided into groups, and each group was then taken to the trenches to be shot by a platoon of about 30 men. Anyone who refused to go, or tried to escape into the nearby forest, was shot on the spot. The *Aktion* lasted two days.[18] By July 17, the battalions had left the city. Although there are no exact figures for how many Jewish men were killed in this *Aktion*, it is clear that no one managed to escape. The Jews of Białystok were convinced that the men had been taken away for work and would soon return to their families. Both German and Jewish sources estimate the number of Jews killed in this *Aktion* at about 4,000.[19] The

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[15] YVA 053/86, "Auswärtiger Einsatz", *Kompanietagebuch* – The diary of Company 9, Battalion 322, p. 147 (also known as *Kriegstagebuch* No. 1, YVA 053/127). The proceedings of the trial appear in: Justiz und NS-Verbrechen, Vol. XIX, ed. by CHRISTIAAN RÜTER et. al., Amsterdam 1978, pp. 413-469.

[16] YVA TR-10/609, pp. 153-154. Also: CHRISTOPHER R. BROWNING, Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland, New York 1992, pp. 13-14.

[17] YVA TR-10/721, p. 167. The distance between the trenches was apparently 30-40 meters. Testimonies indicate that one of the units dug the trenches deeper, and therefore there was no need to dig additional pits.

[18] YVA TR-10/721, p. 176.

[19] Reizner and Kot quote a figure of 3,000 Jews, Datner and Klemantinovsky 4,000, and Monkiewicz and Kowalczyk 4,000-5,000 Jews. The German court referred to 3,000 Jewish men, but stressed that this was the lowest estimate: YVA TR-10/609, p. 61; EDWARD JANOWICZ, O zlikwidowaniu 4.000 Żydów białostockich, in: YVA M-11B/247.

Aktionen perpetrated by the Germans against Białystok's Jews in the first two weeks of the city's occupation resulted in nearly 7,000 deaths.

The establishment of the Ghetto

On July 26, 1941, the Judenrat announced that the military authorities in Białystok had ordered the establishment of a Jewish ghetto in the city.[20] Poles living in the designated area were evicted, while Jews living outside the ghetto were required to leave their houses spotlessly clean, and hand over the keys to the municipality.[21] The transfer of the Jews to the ghetto was handled by the Judenrat's housing department. The transfer itself did not take long. Since wagons were scarce and very expensive, people had to ferry their personal belongings – mattresses, bedding, furniture and dishes – through the streets themselves. Many Poles took advantage of the chaos to rob children of the few goods they were carrying.

> "Two or three families in a room. The rooms are divided by wooden or cloth partitions [...] The wealthy are able to hire wagons, for which they pay with pianos or beautiful items of furniture they no longer have any use for… The Germans meanwhile photograph the event [...]."[22]

The main gate to the ghetto, on Jurowiecka Street, was kept open throughout the ghetto's existence, while another gate, on Kupiecka Street, was usually kept closed. Two German soldiers and two Jewish policemen stood guard by the main gate. The Germans ordered a wooden fence to be built round the ghetto, 2.5 meters high, topped by half a meter of barbed wire. In some places the walls of houses adjoining the ghetto served as natural boundaries.[23]

On Friday August 1, 1941, five days after the order had been given to move into the ghetto, the gates were closed on its 43,000 Jewish inhabitants. The following day the Judenrat held its first session, with a full quorum of 24 members, as stipulated by the authorities.[24] Engineer Ephraim

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[20] NAHMAN BLUMENTAL, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, Jerusalem 1962, p. 278.

[21] Ibid, p. 281.

[22] KOT, Khurbn Bialystok, pp. 29-30. Also: FELICJA NOWAK, Moja Gwiazda, Białystok 1991, p. 68.

[23] REIZNER, Umkum, pp. 58-59; KOT, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 30; MONKIEWICZ / KOWALCZYK, Zagłada, p. 9.

[24] We do not know how the second, expanded Judenrat was established. Apparently, the Judenrat's president, Rabbi Rosenman, was ordered to continue as president, and to expand the board from twelve to twenty-four members. The General-Gouvernement was

Barash held the post of acting chairman of the Judenrat throughout the ghetto's existence.

The Judenrat was headed by Rabbi Gedalyahu Rosenman, its chairman; with Ephraim Barash as acting chairman. In due course, various committees affiliated with the departments also came into being. These were: the Registrations Committee, the Budget Committee, the Self-Help Committee, the Information Committee, and the Sanitation Committee. As well as departments and committees, there were also divisions affiliated with the departments. These were: the Tax Division (also known as the Tax Department, or Tax Bureau), the Court, the Criminal Court, the Furniture and Raw Materials Division, the Gardening Division, and the Latrine Division.[25]

As well as trying to alleviate hardship in the days following the Occupation, the Judenrat tried to promote the work ethic, by advertising for plasterers, carpenters, polishers, painters, locksmiths, blacksmiths, car mechanics, radio technicians and simple laborers. Skilled laborers working outside the city were issued with special passes.[26] The Judenrat's emphasis on the importance of work was based on two assumptions: First, that work was a passport to safety, and second, that work would supply the minimum requirements for survival under occupation conditions.

The Period of Calm: November 1941–November 1942

Some major departments of the Judenrat constituted the infrastructure of daily life in the Ghetto.

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subject to the order issued by Governor-General Hans Frank, on November 28, 1939, stipulating that where the Jewish population exceeded 10,000, the Judenrat board had to comprise 24 members. One may assume that in this matter, as in many others, the authorities in the Białystok district decided to follow the laws applying to the General-Gouvernement. – As to the number of Jews in the ghetto when it was sealed, I believe that given the estimated number of Jews who perished prior to the establishment of the ghetto, and given the statistics on the number of Jews in the ghetto provided by the Judenrat and Mordecai Tenenbaum (see below) at various intervals, this number (43,000) is the most accurate. Philip Friedman puts the number at 60,000, basing this estimate on Datner, who also specifies 60,000. This figure is definitely inflated, being corroborated neither by Jewish sources nor by German statistics: PHILIP FRIEDMAN, Roads to Extinction, New York / Philadelphia 1980, p. 76; DATNER, Pamięc, p. 23.

[25] The names of the divisions and committees are taken from Judenrat reports, and from public notices that were found after the war and incorporated into Blumental's book: BLUMENTAL, Judenrat, p. 549.

[26] Ibid, p. 282.

The Finance Department

Already before the establishment of the ghetto, the military authorities demanded a high tax, in what was to become a systematic policy toward the Jews. The Judenrat, through its Finance Department, was responsible for assessing tax rates, collecting the taxes (sometimes by coercion) and delivering them to the Germans. Dov (Berl) Sobotnik, a member of "Yehiel's Beit Midrash" famous for his extraordinary Talmudic erudition, was appointed head of the Judenrat's Finance Department. Although at the start of the Occupation, the Judenrat's revenue was based on gold reserves and general tax collection,[27] from early 1942, a series of new taxes were legislated.[28]

The instability of ghetto life made it impossible for the Judenrat to work out a regular budget. In a session held by the heads of five Judenrat departments on January 16, 1942, Sobotnik ascribed the lack of a budget to the fact that "so far we have not had a minute's peace, and have been unable to get into a work routine."[29]

One of the reasons why the Judenrat was so strict about payment of taxes was that these constituted its only regular source of income. Other sources of income were occasional contributions, "donations" that had been given by or extracted from the ghetto's rich, the assets of Jews who had been deported or killed, and the wages of laborers employed outside the ghetto, which the Judenrat retained either fully or in part. Naturally, none of these sources of income were reliable.

The Labor Department

Even before the gates of the ghetto were closed, the authorities demanded that the Judenrat provide them with a quota of workers. The quotas set by the Germans immediately after the Occupation were so high, the Labor Department found it hard to meet them, both because of time constraints, and a wide-spread reluctance on the part of the ghetto residents to work outside the ghetto. Workers returning to the ghetto reported that at the tiniest slip-up they were beaten, forced to work overtime, made to carry loads that were far too heavy for them, and taken in wagons to remote areas where they were arbitrarily abused. The Germans, for their part, constantly threatened the Judenrat with sanctions. The Judenrat's failure to

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[27] Ibid, Judenrat, p. 151.

[28] Ibid, pp. 73-75, Notice No. 250; p. 453, Notice No. 282; p. 403, Notice No. 197; YVA M-11/18, p. 24.

[29] Ibid, p. 111.

meet the German's demands was not for lack of trying. As stated, the Judenrat considered Jewish labor essential to the ghetto's survival, and even before the authorities laid down the law, sent over 2,000 workers each day to work outside the ghetto.[30]

Right from the start, the issue of Jewish labor figured at the top of the Judenrat agenda.[31] It is difficult to ascertain exactly when Barash became convinced of the supreme importance of Jewish labor as a key to survival. From the beginning, the ghetto enjoyed a strong leadership, which adhered throughout to its principles. This leadership firmly believed that the ghetto Jews would survive by serving the economic interests of the German Reich through the provision of cheap labor. In actual fact, the first fifteen months of the ghetto's life seemed to endorse this belief, thereby enhancing the leadership's credibility. The Judenrat's slogan was "salvation through work", an idea which gained currency within the Judenrat, and later, within the Jewish community itself. The idea behind this view, to "make the ghetto so indispensable to the German authorities that they would be reluctant to destroy it", was so logical, it was difficult to challenge.[32] Reports on Judenrat sessions testify that this theme ran like a leitmotif through all Judenrat sessions.

Ephraim Barash sincerely believed that Jewish labor was a safe – albeit difficult – prescription for survival. For many months, Barash tried to persuade others (and perhaps himself, too) that the benefit the Germans reaped from the labor of the ghetto Jews had softened their attitude toward them. In his opening speech on the first anniversary of the ghetto's establishment, Rabbi Rosenman stated: "The authorities can see for themselves that we are working without thought of personal gain, and over time their attitude toward us has improved due to their positive regard for our work."[33] This process of self-delusion kindled in Barash the hope, and ultimately the conviction, that the Białystok ghetto would come through the war intact.

The visits by various government officials to the ghetto lent credence to this conviction. In his report on these visits at the Judenrat session of August 14, 1942, Barash stated:

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[30] YVA M-11/18, p. 12; BLUMENTAL, Judenrat, p. 11, and p. 291, Notice No. 20. Also KOT, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 48.

[31] BLUMENTAL, Judenrat, p. 79.

[32] Ibid, p. 237. Elsewhere, Barash said: "Our policy of making the ghetto useful to the authorities is correct", p. 229. Both statements were made in August 1942.

[33] BLUMENTAL, Judenrat, p. 215.

> "Recently, the most important events in the ghetto have been visits to our factories and to the ghetto in general. They are important for our future; our 'to be or not to be' depends on them [...] Two delegations sent by the Gauleiter (district governor, S.B.] stated that throughout Eastern Prussia they have never come across such well-organized work."[34]

The first signs that the equilibrium of ghetto life was about to be upset by an imminent *Aktion* came in October 1942, after about a year of relative calm.[35] Barash's anxiety over the rumored *Aktion* pushed him to make even greater efforts to ensure the ghetto's survival. The insecurity he felt, rather than undermining his belief in the power of work, simply strengthened it. As he saw it, if all ghetto Jews had been fully employed in October 1942, the German authorities would never have thought of including Białystok in their extermination program.

The Industry Department

As well as encouraging people to work outside the ghetto, Barash saw industrial development inside the ghetto as another way of making the Jews useful to the Germans, and thereby ensuring their survival. When the Judenrat discovered, in early November 1941, that the ghetto's existence was in danger, and that the Germans were considering setting up another ghetto in the city, Barash began focusing on industrial development inside the ghetto. The goods manufactured in the factories and workshops that were opened during the first month of the ghetto's existence, led Barash to conclude that "the ghetto's status has improved in the eyes of the authorities."[36] At the Judenrat's initiative and with the help of the authorities, the Wehrmacht established ties with the ghetto in late 1941, when it placed a large order for boots. This corroborated Barash's hunch that industrial activity "could ensure the safety of the entire ghetto."[37]

The Industry Department was responsible for finding suitable locations for factories, and supplying them with machines and manpower – assignments that, in those times, were extremely difficult. In an attempt to demonstrate the ghetto's production potential to the German authorities, the

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[34] Ibid, p. 229.

[35] Ibid, p. 249. In the first half of October 1942, the Gestapo in Białystok received a secret order from the Reich Main Security Office to destroy the Białystok ghetto and other ghettos in the district: ARTUR EISENBACH, Di Felker-Oysratunsgpolitik fun Daytshen Imperializm in eniberbrukh period oyfenmizrakh-front, in: Bleter far Geshikhte 3 (1950), No. 3-4, p. 45.

[36] Ibid, p. 93.

[37] Ibid, p.105 (10.1.42); YVA M-11/18, p. 20.

Judenrat presented the German army, in January 1942, with about 3,500 items of clothing, 500 winter coats, 500 vests, 500 pairs of gloves, 500 hats, socks etc.[38] Apartments were converted into factories, and machines and tools were obtained from individuals through gentle or not so gentle persuasion.[39]

A permanent exhibition of ghetto goods organized by the German ghetto administration at the Judenrat's initiative in March 1942, triggered a rush of new orders. The exhibition was housed outside the ghetto in a three-roomed apartment on Warzowska Street. A female artist from the ghetto (originally from Warsaw) was custodian, while two Jewish girls who were fluent in German greeted German visitors to the exhibition, provided explanations, and encouraged them to visit the ghetto factories where the exhibits had been manufactured.[40] In a Judenrat session on March 22, 1942, Barash emphasized that the exhibition, with its high degree of professionalism, was an asset to the ghetto: "Its 500 exhibits make a good impression, almost like before the war […] I hope it will prove of advantage not only to the ghetto, but will lead to a change in attitude toward the Jews in general."[41] On April 5, 1942, Barash stated:

> "The industrial workers are not only saving themselves but the entire ghetto. You have heard of the large-scale deportations from Berlin and from Königsberg. We have done everything to convince them [the authorities] that the ghetto must be left intact […] The exhibition makes a very good impression, and this is very important both for us and for the Jewish people as a whole. I have also heard criticism of our work. [Some say] that we are too eager to cooperate. However, we must not lose sight of the future. Therefore I declare: Our goal is to survive, and we must do all within our power to attain this goal. As to the regime here, its actions are not determined by [our] behavior but by its own policy. Already, we see a certain lack of logic in the Poles' attitude towards the Jews. Let Jews who have connections with Poles not lose sight of this fact."[42]

Barash finished his speech by saying: "We are doing what we can. History shall be our judge".[43]

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[38] Ibid, p. 115; REIZNER, Umkum, pp. 62-63.

[39] BLUMENTAL, Judenrat, p. 449, Notices Nos. 274-276; p. 323, Notice No. 78; p. 361, Notice No. 132; p. 389, Notice No. 175, p. 469, Notice No. 307; p. 499, Notice No. 361.

[40] YVA M-11/18, p. 22.

[41] BLUMENTAL, Judenrat, p. 149.

[42] Ibid, p. 163.

[43] Ibid.

The Supplies Department

Two Judenrat departments were responsible for the ghetto's economy: The Department of Economic Affairs and the Supplies Department. Officially, the ghetto Jews were not allowed to conduct business either inside or outside the ghetto; the Judenrat's Supplies Department, run by Yaakov Goldberg, was responsible for supplying the ghetto residents with their basic needs. The Civil Administration supplied the municipality, which supplied the Judenrat which distributed the food among the residents.[44] During the ghetto's first winter (early 1941), the Department managed to obtain enough fuel for the entire population. In the winter of 1942, however, the Judenrat received a much smaller quantity of fuel, and since most of this went to public institutions (hospitals, clinics, and factories), many private houses were left without any heat.[45]

The Supplies Department distributed potatoes to the ghetto residents, and also supervised the bakeries and dairy farms to ensure a fair distribution of bread and milk. In early 1942, the ghetto's economic situation improved, thanks to an expanding economy and a lively smuggling trade. Although the cost of living was high, it was possible to make ends meet. The ghetto's small stores sold food exclusively; the ghetto also had a few restaurants and cafes, and many businesses were conducted in the ghetto's streets.[46]

By the end of the first period of the Occupation, workers were paid a wage of 1 to 1.20 Marks per day (half the wage of Polish workers), and skilled laborers received even more. By the summer of 1942, a worker's daily wage sufficed to purchase half a kilogram of bread. As a result, more money flowed into the ghetto, the food situation improved, despite inflation, and the economic situation appeared to be stabilizing.[47]

The Judenrat's efforts to stabilize the economy bore fruit; the Białystok ghetto did not suffer from starvation. Effective food distribution, legal trade permits, food factories, and the conversion of vacant lots into vegetable gardens not only saved the ghetto residents from starvation, but actually rendered their lives tolerable. Although at the time the Białystok ghetto numbered only 42,000 residents – an easy number to feed compared with

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[44] Ibid, p. 307, Notice No. 52; p. 351, Notice No. 113; p. 363, Notice No. 133; p. 377, Notice No. 154; p. 409, Notice No. 206; p. 451, Notice No. 281; p. 481, Notice No. 325; p. 20; p. 26.

[45] YVA M-11/18, p. 9.

[46] Ibid, p. 7.

[47] YVA M-11/29, pp. 8-9, pp. 14 and 16; YVA M-11/18, pp. 11 and 21. Also: NOWAK, Moja Gwiazda, p. 80.

large ghettos such as Warsaw and Litzmannstadt – most of the traditional sources of income had disappeared already during the Soviet period, prior to the German occupation. Only a highly efficient economic administration could prevent dire shortages and serious economic hardships, even during the war period. In this respect, the Białystok Judenrat passed the test with flying colors.

Although the Judenrat's official chairman was Dr. Rosenman, the community leader Ephraim Barash was its active chairman. Barash assumed the function of acting chairman of the Judenrat even before the ghetto's establishment, about a month after the Germans' entry into Białystok. An experienced and circumspect leader, Barash had to formulate a policy that accommodated the strategy of the new rulers. Initially at least, Barash rejected the assumption that the murder of Białystok's Jews during the early days of the Occupation was part of a general plan to liquidate European Jewry. He entertained no illusions about the weakness of the ghetto and the might of the German rulers, but sought all possible ways to protect the ghetto's 40,000 Jews, for whom he felt responsible. Barash believed that he had to give the public some hope to latch on to, to keep it going. Although Barash had no ideology to speak of, he clung tenaciously to the belief that the ghetto Jews could be saved by making themselves indispensable to the Germans.

Available testimonies and memoirs confirm that until the sealing of the ghetto in November 1942, life in the ghetto gradually stabilized, and became even tolerable. A large percentage of ghetto residents were employed, food was in reasonable supply, health services were satisfactory, and factories and workshops thrived. This lulled people into the false belief that they would weather the storm safely, even when news reached the ghetto of the extermination of Jewish communities in Poland and the Eastern territories.

The First *Aktion* – February 1943

The Jews of Białystok knew that the Jews in the district were being deported to Treblinka and Auschwitz, and that their own fate hung in the balance. They had been told by refugees from other provinces, of how thousands of Jews had been taken to the death camps. These stories were corroborated by documents, photos, and notes found on the clothes of victims, sent from Treblinka to the textile plants in the Białystok ghetto. When Barash gave some of these documents to Tenenbaum for his archive,

the latter wrote in anguish: "The documents haunt me [...] I feel as if my pocket is on fire".[48]

On February 1, 1943, a railway timetable was published in Kraków, signed by the Director General of the Eastern Railways, whereby between February 9 and 13, five special passenger trains were to transport Jews from Białystok to Treblinka.[49] Berlin had decided, for the time being at least, to evacuate only about 10,000 Jews from Białystok. Rolf Günther – Eichmann's henchman – was dispatched to Białystok in order to quash opposition by local officials, such as Dr. Wilhelm Altenloh.[50]

As the date of the *Aktion* approached, the ghetto population prepared for it as best it could. Finishing touches were put to hiding places. "A new city was built in cellars, attics, and hollow walls."[51] Tenenbaum himself inspected the central bunker – 35 meters long, one-and-a-half meters wide, and four meters deep – dug by members of Dror at 7, Chmielna Street. Tenenbaum described it as "a real underground catacomb, equipped with ventilation, water and electricity."[52] The bunker was also used by Barash to hide gold, valuables, and foreign currency belonging to the Judenrat.

On Tuesday February 2, the ghetto population was alarmed to see Richard Dibus of the Gestapo and Yitzhak Marcus, head of the Jewish police, repairing all holes and cracks in the ghetto walls. "The women bought up all the bread in the shops. The shops looked like after a pogrom. People are taking food into the shelters."[53] The streets emptied of people, as the rumor that the Germans were intending to deport a quota of 10,000 Jews spread through the ghetto like wildfire. In preliminary talks held on the evening of February 4, several hours before the start of the *Aktion,* Barash informed Tenenbaum that the Germans had originally intended deporting 17,600 Jews but had later whittled this down to 6,300 in three transports of 2,100 people each. He added that the Germans were intending to use the Judenrat's lists to deport the unemployed, and that the factory

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[48] MORDECAI TENENBAUM-TAMAROFF, Dappim min ha-Dlekah*,* Jerusalem 1948, p. 31 (January 29, 1943). A few days earlier, seven wagonloads of clothes had arrived at the "Textil Industrie Aufbau" and "Werterfassung" plants in the ghetto. Ibid, p. 27.

[49] YVA 053/47. This timetable was also subsequently changed, but the number of deportees remained constant.

[50] YVA TR-10/661, p. 82.

[51] KOT, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 56. Also: ABRAHAM VERED, Lihiot be-Tzel ha-shoah [To be in the Shadow of the Holocaust], Tel Aviv 1950, p. 33.

[52] TENENBAUM-TAMAROFF, Dappim min ha-Dlekah, p. 34. For information on Dror's bunker.

[53] TENENBAUM-TAMAROFF, Dappim min ha-Dlekah, p. 34. Also: REIZNER, Umkum, p. 120.

and Judenrat workers were safe for the time being. Although a final decision from Berlin was imminent, one of the generals of the committee that had visited the ghetto that afternoon – a member of the Gestapo in Königsberg – intended to intercede on the ghetto's behalf upon his return to Königsberg. According to Barash, even Fritz Friedel, head of Białystok Gestapo, opposed the liquidation of the ghetto. The head of the ghetto administration Gerhard Klein, he added, had promised that he would not allow more than one transport through. Barash, who was familiar with the German tug-of-war over the ghetto's fate, was not deceived for a moment, but was convinced that the three transports would proceed as planned, and would be carried out on three successive days.[54]

On Friday February 5, 1943, at 3:30 A.M., about 80 armed members of the Gestapo, Schupo, and Kripo, entered the ghetto and marched toward the Judenrat building. Within seconds, they surrounded the neighborhood designated for deportation, and opened fire. The Germans ordered the Jewish policemen to round up the Jews and when the latter refused to obey, they were savagely beaten. "The Germans threatened to kill ten Jewish policemen if they disobeyed orders."[55] Despite the above, some policemen did manage to go into hiding, leaving the Germans to do their own dirty work. Despite several hours of searching, the number of men, women and children rounded up by the Gestapo was far less than the stipulated quota.

The Germans, aware that they were having less success in rounding up the Jews with each successive day, tried a new tactic – encouraging people to inform by granting them immunity from deportation. Each informer would be issued with a document stating: "This Jewish traitor is exempt from the transport" (*Dieser Judenverräter ist befreit vom Transport*).[56] Dozens of people chose to save their lives by becoming turncoats. This tactic, which resulted in the exposure of hundreds of Jews, led to a moral degeneration in the ghetto.

The rumor was now circulating that the Germans' latest success in rounding up the Jews had prompted them to extend the *Aktion* for another few days, in an attempt to round up the requisite quota of Jews. As the ghetto population became increasingly demoralized, suicides became common occurrences. Uncertainty concerning the cessation of the *Aktion* led to despair and apathy. The Jews obsessively calculated the number of deportees, in an attempt to assess when the *Aktion* would end.[57]

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[54] Ibid, pp. 38-39.

[55] Ibid, p. 41. Also: REIZNER, Umkum, p. 121.

[56] YVA M-11/17, pp. 12-13.

[57] YVA M-11/17, pp. 14-15. Also: Testimony of Hadassah Sprung; REIZNER, Umkum, p. 137.

This uncertainty was dispelled on Thursday February 11, when Constantin Canaris, Chief of Security Police and SD in Eastern Prussia, arrived from Königsberg and informed Barash that the *Aktion* was about to end. True to his word, the following evening, (Friday February 12), the *Aktion* in Białystok came to an end, about a week after it began.[58] The Jews, however, unable to believe that the nightmare was over, were afraid to leave their hiding places. It was only the following morning (Shabbat) that people dared return home. Thus, two phenomena, unique to the Białystok ghetto, are worthy of note: First, the steadfast refusal of the Jewish policemen to participate in the deportation, and second, the fact that the entire ghetto population went into hiding.

During the entire week of the *Aktion,* 10,000 residents of the Białystok ghetto were deported in five transports: The first two trains left for Auschwitz on February 5 and 6, and the three others left for Treblinka between February 8 and 12.[59] Due to a lack of weapons, ammunition and plans, in this *Aktion* in Białystok none of the two fronts in the underground conducted any kind of resistance.

On Saturday February 13, 1943, a day after the end of the *Aktion*, the Germans erected a gallows near the Judenrat building, and hanged three Jews for looting empty apartments.[60] On the same day, the ghetto Jews began hunting for informers. The hunt continued for about a month: "They are hunting down informers and beating them to death. One has only to point to an informer, for hundreds of people to set upon him. […] They have already hanged three informers, and lynched another three".[61]

The main question that preoccupied the ghetto population after the *Aktion* was when was the *Aktion* going to resume? Alongside this growing anxiety, however, there were signs that life in the ghetto was returning to

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[58] TENENBAUM-TAMAROFF, Dappim min ha-Dlekah, p. 72.

[59] YVA 053/47, Transportation Order No. 552 of The General Administration of Eastern Railways. This order assigned five trains to deport Jews from Białystok to Treblinka. The order stated that the first train was to leave Białystok for Treblinka on February 9, 1943. When, however, it transpired that the *Aktion* in Białystok would begin already on February 5, the original deportation schedule was changed, and the first two transports were rerouted to Auschwitz: DANUTA CZECH, Kalendarium der Ereignisse im KL. Auschwitz-Birkenau 1939–1945, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1989, pp. 407-408. The other three trains reached Treblinka as originally planned, although their exact dates of departure are unknown: YVA TR-10/661, p. 99.

[60] YVA M-11/17, p. 16. Also: BLUMENTAL, Judenrat, p. 515, Notice No. 388; KOT, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 70; HAIKA GROSSMAN, The Underground Army. Fighters of the Bialystok Ghetto, New York 1987, p. 234.

[61] TENENBAUM-TAMAROFF, Dappim min ha-Dlekah, pp. 41-42. This anguished entry in Tenenbaum's diary was in Yiddish. Also: BLUMENTAL, Judenrat, p. 517, Notice No. 391; p. 519, Notice No. 520; KOT, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 71.

normal. Military production swiftly expanded, and the notices put up by the Judenrat asking for sewing machines, motors, horses, and textile experts, also generated a faint hope that things might not be quite as bad as they seemed.[62]

True to its ethos, immediately after the *Aktion,* the Judenrat set about expanding the factories. With Barash's approval, the factory foremen put up signs declaring the factories to be Wehrmacht property, in the hope that this would improve their chances of survival. Again, Barash had to contend with widespread reluctance to work outside the ghetto, since many of the deportees had been "outside" workers. To solve this problem, and meet the quota of workers demanded by the Germans, the Judenrat stamped the work cards of those who worked outside the ghetto with a ghetto factory stamp.[63]

After the *Aktion,* Barash, as leader of the Judenrat, did his best to instill optimism and hope into the hearts of the Jews. The ghetto population saw that the Germans had stood by their promise not to deport the workers and their families who were hiding in the factories, and allowed themselves to be swept along by Barash's conviction that after this partial *Aktion,* the Germans would leave the ghetto alone. Barash won public support for his belief that the ghetto was indispensable to the Reich's war efforts. If anything, the public's faith in Barash increased after the *Aktion*.

Barash's cultivation of the German authorities paid off: He was kept informed of decisions regarding the ghetto's future immediately after the *Aktion*. A German document dated February 20, 1943 (a week after the end of the *Aktion*) describes a meeting that had taken place the previous day with the Commander of the Security Police (KdS) commander in Białystok. The meeting, called ostensibly to discuss the ghetto's new borders and fences, shed light on the authorities' plans for the ghetto's future. At the end of the meeting, the following decisions were adopted:

> "During this meeting, the deputy commander of the KdS declared that a further deportation of the Jews [from Białystok] is out of the question. In our estimation, 30,000 Jews will remain in the ghetto until the end of the war. From now on, we must take this economic fact into consideration, since it is our belief that the Reich Main Security Office will agree with this view of things. Thus, a new picture arises concerning the work force and economic productivity [in the ghetto].
> Although the ghetto's borders have changed, its overall area has not.
> Factories situated within the ghetto will continue to employ Jewish workers.

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[62] BLUMENTAL, Judenrat, p. 517, Notice No. 390; p. 519, Notice No. 394; p. 525, Notices No. 401 and 403; p. 529, Notice No. 407.

[63] REIZNER, Umkum, p. 146.

> Irrespective of future peace arrangements in the city, it is essential, for both political and security reasons, that the 4,000 or so Jews employed in factories outside the ghetto be forthwith transferred to factories inside the ghetto.
> This proposal awaits the final approval of the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin."[64]

This document provides some insight into how, once again, the ghetto's fate became a subject of controversy. The document's emphasis on the economic factor seems to indicate that the authorities wished to avoid the destruction of the ghetto. Since the document was found in Tenenbaum's underground archive, Barash presumably gave it to Tenenbaum, after receiving it from a German official. This document may explain why Tenenbaum kept putting off the moment of action, rather than prepare for the inevitable confrontation, or why he made no attempt to challenge Barash's views. In any case, there is no doubt that it was this document that motivated Barash to begin rehabilitating the ghetto.

The Final Evacuation

Material from war trials held in Germany shows that already in April 1943, at the height of the evacuation of the Warsaw ghetto, plans were afoot for the final liquidation of the Białystok ghetto. Indeed, the destruction of the Białystok ghetto was part of a master plan Himmler devised in May 1943.

Artur Eisenbach, in his book *The Nazi Extermination Policy*, describes how Himmler was keen to take over the Białystok ghetto with its large industrial potential, in order to strengthen the *Ostindustrie* – a company owned by the SS, that was established in January 1943. The Ostindustrie was meant to operate throughout and even beyond the General-Gouvernement, and one of its functions was to act as the umbrella organization of all labor camps – both present and future – in the Lublin district. Initially, the Ostindustrie was based on the labor camps already under Odilo Globocnik's direct control. The idea was to transfer in February 1943, all

[64] YVA M-11/26. This document, together with two other German documents, was copied from the original German, and also appears as M-1134 in the YVA. Note that this is the only known case of a German document falling into the Judenrat's hands. There is no doubt that the document was copied from the original, both because the language and style are typical of Nazi decisions and orders, and because Tenenbaum added comments in his own handwriting. Tenenbaum could have obtained the document only from Barash, especially since the Jews who worked for the Gestapo almost certainly had no access to classified material, and even if they had, would not have risked their lives by stealing it.

production forces from Warsaw and Białystok to camps in the Lublin area.[65]

Herbert Zimmermann, an attorney by profession, and KdS in Białystok, favored the ghetto's continued existence, albeit for personal motives.[66] Himmler, keen to make use of Globocnik's expertise, appointed him on July 10, 1943 Commander of "Operation Reinhard" and Political Director of the Ostindustrie camps in Lublin. During his stay in Lublin, Himmler completed two important missions: The destruction of the two ghettos (Białystok and Litzmannstadt), and the completion of the financial accounts of "Operation Reinhard." Himmler's choice of Globocnik, his immediate subordinate, to oversee the deportation to Lublin was also partly dictated by his fear of an uprising in Białystok.[67] Globocnik was chosen for his natural skills and substantial experience, and also because local opposition to the evacuation of the ghetto (a situation unique to the Białystok ghetto) made it hard to find men willing to carry out the task.

Globocnik ordered Georg Michalsen, deputy commander of the Lublin unit, to leave for Białystok and prepare for the evacuation of the ghetto together with Zimmermann and the local security police. Michalsen arrived in Białystok between August 10 and 12, 1943, together with Obersturmführer Magel, commander of Police Regiment 26.[68]

On Sunday evening August 15, Michalsen informed Zimmermann that after the Jews were led to the prearranged assembly point, Globocnik's men would carry out a "selection" of able-bodied Jews, who would be taken to Małkinia, the train station nearest to Treblinka, together with the other Jews. However, unlike the other Jews, for whom Treblinka would be the final destination, the able-bodied Jews would continue to Lublin and Auschwitz.[69] Five factories were also to be transferred from Białystok to the labor camps of Lublin. Finally, the local security police would be responsible for evacuating the elderly, the sick, and infants in care.

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[65] ARTUR EISENBACH, Di Sibbes vos hoben tzugeaylt, oder forlangzamt di likvidatzia fun di Białystoker yiden, im: Bleter far Geshikhte 4 (1951), No. 3, p. 73.

[66] Ibid, p. 80; YVA TR-10/661, p. 299; YVA TR-10/813, p. 157. BER MARK, Der Oyfshtand in Białystoker Geto, Warsaw 1950, p. 373. Friedel points out in his testimony that "Zimmermann argued that the Jews should be left in Białystok since almost all of them worked for the army." YVA 1505, Department for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes, Israel Police Bureau 06, Manuscript of Fritz Friedel, 12.-13.6.1949.

[67] Friedel wrote in his testimony that Lothar Heimbach (chief of Gestapo in Białystok) told him that Zimmermann had informed him [Heimbach] that Himmler had appointed Globocnik to deport the Jews from the Białystok ghetto: Manuscript of Fritz Friedel.

[68] Manuscript of Fritz Friedel.

[69] YVA TR-10/661, pp. 301-302, Report Globocnik to Himmler, 5.1.1944, and from an Ostindustrie report dated 13.3.1944.

Unlike the February evacuation, preparations for the final destruction of the Białystok ghetto were such a well-guarded secret, that even Barash had no idea of what was going on. On the night of August 15, 1943, the three battalions of Police Regiment No. 26 barricaded all approaches to the ghetto in a tight ring formation that precluded any attempts to escape.[70] The liquidation of the Białystok ghetto had begun.

The destruction of the ghetto

In the second half of July 1943, a rumor spread through the ghetto that the Germans were planning to destroy one of the two large ghettos left in Poland (Litzmannstadt and Białystok). Barash informed his colleagues that he was no longer optimistic.[71]

It was around this time that the representatives of all the underground factions decided to set up a united front. After the merger Tenenbaum was appointed commander of the underground, and the Communist Daniel Moszkowicz, his deputy. The first meeting of the heads of the united underground took place on July 29, 1943.

On Sunday August 15, around evening time, Barash was summoned to the Gestapo headquarters in the Branicki Palace. He was summarily informed that the following morning policemen from Lublin would be transporting the Jews of Białystok, their families and factory equipment to Lublin and assured Barash that the Jews' lives in Lublin would continue in much the same manner as in Białystok. Barash was warned that any resistance would be severely punished.[72]

Barash left the Gestapo headquarters in a daze. Since he had not yet managed to form ties with Zimmermann, he realized that bargaining, begging, or bribery were out of the question, and that there was absolutely nothing he could do. This was no doubt the most difficult moment in his life – the realization that he had failed, that all his efforts had been in vain, and that he may have been mistaken all along. And yet, even at such a time, his conviction in the justness of his cause was so strong that he persuaded himself that all was not yet lost. Be that as it may, he broke his promise to Tenenbaum by failing to inform the underground of what he had just learnt, thereby depriving them of several hours of vital time in which to organize for action.

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[70] YVA TR-10/813, pp. 159-160.

[71] REIZNER, Umkum, p. 162.

[72] Manuscript of Fritz Friedel; MARK, Oyfshtand, p. 375.

At about 2 A.M. on Monday August 16, 1943, the evacuation forces began encircling the ghetto in a swift and silent maneuver designed not to alert the ghetto residents. The leaders of the fighting fronts and the commanders of the underground cells had already worked out an emergency plan in the event of an *Aktion,* in which members would take up positions, be issued with weapons and await orders from their commanders. However, the surprise element of the *Aktion* created unforeseen problems, and forced the underground to modify its plan.

Barash had no choice but to do as he was told. Accordingly, the Judenrat put up a notice ordering the ghetto residents to assemble on Jurowiecka, Fabryczna, Ciepła, Nowogródzka, and Chmielna streets and in the Judenrat Garden, by 9 o'clock that morning, for transportation to Lublin. The notice promised that they would remain alive. Barash, eager to set an example, was the first to turn up, complete with suitcase and backpack.[73] Soon, most of the Jews followed suit, leaving their houses voluntarily.

On the morning of August 16, thousands of Jews assembled in Jurowiecka and adjoining streets, awaiting orders. The underground, which had assembled at dawn at 1, Piotrkowska Street, at Tenenbaum's order, feverishly devised a new plan to meet the new circumstances - to launch an offensive at 9 A.M.

Although escaping to the forests was an option in Białystok, Tenenbaum had never been enthusiastic about the idea, for reasons both pragmatic (he did not believe it possible to survive in the surrounding forests) and ideological (he sincerely believed in the importance of armed struggle inside the ghetto). The Białystok underground, unlike other active underground movements, was shrouded in a cloak of secrecy, so much so that most of the ghetto public was unaware of its existence. This goes some way toward explaining why the Jews in the Białystok ghetto were unprepared, and why, when the underground called on the masses to resist, many of them had no idea what was expected of them.

Upon realizing that they did not have the support of the masses, the underground leadership decided to move the center of the fighting to the ghetto's eastern sector, where the Jews had been ordered to collect. Accordingly, they decided to transfer all weapons to this area, and join forces

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[73] MARK, Oyfshtand, p. 380 (based on the testimony of Shmerl Grinstein). Nowak writes that Barash tried to oppose the evacuation, and received a slap on the cheek: NOWAK, Moja Gwiazda, p. 119; REIZNER, Umkum, pp. 164-165. Interview with Shamai Kizelstein by author, September 1993, in: YVA TR-10/813, pp. 60, 163-164; YVA TR-10/661, p. 303.

with the main command at 14, Ciepła Street, presided over by Tenenbaum and Moszkowicz.

The uprising began shortly before 9.30 A.M. The experienced and well-armed soldiers of SS and Police Regiment 26 entrenched themselves behind the fence, while the German evacuation forces radioed for help, firing their machine and submachine guns at random. Many of the bullets hit the crowds of Jews who had not taken part in the uprising but were waiting helplessly for instructions. The Germans decided to isolate the fighters from the masses, and destroy the chain of communication between the various resistance cells. They drove the fighters into the area formed by Smolna-Nowogrodzka-Ciepła Streets, in order to narrow down the combat zone to a circumscribed area, which would make it easier to control them. By noon, most of the fighters had fallen, and by 2 P.M. the battle was over.[74]

Meanwhile, by noon that day, an estimated 20,000 people out of a total of 30,000 had shown up at the assembly points on the eastern side of the ghetto.[75] Although the overseers of the *Aktion* assessed the number of able-bodied Jews at about 15,000,[76] only 12-13 thousand were actually sent to the labor camps in Lublin.[77] In his book *Treblinka, Destruction and Revolt,* Itzhak Arad writes that in August 1943, about 7,600 Białystok Jews were taken to Treblinka.[78] To these must be added the 4,000 or so Jews who were sent to Auschwitz (assuming that each transport comprised 1,600 to 2,000 people) and the 13,000 Jews who were sent to the labor camps in Lublin. This gives a total of about 25,000 Jews who were evacuated in the 14 transports that left Białystok. In addition, the Germans left about 1,000 Jews in the "small ghetto" who were evacuated in the last transport, which took place on September 8, 1943. Furthermore we must not forget the hundreds of Jews who were shot in the ghetto or in Pietrasze Fields in the course of the *Aktion*, or the two thousand children were brought back to the

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[74] Ibid, p. 410; DATNER, Pamięc, p. 40.

[75] German legal material points out that at the time of its destruction, there were some 30,000 Jews in the ghetto. Michalsen, in his testimony, quoted 25,000, while, Tenenbaum in a report after the February *Aktion,* quoted 28,000 Jews, including refugees from Grodno. Since there were no far-reaching changes in the ghetto from February to August, one may assume that the number quoted by Tenenbaum on April 2, 1943 was valid also for August 1943, and that it was the most accurate estimate: YVA TR-10/661, pp. 307 and 313; TENENBAUM-TAMAROFF, Dappim min ha-Delekah, p. 76.

[76] YVA TR-10/661, p. 309.

[77] JANINA KIELBON, Migracje Ludności w dystrykcie Lubelskim w latach 1939–1944, Lublin 1995, p. 154.

[78] ITZHAK ARAD, Treblinka: Ovdan ve-Mered [Destruction and Revolt], Tel Aviv 1983, p. 263.

ghetto under exchange plan for German prisoners-of-war.[79] A swift calculation shows that on the eve of the *Aktion* there were about 30,000 Jews residing in the Białystok ghetto.

Most of the fighters who survived the first day of fighting (about seventy-two), took shelter in the large bunker, at 7, Chmielna Street, awaiting further instructions, or hoping for a chance to flee to the forests. On the third day of the evacuation, the bunker came to be discovered.[80] All its occupants were removed, and lined up along the wall of the house at the corner of Jurowiecka and Kupiecka Streets. 70 Jews, members of the underground, were shot in groups of four.[81]

On Friday August 20, the fifth day of the *Aktion*, once the last Jews were evacuated, Tenenbaum and Moszkowicz committed suicide.[82]

Conclusion

The entire history of the Białystok ghetto was shaped by two of its most dominant and charismatic figures – Ephraim Barash, leader of the Judenrat, and Mordecai Tenenbaum, leader of the underground fighters.

For whereas Barash condemned armed resistance as useless at best, and dangerous at worst, Tenenbaum and his comrades saw it as the means to an honorable death. For them armed resistance was a way of making a final

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[79] YVA TR-10/661, p. 309. The testimonies of survivors who testified at trials held in Germany after the war clearly show that during the evacuation, hundreds of Jews were killed both in the ghetto and in Pietrasze Fields. Ibid, p. 315. There is no way of accurately estimating the number of Jews who perished in Białystok itself during the deportation. If we compare the events of the final deportation to those of the February *Aktion* during which almost 1,000 Jews died in the ghetto, we may assume that at least twice as many died in the final deportation in August. For the children, see below.

[80] These versions are based on interviews with Efraim Kissler, Haika Grossman, Bronka Klibansky, Eva Kartzowsky, and Shamai Kizelstein, among others. Also: MARK, Oyfshtand, pp. 426-428; REIZNER, Umkum, pp. 194-197.

[81] MARK, Oyfshtand, pp. 429-430. In another testimony, Kissler stated that Friedel ordered five Jews to be removed from the group and marched toward Kupiecka Street. When three of them began singing the "Internationale," an incensed Friedel ordered them to be shot: Bialystoker Natsi-Talyon Friedel, Farmshaft tsum Toyt, in: Bialystoker Shtime, January – February 1950, p. 19; PESSAH BORSTEIN, Die Letste Oyfshtandlers in Bialystoker Geto, in: Fun Letsten Khurben (= From the last destruction; paper published in the DP camps in Germany after WWII) No. 7 (May 1948), pp. 71-74. Srul Abramson testified at Friedel's Trial that it was Friedel himself who gave the order to shoot the Jews, and ordered the wagon-drivers to collect their corpses: SARA BENDER, The Jews of Białystok during World War II and the Holocaust, Hanover, N.E. 2008, p. 264.

[82] GROSSMAN, Underground Army, p. 327; TUVYA CITRON, Der Oyfshtand in Bialystoker Geto, YVA M-11B/88.

statement to mankind, to the Jewish people, and to the Land of Israel. Therefore, while the choice facing Barash was slavery versus death, the choice facing Tenenbaum was an honorable versus a dishonorable death (going like "sheep to the slaughter"). Apart from the February *Aktion,* this fundamental difference of outlook colored their entire relationship.

Throughout the two years of its existence, the Białystok ghetto was an organized, industrious, and even prosperous ghetto. Unlike other ghettos, it never experienced starvation or abject poverty. Despite the difficulties of life under the German occupation, and fears concerning its future, life in the ghetto continued on an even keel. People's expectations were modest, concern for cleanliness and hygiene prevented epidemics, weddings were held and children were born. Even when news began reaching the ghetto of the atrocities that were taking place outside, the public did not abandon its faith in the future.

In theory, the Judenrat was totally subordinate to the authorities' whims. In practice, the Jewish leadership in Białystok enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom and even support, after it proved its ability to supply the Germans with an efficient workforce and cheap products. It was this understanding between the Judenrat and the local occupation authorities that lulled Barash into a false sense of security and distracted him from Hitler's policy of genocide.

Barash made the same mistake as most Jewish community leaders during the Holocaust period. As a rational man, he was unable to believe that the Germans would write off the Białystok ghetto, which under his skilled leadership had become indispensable to the German war effort. Barash labored under the illusion that the Germans, unlike the Polish masses or the simple Ukrainian peasants, were a sophisticated and down-to-earth nation. He was convinced that nothing would induce the Germans to abandon the ghetto whose productivity was a feather in the cap of the local Occupation authorities.

Barash's assumption that a nation with any sense would not murder its vassals was logical enough. What he did not and could not have known was that German policy regarding the Jews was not based on rational considerations. The special ties that evolved between him and the German overseers merely strengthened his belief that the Białystok ghetto was special, in terms of its industry, discipline, and order. Therefore, even when news of the extermination of Jews in Treblinka, and the destruction of hundreds of Jewish communities reached the ghetto, Barash still chose to believe that the Germans were guided by local considerations, and that by "working, we shall be saved."

Naturally, Barash's attempt to win over the authorities carried with it its own dangers. The need to adapt to the German mentality made him too

willing to accept their methods. It would have been only natural if, under such conditions, he had himself resorted to foul means, or had become their puppet. Barash, however, never fell into the trap, but remained honest in his dealings to the end. What helped him preserve his integrity was no doubt the fact that he saw himself as a mediator between the ghetto and the Germans, in the great tradition of the Jewish "intercessors" who saved their people from destruction throughout the generations.

In view of the above, it is surprising, to say the least, that Barash continued to cling to his beliefs even after he realized the ghetto was doomed. Why, for example, did he see to it that the deportation was carried out in an orderly and disciplined manner? Why did he not urge the Jews to flee, or at the very least, resist? Why did he not tell them the truth? Why did he not make an effort to save individuals?

There are no clear-cut answers to these questions. We shall never know what passed through Barash's mind during the ghetto's final hours. All we know is that throughout the two years of the ghetto's existence, Barash never believed in escape as a viable option. On the contrary, for him a Jew without a ghetto was a condemned Jew. The fact that refugees from other ghettos preferred the Białystok ghetto to the nearby forests merely confirmed his belief that the forest was dangerous, while the ghetto offered the possibility of survival. For Barash, who considered himself responsible for his flock even in the ghetto's final hours, a massive flight from the ghetto appeared to be the height of irresponsibility, if not downright anarchy.

It is equally possible that Barash did not urge the ghetto population to resist because he did not believe it would help. For Barash, what was important was to survive. Dying an honorable death pulled little weight with him. Time was also against him. Even if he had believed an uprising might help, there was not enough time to prepare for one. His apathy and silence should be construed not so much as a betrayal of the public, as a natural psychological response to a wholly unnatural situation.

Equally tragic is the figure of Mordecai Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, the underground leader. There are some who claim that, initially at any rate, Tenenbaum was overshadowed by the more dominant Barash. Be that as it may, no harm came of it, since Barash was an honest, upright man, whose primary concern was the welfare of the public under his care. It was also hard to pick fault with Barash's outlook, based as it was on logical and rational considerations. Contrary to expectations, however, Tenenbaum never deferred to Barash even for a minute. Their relationship was based on friendship, trust, and sympathy. The ideological differences between Barash, who represented the establishment, and Tenenbaum, who represented the youth, could easily have developed into a poisonous vendetta.

That it did not was largely due to the character and probity of these two great personalities, whose greatness runs through all their actions and writings.

Barash, along with thousands of Jews from Białystok, was murdered on November 3, 1943, in one of the work camps in the network of Majdanek-Lublin, in the large scale *Aktion* – "The Erntefest".

The history of the Białystok ghetto is simply the history of the psychological vagaries of this unfortunate ghetto leader, obsessed with his vision of survival, and who managed to win over the entire ghetto public with his message of reassurance and hope. In the symbiotic relationship that developed between him and his community, his wish became their wish. Like him, they too opted for life, under any condition, and at any price.