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JEWS IN KUTNO, POLAND

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On September 1, 1939, when the Germans invaded Poland, Kutno had about 27,000 inhabitants and was considered a medium size city. At that time about 6,700 Jews lived in the town making up 25% of the general population. On September 16, 1939 Kutno was completely taken over by the Germans. On October 8, 1939 the Germans annexed the western section of Poland to the *Reichsgau Posen* that on January 9, 1940 was renamed into *Reichsgau Wartheland*. This territory was divided into three administrative sections (*Regierungsbezirke*): *Hohensalza* (Inowrocław), *Kalisz* (later county *Litzmannstadt* /Łódź) and *Posen* (Poznań). The town and district of Kutno went to the county of *Hohensalza*, an area of 14,461 square kilometers with 1,181,000 inhabitants of which 54,087 Jews.

As soon as the German army had taken over Kutno, the persecution of the Jewish people began. On September 19 the German military administration ordered all Jewish men to report, whereupon they were locked in a local church. It is true, the majority was released after two days, but a large group was taken to the town of Piątek for forced labor. There they were marked with numbers in white paint on their backs, tormented and forced to carry out heavy labor in the fields. Returning to Kutno most of them were exhausted, sick and injured from the tortures.

After the military administration of the occupied territories had been taken over by the German civil authorities on October 25, 1939 forced labor took organized shape. In December 1939 the local German government of Kutno ordered all Jewish males between the age of 16 and 60 to carry out forced labor two days a week. Starting from mid January of 1940, the rule also applied to Jewish females between 18 and 25. The German military and civil authorities made raids on people in the street and forced the Jewish people to different kinds of labor. These raids had not only the object of forcing to labor but also of making fun of the Jews. One of these "amusements" was to drag men studying the Talmud out of the Bet-hamidrash and have them clean the market square from horse-dung, of course without using any shovels or brooms, but with their bare hands.

The occupying authorities did not limit forced labor to the local town, they also deported the Jews to labor camps in the area and - in greater extent - in the county of Posen. The deportations to labor camps took only mass shape in the middle of 1941, when the Jews

of Kutno were already confined to the ghetto. They were mainly deployed to construct the highway between Posen and Frankfurt. A large group of Kutner Jews was sent to camps in Upper Silesia, for instance to the mine of Fürstengrube to load coal.

During the existence of the ghetto in Kutno, daily contingents of 50 forced laborers were recruited from the poorest, many of them refugees from other cities. The *Judenrat* paid the workers 1 RM per day. The funds were raised by levying a special charge to be paid by the wealthiest, who in turn would be exempted from forced labor.



Decree from December 8, 1939 in Kutno obliging the Jews to wear the Star of David on the right side of the chest

As soon as the German army had entered Poland and established their administration in Kutno, the stealing of Jewish property began. This action of dispossession was directed by the *Haupttreuhandstelle-Ost* (HTO) with its main offices in Berlin and a branch in Posen that was set up to confiscate the property of the Jews and Poles in the territories that were annexed to the Reich. In addition, German officers, policemen, party members and civil servants pinched around. As early as the beginning of November 1939 a group of Germans robbed Jewish stores on their own initiative. Systematic theft began in February 1940, when a group of ten ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) came to Kutno to requisition Jewish belongings to give them to fellow German colonists. After a few weeks 80 percent of the Jews had lost their possessions and were completely ruined. The Germans also confiscated furniture, household goods and linen, even if they had no use for most of what they had stolen, except for burning it in their stoves.

In December 1939 the HTO confiscated the large mill of Szlajfer and Blumstein as well as three Jewish stores: the pharmacy of Lejzor Lewin, the outfitter's store of Arch Koppel and the jeweler store of Lejzor Korn. As a result of this expropriation action all the Jewish enterprises were in the hands of the occupying forces by 1940.

Independent of confiscating movables and immovables the German authorities imposed contributions on the Jews, both in cash and in kind. They demanded for instance 15,000 RM from the Jewish Community to renovate and furnish the house of the local Gestapo chief. The sum was collected by means of a public contribution.

On November 3, 1939 the German authorities established the *Judenrat* in Kutno with S. Falc as Chairman and P. Goldszejder, L. Praszkiel, I. Kubic and Sz. Opoczyński as officials. Its tasks were not precisely outlined, but it did not have many possibilities to intervene. Basically, it was about the personal responsibility of the members for the accurate and punctual execution of all orders that were systematically directed towards the terrorization of the Jewish population. One of the first orders by the chief of the Gestapo was to provide a list of all Jews, including their property conditions and their outstanding debts and demands.

The Germans forces used an arsenal of methods to intimidate the Jewish population. One of the most frequent was barbaric atrocity. The most degenerated culprits in Kutno were members of the police, the SS and SA. Gestapo-officer Hoffmann, nicknamed "Nuche", who had the characteristics of a psychopathic sadist, was the terror of the Jewish population. His specialty was to molest young girls. He would tear their clothes off and beat them with a stick until they lost consciousness. Another culprit, an SA-man named "The Yellow", tortured the Jews using a metal baton. Without having any reason, the Chief of the Gestapo, Michael Strumpler, once locked the members of the *Judenrat* up in the detention cell to have them beaten up. This event met with an appalled response from the Jewish society. It showed that not even the Jewish Administration was safe, even though it had been installed by the occupier. And it revealed the perfidy of the Nazi's, as the detention center was set up at the expense of the Jewish Community.

One of the methods to brand the Jews was the order to wear a yellow star on the back. In Kutno this ordinance was given at the end of 1939. It also included a strict ban to use the sidewalks and a 6:00 p.m. curfew. In the first half of 1940 the Kutner Jews were also subjected to a wave of arrests. The first to be arrested were the owners of the confiscated stores, L. Lewin and A. Koppel. On February 15, 1940 they were taken to an unknown place. On April 14 the majority of the teachers of Kutno was arrested, including a group of Jewish teachers. They were taken to camps where they either succumbed to the slave labor or were murdered. That was the fate of A. Klapper, the eminent principal of many years' standing of the Jewish elementary school, and the teachers, Miss F. Kac, S. Klapper, Ch. Meller, R. Rotapfel and Sz. Przygoda. On May 14, 1940 a group of wealthy Jews was arrested (Kilbert, Rabe, Kronzylber, Korn and others) and locked into the building of the former state tobacco company. During investigation they were beaten and tortured. One of the arrested, Menachem Korn, was shot on the spot. The others were taken away without leaving any trace.

Despite the repressions, until mid 1940 the situation of the Jewish population of Kutno still seemed much better than in other towns of the annexed territories. The main reason was that the Kutner Jews were not deported or "resettled" to the *General Government* that between September and December 1939 and in the first months of 1940 absorbed nearly 140,000 people from the Warthegau. The resettlement of the Jewish people was combined with the theft of their possessions as they were only allowed to take hand



luggage. Under penalty of severe sentences they had to leave their movables and immovables untouched. *Menachem Korn, member of an old Kutner family of goldsmiths, shot dead during the first wave of arrests*

Deprived of their lifework these people were soon downgraded and pauperized. That is why thousands of Jews preferred to leave their homes in time and go on their own to other Jewish centers in the *Warthegau* or the *General Government*. About 3,000 Jews from Golina (*Gollin*), Włocławek (*Leslau*), Kalisz (*Kalisch*) and Koło (*Warthbrücken*) as well as from small communities such as Lipno (*Leipe*), Dobrzyń, Ciechocinek, and Toruń (*Thorn*) found refuge in Kutno. Also a large number of Kutner Jews left their hometown, in the beginning out of fear for the invading Germans and later to escape the persecution and terror. The majority headed east towards Warsaw and to those parts of Poland that had been occupied by the Russians. They mainly belonged to the upper social stratum or were involved in political activities or they were youths who could easier cope with the circumstances of their bitter fate. The poorest, however, mainly the Orthodox, stayed put. The exact number of Jews who fled from Kutno is unknown. But they must have been much fewer than those refugees who came from other towns to Kutno. At the beginning of 1940 there were approx. 9,000 Jews in Kutno, i.e. approx. 2,300 more than on the eve of the outbreak of the war. Complying with a German decree from February 1, 1940 a large part of the refugees left Kutno. About 1,000 ignored the order and stayed in town, without being confronted with counter-measures.

The Kutner Jews who found themselves in a more favorable position made every effort to help the forced immigrants. The *Judenrat* arranged a relief action for the newcomers. However, in this particular case, the credit goes to the local relief action committee. All the responsibility and work rested on the members of the committee: J. Borkowski (Secretary of the Kahal), A. Ake (bookkeeper of the Kahal) and L. Nejman. Thanks to their energy and engagement the life of the refugees was more or less bearable. Their greatest benevolent action was to provide those hundreds with food, who left the town on February 1.

The refugees themselves also made a great effort to improve their unfortunate situation. The largest group, a few hundred people from the Włocławek area, founded its own committee, including F. Kaufman, M. Szrubsztajn, M. Lidzbarski, J. Blumental, H. Rogozik, A. Rozenblat and I. Kaufman as their representatives. It organized financial aid and benefit in kind for its members, appealing to the leaders of the Community in Kutno and to Jewish charities. F. Kaufman, a social worker from the Kutner Kahal, acted as intermediary between *Judenrat* and the Jews from Włocławek.

Until January 1940, the religious life of the Jews in Kutno had not really changed. It is true, the Germans had prohibited ritual slaughter, but it continued in secrecy and was never denounced. The Chasidic youth could study the Talmud undisturbed and they even regularly organized *siyads*. A large number of Jewish homes had their own *minyán*. The German occupiers spared no effort to wipe out any trace of Judaic culture in Kutno. First of all they tried to destroy the synagogue. Several times it was set on fire, but the flames did not severely damage the building because of the immediate intervention of the Jewish population. In the last attempt the fire consumed the roof truss because the SS had threatened anyone who tried to stop the fire with the death

penalty. In spite of it, the fire did not spread to the interior. However, under the pretext that the wooden furnishings in the synagogue would be highly inflammable and therefore pose a fire danger, the SS removed all the benches, doors, windows and floorboards and smashed them up. After that, only a sooty skeleton remained, which was leveled to the ground after the ghetto had been established.

The plunderage also included monuments of the Jewish material and spiritual culture. The occupying forces destroyed or confiscated historical buildings, religious utensils, pieces of art etc. The precious book collection of the Peretz Library for instance, the oldest and largest in town, was confiscated and for the most part burned.

The last and darkest chapter in the war history of the Jewish population of Kutno was the establishment of the ghetto, officially named "Judenlager Konstancja". Planning the mass extermination of the Jews the Nazis initially went over to concentrating and isolating them in ghettos. The idea of isolating the Jews from the outside world was based on Hitler's propaganda about creating separate closed districts. To this end the propaganda machine produced the most perfidiously phrased accusations about the Jews undermining health, economics and politics. On the one hand this criminal camouflage intended to deceive the public opinion, but on the other hand to suggest the Jews that the ghetto would in fact only serve their own protection.

Instructions to establish a ghetto in Kutno were given on June 15, 1940, which was relatively early. The resettlement of the Jewish population to the abandoned Konstancja sugar factory started on April 16 and took three days. In a most inhuman way, more than 7,000 people were pressed into an area of 5,000 square meters. In this particular case the Germans did not even try to keep up appearances but described the ghetto already in the initial stage as a camp for Jews. The bad conditions in the ghetto could have only one goal: the slow biological extermination of the Jewish population. The Kutner Jews found themselves in the worst situation of all the Communities in the Polish territories occupied by the Germans. In no other ghetto in the Warthegau were the living conditions as tragic as in the "Judenlager Konstancja".

The majority of the Jewish inhabitants of Kutno was resettled on the first day of the action. For this purpose the Germans mobilized all SA and SS forces. They tightly guarded the march route to Konstancja in the outskirts of town and shouting and beating hurried the poor people up. On this day, the Poles were strictly forbidden to appear in the street or even to look out the window of their homes.



The housing conditions in the ghetto were disastrous. The Konstancja factory had been out of operation since many years. The only remnants were five residential buildings and some heavily damaged sheds. The *Judenrat* occupied two buildings. In one of them the offices and the hospital were put up, the other

accommodated the members of the *Judenrat*, the clerks and the wealthiest. The Germans ironically called it the "House of Lords". Those who had any funds or happened to get there first billeted the remaining three buildings and the sheds. The majority, however, was cooped up in the attics, corridors and basements. In August 1940 approx. 1,000 people camped under the open sky. With the onset of fall these homeless had no choice but to dig burrows or lairs to protect their families from the rain and the cold. Also the former derelict production rooms were used for shelter

Barbed wire fences surrounded the ghetto area and there were guards occupied by members of the local German police force (*Schutzpolizei*, *Schupo*). Head of the ghetto guards was Hageder who was answerable to Oberleutnant Weissborn, chief of the Schupo in Kutno.

The ghetto administration that was installed by the Germans and only had limited power was in the hands of the *Judenrat*. Bernard Holcman was the Chairman, assisted by S. Falc, M. Zandel, P. Goldszejder, L. Praszkie, I. Kubic i Sz. Opoczyński. The secretary's office was in charge of the regular tasks. Various departments, such as a tax, financial, business, health and welfare and a post department, each employing a smaller or larger number of officials, executed these tasks. There were also separate departments for forced labor and the Jewish police. In the summer of 1940, the business department employed approx. 250 craftsmen and laborers who had to build barracks and level the ground of the ghetto site. The forced labor department had to send 50 people daily to work outside the ghetto without pay. Usually, the Germans used this free work force, mainly consisting of the poorest ghetto dwellers, to unload wagons on the nearby train ramps and to clean up the streets.

Soon, a social care unit and charities were formed in the ghetto. A soup kitchen was set up that was used by 2,000 people daily. Half of them had the meals free, the other half had to pay a small charge. Within the bounds of possibility the Red Cross that had a branch in the ghetto tried to take care of the poorest. In particular of the children who suffered most from the harsh living conditions. The Red Cross also shared out extra food sporadically supplied by Jewish charities.

The Jewish police, wearing special armbands and equipped with batons, maintained order in the ghetto. Though the measures taken by the police were often damaging to the ghetto population, it was thanks to their help that food could be smuggled into the ghetto. Especially the policemen who guarded the main entry played an important role in bribing the German watchmen. They passed on the bribe that was needed for the contraband. It saved many ghetto dwellers from starvation.

The legal food rations came from a farm in Chruścinek near Strzelce (*Strehlitz*) as well as from a local dairy. The irregular supplies were of wretched quality and the limited quantities could not satisfy the minimum needs of the ghetto inhabitants. The "menu" consisted exclusively of potatoes, cabbage and turnips. Only smuggling could relieve the lack of food. In many cases Polish grocers helped the Jews in their need. With the aid of the Polish families Z. Rzymowski and T. Białcki the Jewish families

Stuczyński and Kapłan and later the sisters Mróz were able to organize the smuggling of food into the ghetto.

But the contraband ended abruptly in the summer of 1941, when Weissborn's watchmen were replaced by forces of the 41st Battalion of Posen. The Gestapo had discovered the smuggling channels and Schurman, the mayor, suspected the watchmen of "sleeping partnership". From that moment on the relatively easy smuggling of food into the ghetto was out of the question. Other solutions had to be found and they would be far more dangerous and less effective. One possibility was the watercourse that connected Konstancja with the river Ochnia. A smuggler would crawl through the canal to the pasture on which farmer Helman kept his cows and would put a package with food on the water's edge. But it shouldn't take long until one of the smugglers was caught by a watchman.

Pretending the outbreak of a typhus fever epidemic, the Germans completely cut off the ghetto from the outside world on November 22, 1940. The miserable sanitary conditions, the chronic lack of food and the lack of clean water (initially there was only one well in the ghetto area) encouraged the spreading of diseases. The first victims were the children, who suffered from phlegm and other kinds of infections, famine edema and tuberculosis. Before the ghetto was completely isolated two Polish physicians, J. Perkowicz and J. Milanowski, had given medical assistance to the community, advising, performing simple surgical operations and dispensing medicine from their own stock. Vaccination against typhus fever had been started as early as July 1940. In spite of 15,000 injections the epidemic could not be avoided. The focus of the disease was found to be in the barracks, which had been built by the *Judenrat* for the "homeless" before the beginning of the winter. The population density was unbelievable. Twenty individuals had to share one room of 4 square meters. The hunger and the abominable sanitary conditions that beggared description accelerated and increased the number of diseased. Owing to epidemics the death rate in the ghetto reached 40 people a week. In spite of the efforts of the Jewish doctors, in particular of Juliusz Weinsaft, and of the Polish doctor Bolesław Jędraszko (who was permitted to enter and leave the ghetto as the German authorities needed an expert opinion about the situation) the typhus fever epidemic could not be stemmed. As the provisional hospital could not accommodate all the sick, a large number had to stay in their shelters, infecting the healthy.

Two physicians, Dr Weinsaft from Krośniewice and Dr Brzóska from Warsaw, and medical assistant Aspersztajn were in charge for the hospital with its fifteen beds and out-patient department. Also the manager of the hospital, Artur Frankensztajn, was of great help. The expenses for health care that were paid by the *Judenrat* amounted at that time to about 800 RM daily.

Details about the shocking situation in the "Judenlager Konstancja" soon spread to other Jewish communities. And even to Berlin, from where a special commission was sent to Kutno to inspect the living conditions in the ghetto. The German commission was of the opinion that maintaining the current state was inconceivable and that more endurable living conditions for the Jews should be created. Mayor Schurman countered this judgment sarcastically, claiming: "*Was wollen Sie, das ist doch ein*

Krepierlager für Juden" (What do you want, it's finally a croak camp for Jews).

Hoping for a better life many ghetto dwellers tried to escape, but the attempts often ended tragically. Seven of them for instance were shot on the spot by watchman Schulz.

As far as possible the ghetto dwellers tried to organize a normal life, not leaving out education and culture. The young were particularly active at this point. They built a recreation room in the tunnel of one of the factory sheds, using it for readings, recitals and discussions. They also organized a show, "Radio-Live", in which they made fun of the Jewish police, the clerks, the medical staff and the cooks of the soup kitchen. Also mass meetings were organized, for instance to commemorate the Zionists Theodor Hertzl and Włodzimierz Żabotyński. At the end of 1940 the youth built a school with one classroom and an orphanage. But when the school was finished lessons couldn't be taught because the typhus epidemic had broken out. The classroom was used by the sick instead.

Many refugees from other towns and villages in the annexed territories found themselves in "Konstancja". The largest groups came from Włocławek and the vicinity (several hundred) and from Kalisz (two hundred). The Jews from Włocławek were well organized and managed to get food aid in the form of 80 kilograms of bread and 40 liters of milk daily. The Kalisz Jews followed their example and founded a citizens' committee consisting of Sz. Pulwermacher, J. Szkolnik, M. Epszajn, J. Szacher and I. Izbicki.

Winter was the most difficult period for the ghetto inhabitants. The raging hunger and the penetrating cold caused by the lack of fuel as well as the typhus epidemic took a heavy toll of human life. J. Wróbel estimated that no fewer than 412 people died in the ghetto in the first half of 1941.

In sheer desperation, the ghetto dwellers directed their anger and aggression towards the *Judenrat*, which they considered responsible for the hopeless situation, accusing its members of embezzlement and that they were looking after their own interests exclusively. It even came to an attempt of arbitrary law. In February 1941 a furious mob dragged Sender Falc, the treasurer of the *Judenrat*, to one of the factory sheds and put him on a platform. Among the scenery of beds with dirty linen, from under which the wretched faces of the sick peered out, the crowd accused him of misappropriation and corruption. They beat him up, until a guard, called out for by the Jewish police, rescued him from the clutches of the mob.

The Nazis accelerated the biological extermination of the Jewish population of "Konstancja" by reducing the already low food rations yet further. Towards the end, before the ghetto was to be liquidated, the food ration consisted only of 100 grams of bread per day and per person. Starving, decimated by typhus, the people had given up hope of surviving or counting on the least improvement of their fate. Several committed suicide. One of them was Hemia Landau, a chemist who had worked before the war for the chemical factory "Kutno".

The most tragic chapter in the history of the Kutner Jews was closed with the liquidation of the "Judenlager Konstancja". On March 19, 1942 the Germans went over to the "resettlement" phase of the ghetto dwellers. In alphabetical order, several hundreds of people were bundled daily into trucks or freight cars and taken to the narrow-gauge railway station in Koło. From there they were sent to the extermination camp of Chelmo on the river Ner (Kulmhof am Ner). Approximately 6,000 Jews from the ghetto in Kutno died a most cruel death, murdered in gas vans.

The liquidation was completed on March 26, 1942. The last seen of the ghetto inhabitants were the Manszesters, Zylbers, Kibels and Opoczyńskis. Bernard Holcman, the Chairman of the *Judenrat*, along with Manszester and Gurker, the last Jewish policemen, were shot on the spot.

