



The deportation

THE DECLINE OF JEWISH KUTNO

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1-From war outbreak to deportation to the ghetto (1.9.1939 – 16.6.1940)

Kutno was located on the important connection Posen-Warsaw and in the midst of heavy battle waged between the retreating Polish army and the motorized German columns from Sept. 13 to Sept. 17, 1939. In the first day of the war, in the morning of September 1st, the train station, where the recruits were gathered, was bombed. On that day, about 120 were killed and about 200

injured. The next day a civilian train was bombed, resulting in a large number of dead and wounded.¹

The town itself suffered little from the air strikes. A total of five Jewish houses were destroyed, killing 16-18 Jews.² However, the town was filled with civilians and military personnel wounded. They occupied not only the hospitals, but also the Synagogue, the *Beit Midrash* and even private houses. The wounded found themselves in appalling conditions, without medical help, food or medicines.³

In the days between September 13th and 17th, fierce battles took place around Kutno – the retreating Polish Army presented a desperate resistance and inflicted significant casualties to the enemy. However, the outcome of the German-Polish war was already written.⁴ On September 16th, "*Shabbat Shuvah*"¹, the Germans entered the town. That day, Jews did not go out in the streets and sat huddled in their homes. On that day the Germans gathered all men, Jews and Christians, in the market square. They asked for weapons and confiscated even pocket knives and scissors. For a couple of hours, the men stood in fear in the market square until a German officer came who addressed them in Polish, demanding them to

¹ TN: the Shabbat between *Rosh HaShana* and *Yom Kippur*.

give away their weapons, threatening them with death penalty.⁵

Three days later, on September 19th, the military authorities performed a general hunt for Jews. Some Poles were also arrested. All of them were gathered in the church and the cinema theater, and they stayed there the whole night, during which nobody was allowed to go out even for physiological needs. Early in the morning, the Jews were assigned to various forced labor camps. A group of 200 people was sent to a civilian prisoners' camp in Łęczyca, where all of them were given numbers, hit heavily, tortured while at hard work, without being fed at all. After spending there four days, they were sent back home.⁶

In November, the German authorities issued a decree that Jews must carry a yellow band on their arm. Afterwards, the band was replaced by a yellow cut "Star of David" to be replaced on the end of April 1940 by a full "Star of David" (10cm in size), that was to be carried on the chest and on the opposite side on the shoulder; in the same month – an order that Jews may not appear in the street after 6pm⁷ (after 8pm for Poles), may not walk on the pavement⁸. Ritual slaughter was also forbidden.⁹

By order of the German police, the Polish mayor set up a special office for requisitions. The authorities proposed that requisitions be applied for Christians as well, however, it was actually applied only to Jews.¹⁰

The Jewish population was constantly exposed to all kinds of atrocities and acts of terror, starting with forced labor and ending with ordinary acts of plunder and murder. The head of the local Gestapo, Schtadie – whom the Jews called "Geniek" or "Nachum" ("Him Again") – distinguished himself particularly by his sadism and cruelty. When he was seen in the street, Jews used to break out in panic. He used to invade Jewish homes and beat up girls, after ordering them to undress naked. Out of fear, people would jump out of the windows, breaking hands and legs.¹¹ He used imagination and manipulation. He received the appointed Council of Elders¹² with a handgun laid on his table. He then made a speech regarding his duty to let the Jews have European manners. The council had to renovate for him a luxuriant apartment that cost 15 thousand złotych. He used to send to the community Polish girls demanding to dress them from head to toe. The Jewish workers who worked for him were heavily beaten. The council had to pay a monthly fee to his "ethnic German" assistant. Once he ordered a "*Sefer Torah*" to his house and he occasionally performed searches for looting purposes.¹³

However, "Geniek" was not alone. He was assisted all over. Other members of the German authorities didn't abstain from mocking and abusing the helpless Jews.

Once, German soldiers entered the *Beit Midrash* and drove all the present worshipers to the market, at gun point. There, they were forced to collect horse dung with their bare hands while being cruelly beaten.¹⁴

On Nov. 11th,¹⁵ numerous arrests of both Jewish and Polish former social workers were conducted. They were

held up to the end of December and, according to the testimonies, were treated fairly.¹⁶

In December, a Jewish labor department was established inside the Council of Elders, stopping the random kidnapping of Jews for compulsory work. All the male Jews between 14 and 60 years old had to report for compulsory work for the Germans twice a week, under very strict rule. During work the Jews were heavily beaten.¹⁷ An order for Jewish woman at the ages of 18 to 23 were to report twice a week for work was published on Jan. 15 1940. There, they "performed various tasks".¹⁸

In contrast to the oppressive moral atmosphere, the economic situation was bearable, one might say quite tolerable. Except for some sporadic cases of cases of requisition of Jewish businesses and industrial enterprises, like flour mills¹⁹, the Jewish trade was not tampered with and no "*Commissars*", so-called "trustees", were appointed. Jews continued like before, to purchase valid licenses in the Polish municipality and later from the German authorities and conducted lively trade up to their going to the ghetto²⁰. The trade had even enjoyed favorable economic circumstances due to the following situation: after the annexation of Poland's western part to the German Reich²¹, Kutno found itself on the border pass between the Reich and the General Government, and a contraband trade flourished between the two parts. "Great business was done", states one of the sources.²² Aside from that the German military bought a lot, paying the requested prices. Kutno became known as a good town in the area, an "oasis of calm and prosperity for Jews".²³

Beginning of February 1940, the situation deteriorated. First of all, the authorities began to take care of the great number of refugees gathered in Kutno.

The German invasion and the first vicious persecutions caused a terrible panic and turmoil among the Jewish population. Already in the first weeks of the German invasion into Poland, they conducted deportations of whole Jewish congregations in Poznań and Pomeranian districts. A huge wave of people flooded the front-line regions. People ran. They ran from the front line to the towns that were located closer to the center. They ran from one town to another, from the smaller to the larger and *vice versa*. To Warsaw and the General Government and to the USSR; from one place where the persecutions had taken drastic forms to another place, where the German regime didn't yet show their savage claws. The moment a local resident left his place, a stranger from another town took it.

Naturally, the migrations that took place all over Poland, didn't spare Kutno. People ran away to the General Government, to Skierniewice, Warsaw, etc. The young mostly ran away to the Soviet Union.

On the other hand, Kutno received a huge wave of refugees from a large number of other towns. The reason for that was the fact that the Hitlerite regime didn't take at the beginning such brutal form as for example in the neighboring town Włocławek, where already at a week after the invasion, on the evening of Yom-Kippur, the Germans carried out a massacre and a couple of days later,

in September 24th, burned both synagogues²⁴. As a result, a large number of foreign Jews stayed in Kutno.

We have statistical data regarding this matter dated end of 1940 and for later time, namely, mid-April 1941, after the ghetto had existed for almost a whole year, and after a large number of refugees had already left as a result of the order of the German authorities to leave the town. So, we have to assume that the number of the refugees was much larger²⁵ until the deportation (10.2.1940). In a statistical list of the JSS (*Judische Soziale Selbsthilfe*²), No. 25, dated end of 1940, a number of 8000 inhabitants is given for the Kutno ghetto. Among them 1415 strangers, namely 22.1%. A certain number of refugees went back to their hometown (for example, to Włocławek). The committee took care of the travel documents for the refugees who decided to go back to their home-town ghettos (*ibidem*, p. 48).

According to the given list of the entire Jewish population of the Kutno ghetto of April 1941²⁶, out of 6604 persons there were 1340 refugees, i.e. 20.3%, as follows: 281 of Włocławek, 102 of Aleksandrów Kujawski, 121 of Łódź, 108 of Kalisz, 83 of Ciechocinek, 65 of Dobrzyń, 62 of Warsaw, 55 of Toruń, 38 of Lubin, 21 of Bydgoszcz, 45 of Lipno, 44 of Piątek, 19 of neighboring Krośniewice and Gąbin, 18 of Danzig, 6 of Częstochowa, to 4 of Szeps, Łuków and Białystok, 1 of Grodno, 8 of Grudziądz, 4 of Lviv, 2 of Poznań, and even 3 Jews of Berlin, Breslau and Nuremberg (probably deportees of October 1938) and of other line of smaller and larger settlements (therefore closed).²⁷

We have intentionally given the detailed accurate list of the foreign Jews in Kutno ghetto, in order to show the huge radius of migration waves that caught the Jewish population in Poland during the first year of the Hitler occupation. Kutno was particularly important in that respect for the migration flow, since it was the last big town on the border between the Wartheland and the General Government.²⁸ A similar picture can be seen in Piotrków, which was also found on the southern border of these provinces.²⁹ A substantial number of Kutno residents settled in Warsaw. At the end of 1940 there were 241 Kutno refugees in Warsaw (Ringelblum Archives, #41, p. 4).

Thanks to the not-so-bad economic situation, the refugees dwelling and nourishing were taken care of. The specially appointed committee, whose distinguished former community officers included Yoav Borowski and Ajke, was collecting a weekly payment from the residents for the benefit of the refugees. However, the refugees didn't rely solely on the help they got from the Elders Committee, which naturally was not enough to fulfill their needs,³⁰ and set up their own local committees who acted on their own to get help from outside. In a letter to the *Joint* in Warsaw dated May 15, 1940, the Włocławek refugees announce the establishment of an independent help committee, for which they were asking financial help.³¹ The Kalisz refugees also tried to organize their own

committee.³² As for the success level of this trial, there was no report issued.

The plight of the refugees whose majority left their little belongings in their old dwellings was very difficult, worse than that of the residents. On this ground, there was some friction with the Kutno Council who first and foremost took care of their own.³³ This was actually the reason for the establishment of local refugee committees.

On February 12th or 15th, 1940, a group of ethnic Germans from Gostynin district came to town, who requisitioned nearly 80% of the Jewish population's furniture, laundry and beddings³⁴ for the resettled colonists from the Reich. This was a real robbery. They have taken anything they could, expensive pieces of furniture were used as heating material.³⁵

At about the same time, according to one source, there were several attempts to burn the synagogue. After the first unsuccessful attempt, the second time the Germans used gasoline for setting the synagogue in fire, late at night. When this wasn't successful either, they tore out the shutters and floor, and used them to set fire. The synagogue turned into ruins. The first two times the authorities let people extinguish the fire, in the last time it was not permitted to take care of the burning synagogue, under threat of firearms.³⁶

The occurrence of individual violent actions became more frequent. So, for example, was the beastly murder of Menachem Korn³⁷ for his courageous resistance during an investigation by the Gestapo; there were cases of breaking into Jewish houses at night, trying to rape Jewish girls.³⁸

In March 1940 Jews were evacuated from certain houses in the town center, and entire houses in the Jewish neighborhood were destroyed that were populated by Jews. From mid-May 1940, the evacuation of Jewish houses intensified. Its character became massive and hundreds of families were harmed. The expelled people were settled in the Tobacco Monopole storehouse which later became a transit camp. There, their belongings which they brought by permission of the authorities were robbed (permission was probably granted to allow a more efficient plunder). In addition, the detained Jews were beaten and hurt in a murderous way.³⁹

This lasted up to the end of May. Then it became quiet. However, this was the silence before the storm.

2-The deportation and life in the ghetto

a. The deportation

In the winter of 1939-1940 the Jewish population lived under the constant fear of the upcoming "relocation". They were waiting for the spring with their prepared packages, hoping to get through the hard winter.⁴⁰

Spring arrived but the nervous mood continued and there was a feeling that a fresh misfortune was coming. In the beginning of June 1940, i.e. two weeks before the Jews were sent to the ghetto, suspicious preparations were

² TN: Yiddish, "Jewish Social Self-Help".

observed on the site of the old sugar factory "*Konstancja*", which was inactive for a long time, ending up in ruins. Germans previously held Polish prisoners of war there. Jewish women were taken to clean the camp. On the factory area there were only five small buildings. The whole area was surrounded by barbed wires. Various speculations spread in town regarding the purpose of these preparations, with alarming rumors. The "*Landrat*"³ promised the Elders' Council that it had no relevance to Jews and that French prisoners were coming. However, some representatives of the German authorities, such as the chief of police⁴¹, who used to go to Jewish tailors, has secretly advised not to believe the mayor, that a concentration camp is being prepared for Jews and whoever can should run away from the town.⁴²

As a preamble to the deportation, the Germans arrested a group of wealthy Jews, put them in the Tobacco Monopole building, stripped them naked and took all their valuables. They were held as hostages until the deportation.⁴³

At midnight, between Saturday and Sunday, 16th of June 1940, all the Jews were woken up and given notice that on Sunday, by 6pm, all the Jews should be present in "*Konstancja*". The Poles were forbidden from leaving their houses on that day. Few wagons were brought from the neighborhood and all the horses and wagons belonging to Jews were used for this purpose (the deportation). An eyewitness thus describes the moving of the Jews into the ghetto:

"An unforgettable day... accompanied by SA men, Gestapo, auxiliary police and others, dragged a huge crowd of people, beating them without mercy on the way, with the remnants of their possessions on hand-carts. Women, loaded with sacks on their shoulders, almost breaking their hands, screams, weeping of children and grown-ups, the wild shouting of the German bandits."

"The worst took place in front of the town hall, where horses and wagons were distributed. The people grabbed them by the planks, held the horses, hit each other... Everyone wanted to be the first... For a place to put a bed, force had to be used, or the one who got it was actually the first... On the evening in *Konstancja*, hungry after the tragic day, children fell asleep on the bundles under the open sky while their mothers were whisperings words of prayers and sorrow..."⁴⁴

Another eyewitness tells: "On the way all were checked, meanwhile being heavily robbed, men kidnapped for work. A small wagon for transferring the things costed 100-200 marks. The small wagons were under the control of the Elders' Council..."⁴⁵

b. Dwelling conditions

It is really hard to talk about "dwelling conditions" when, in an area of a ruined sugar factory, around 7000 people were locked up.⁴⁶ In the factory's five buildings lived previously 200 people. In summer the problem was bearable. The less fortunate lived under the bare sky and



The transfer to ghetto *Konstancja*

in tents, in the half-ruined factory halls and in other improvised dwellings. But when autumn came, the situation became catastrophic. All had to move into the factory buildings. Out of the five factory buildings, one was used by the Elders' Council and hospital. In a second one lived the members and officials of the Council with their families and wealthy people who paid a lot of money for it.⁴⁷ The poor were crowded in the corridors, attics, cellars and the half-open three stories factory halls with no ceilings, where the wind and snow were running wild.⁴⁸ Another resident of the ghetto tells that he and his family of eight, were living in a pigsty, 1.60 meters high.⁴⁹ The factory buildings were divided into blocks. In block No. 8, which was located on the second floor, 15 families were living. In winter the walls and ceiling were covered with ice. The bedding and the clothes were always wet. There was no dry place to sit on.⁵⁰ A small room two-meters wide was used by about 20 persons.⁵¹

The situation of the water was tragic. A single pump had to serve 7000 persons. For a bucket of water, you had to wait in line until night. For the physical needs there were three toilets. From all the above, it can be understood what a hell the Germans had created in *Konstancja* for the 7000 Kutno and foreign Jews.

c. Nutrition

In the first period, i.e. until the outbreak of the typhus epidemic, the economic situation was pretty bad,

³ TN: district governor.

but people dealt with it as they could. Due to the widespread corruption among the German guards who were reinforced by auxiliary police (in the ghetto, the inmates called them "*bolkes*"), it was possible to get to town to purchase food products. In the evening the food products and merchandise that were hidden in town, were secretly brought to the ghetto. In addition, there was an organized smuggling of meat and other products which was imported to the ghetto by two Jews who were hiding on the "Aryan" side in a nearby village, in cooperation with two Poles. In the ghetto, there was a group of receivers. They were called the "*bramkarzes*" (Polish, gatekeepers). A lively "illegal" trade was held in the ghetto. For money or for goods that were brought into the ghetto, it was possible to buy everything, naturally at high prices. For good money, even the "ethnic Germans" provided goods. Even "cafes" were open in the half-ruined stables. Naturally, only wealthy persons could enjoy all of this. The majority who was torn out and displaced from their economic positions, lived in need and hunger and had to go to the public kitchen.

Officially, the German authorities provided the ghetto with bread, potatoes, vegetables and horse meat of the worst kind. In addition, a certain amount of skimmed milk from the cooperative in town was provided (the milk was brought by the cooperative delegate Meir Kaplan).

In the same way, food and other living means were smuggled into the ghetto. Adam Bilecki, a Pole who was himself smuggling products into the ghetto, describes the channels through which the smuggling was flowing: "I had access to the ghetto because I was bringing food to two Jewish families. I could enter the ghetto up to its locking. Later, I used to go up to the gate when it was already dark, and there I was waited for and my smuggling was taken. At the end of 1941, when it was not possible even to approach the gate anymore, I had to use the last possibility to bring something to the ghetto using Helman's help, who used to pasture seven cows belonging to Zusman and Kaplan in the meadow near the ghetto. I used to go into the canal, which ran from (the river) Ochnia to '*Konstancja*', which was dry in the summer, and in a bent-over position I used to go up to the lawn. It was successful for certain time, until it was noticed by a *gendarme* (watchman) who wanted to shoot Helman on the spot. That time, his life was spared, however from that day on, no one went out with the cattle. It was strictly forbidden."⁵² Finally, the traces of the smugglers group were found. In the last days of May 1941, four accused (one Jew from Włocławek, Abraham Hersh Kanterowicz and three Poles) were sentenced to death.⁵³ The rest got lengthy prison terms.

This did not deter the smugglers who succeeded to avoid the arrest. A notice in the "*Litzmannstädter Zeitung*" nearly a year later (April 19th 1942) gave another report about a public hanging of six sentenced smugglers in Włocławek and Kutno, Jews and Poles (three in each town). These were operating in Włocławek, Kutno and Gostynin.

After this failure, the external supply to the ghetto virtually ceased and the famine took catastrophic forms, especially as the official ration for the ghetto became just bread (100 grams for a head)⁵⁴, but even earlier in autumn 1940, the illegal trade between the ghetto and the "Aryan" side was already very difficult. Due to the typhus epidemic outbreak, the ghetto was closed and the guarding was very strict. The illegal supply from outside fell to a minimum. A heavy blow to the illegal trade was that, in June 1941 was the week the police guards including their commandant 1st lieutenant Weissborn, a great bribe taker, were replaced, by order of a SS-man from Poznań⁵⁵ as a result of the intervention of the mayor Schürmann for whom the too long existence of the ghetto was like a thorn in the eye.

d. Forced Work

From the first days of the German occupation, Jews used to be kidnapped for work. After the closure of the Jews in the ghetto, groups of Jews were moved under guard to work outside the ghetto, mainly to unload wagons in the train station. The minimum quota that the Council had to send to work each day was 50 men. They worked without pay.⁵⁶ From this work in the station sometimes a piece of coal was successfully stolen and brought into the ghetto. This was very important, since there was no heating in the ghetto and the German authorities did not provide any heating material. Jews were also employed in various railway works.

Professional workers were mainly working for the Germans, who needed Jewish tailors and shoemakers. They were paid with food products. However, for the police force and other guards, work was done with no payment and using the worker's own material.⁵⁷ In addition, the Jews of Kutno were employed in various German camps, for example, in Wronczyn – digging a canal between Srock and Modrzew, in Greenwald camp No. 3 (both in Poznań province), in work camps in Gniezno, Inowrocław, Jarocin, Poznań, Andrzejewo and even in Berlin.⁵⁸

Kutno Jews were also sent from Łódź ghetto, where they were held and then transported from Łódź to various labor and death camps. This is how Yechiel Ajzman, a son of Kutno, was sent in transport 26 that went on May 23rd, 1942, in transport 23 of May 15th – Mordechai Rak, in transport 21 November 12th, 1941 – Esther Epsztajn etc.⁵⁹

e. Social conditions

The economic situation in the ghetto was such as to hugely enhance the difference between poor and rich. The only weapon that Jews had in the first period against inevitable decline was money. With money one could get a better "apartment". For money, gold, silver and diamonds one could buy smuggled products and, in the end, with money one could buy the corrupt German guards and get an access to the locked external world. And money – meant lots of money. Small money was not enough to make the Germans happy. For example, the guard

commander, Hagedorn, used to get a daily "haracz"⁴ of 200 marks.⁶⁰ Cash money or valuables were naturally only in the possession of a small wealthy group who were enjoying a relatively privileged position over the vast majority of non-wealthy and poor people. The social differences in the ghetto intensified to the boiling point, especially when we take into account that all the time there was bitter and hard struggle to stay alive.

The dwelling conditions divided sharply the ghetto residents into two groups: one that was living in one of the two houses that were allocated to the *Judenrat*, and all the rest who had to be squeezed into the factory halls, corridors, cellars and stables. In the houses lived the members of the *Judenrat* and their families, officials and those who were able to pay, or the forceful who managed already in the first night to establish themselves in the buildings. Those buildings were called by the people ironically the "Lord houses".⁶¹ The Elders' Council, attempting to alleviate the plight of the poor population, organized a soup kitchen using the money received from the *Joint*. However, without a sufficient supply of goods

since the autumn of 1940 – following the outbreak of the epidemic – this soup kitchen having to rely only on the ghetto inhabitants was totally unable to save the poor population from gradually starving to death.

The poor people who reached despair and hopelessness turned their bitterness and anger first and foremost against the Elders' Council whose members they accused of indifference to their terrible fate. The council, of course, stood at the top of the social ladder and belonged to the most privileged group in the ghetto. The Germans deliberately sought to exacerbate social antagonisms within the ghetto. This was one of the ways to deprive the Jews of their group cohesion and increase demoralization among them.⁶² A notable case that characterizes the hatred of the poor for the inhabitants of the "Lord houses" bears witness: "A sick woman, literally a walking skeleton, covered with lice, ran into the 'Lord house', stretched out on the beds to defile them and with a death curse on the tenants on the lips, she went out in convulsions on the stairs of the house."⁶³

The youth were also divided into two camps: the first was grouped around the working-class youth and consisted mostly of Bundists and their sympathizers, the second, which consisted mainly of school youth and the bourgeoisie, embraced other political groupings (mainly Zionist).

f. Cultural conditions

German cultural policy in the occupied Polish territories was moving in the direction of cutting off the educational level of the population at the very lowest level. For Poles, there were still primary and vocational schools of the first grade, i.e. as much education as was needed for a farmer and a workshop master. All higher types of schools were banned. The youth could only get middle and higher education in a secret way, on the so-called underground circles. As far as the Jewish population was concerned, German policy also sought to include it in an intellectual ghetto. As soon as the Germans entered Poland, they generally closed schools, public and Jewish. Later, in the fall of 1939, the Polish public schools were reopened, but the Jewish ones remained closed, with the exception of Łódź, where the government ordered the opening of Jewish schools whose premises had not been confiscated.

After the Jews were imprisoned in the ghettos, an order was issued by Governor-General Frank on August 31, 1940, that the Jews were allowed to hold elementary schools provided that the language of instruction was Yiddish or Hebrew (they only existed for a short time).

In the hellish conditions of the "croaking" camp,⁶⁴ as the Germans themselves called the *Konstancja* camp, at first glance it could not even be spoken about a school. And yet an attempt was made to create a Jewish school in the ghetto. The initiative for this came from the "*Bund*", which had a beautiful tradition in the area in Kutno (in 1929 the "*Bund*" erected a large brick building for the

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DEMANDEUR — NADAWCA — ANFRAGESTELLER

Nom - Nazwisko - Name WELCHMAN
Prénom - Imię - Vorname Nathan
Rue - Ulica - Strasse b/B. Tenenbaum, Ben-Yehuda, 11
Localité - Miejscowość - Ortschaft HAIFA
Province - Województwo - Provinz
Pays - Kraj - Land PALESTINE

Message à transmettre — Złecenie — Mitteilung
(25 mots au maximum, nouvelles de caractère strictement personnel et familial) —
(najwyżej 25 słów, wiadomości ściśle osobiste) — (nicht über 25 Worte nur persönliche Familiennachrichten).

Rebittet Nachrichten von:
WELCHMAN Jakob & Familie
ul. Sienkiewicza, 16
Kutno
Łódź
Deutschland

Date - Data - Datum 16.2.40

DESTINATAIRE — ODBIORCA — EMPFÄNGER

Nom - Nazwisko - Name WELCHMAN
Prénom - Imię - Vorname David
Lieu et date de naissance Geburtsort und Datum
Miejsc i data urodzenia
Fils de Sohn des et de Imię matki und des
Imię ojca
Dernière adresse connue Ostatni adres
Letztbekannte Adresse
Rue - Ulica - Strasse Narutowicza, 3 9 MAI 1940
Localité - Miejscowość - Ortschaft KUTNO
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RÉPONSE AU VERSO. **ODPOWIEDZ NA ODWROTCIE.** **ANTWORT UMSEITIG.**
Ecrire très lisiblement. Pisać czytelnie. Bitte deutlich schreiben.

"רויטן קרייץ" דורכן "זוכט קרובים" — 9.5.1940
"חיפוש קרובים" ע"י "הצלב האדום" — 9.5.1940

9 May 1940 – "Search for relatives" from the "Red Cross"

⁴ TN: Polish "ransom", "protection money", "tribute"

party and the TZISHO school). On the ground, there has even been a rapprochement and collaboration between the two above-mentioned camps, which so far stood against each other. The "*Bund*" undertook to build the school while the other groups undertook to collect the building materials. The building was already finished, but it was not used for the purpose for which it was built. When the typhus epidemic broke out in the fall of 1940, a hospital was set up in that building because the first one could not cope with the large number of patients.⁶⁵

It is easy to describe the many efforts invested in the construction of this small building in the ghetto conditions, to understand the sorrow and pain of a handful of idealists who, despite the nightmarish life in "*Konstancja*" camp, found in their hearts the spiritual power and felt themselves responsible for educating the younger generation.

In the Kutno ghetto a certain cultural activity was also held. The Zionist youth had their "club" in the factory tunnel, where people used to read, recite and lead debates. The *Bund* conducted open cultural activities by organizing public "concerts", or, live radio. An ongoing enlightenment work was carried out at these concerts. In his specially composed songs, recitations, sketches about the "*Life in the Ghetto*", the activity of senior citizens was criticized, pointing out their shortcomings. No one was spared, not the Jewish police, not the paramedics or the public kitchen.⁶⁶ This "concert", in which the public opinion of the ghetto inhabitants was expressed, always attracted a large audience. They became the focal point of public life in the ghetto.

Emanuel Ringelblum noted in October 1940 that a memorial service had been held in the ghetto for Herzl and Ze'ev Jabotinsky. (Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, p. 52).⁵

The above-described socio-economic conditions and depressing ghetto atmosphere have had a demoralizing influence on certain individuals and groups. A couple of sources tell us about moral depravity (drunkenness and sexual depravity). They also report on Jewish informants and Gestapo agents.⁶⁷

g. Self-support and external help

The increasingly difficult economic situation of the Jewish population raised the issue of social assistance for the poorest and most economically disadvantaged, especially for the large number of refugees. As early as the autumn of 1939, an aid committee for the refugees was set up, which was first and foremost tasked with finding shelter for refugees and providing basic food needs. A large number of refugees, who had no relatives in the city, were housed in the House of Culture, where a public kitchen was also opened. The kitchen provided 500 lunches per day in April 1940.⁶⁸

The housing issue was even raised for Kutno residents, because of the "urbanist" policy of the German authorities, which has manifested itself in the demolition of dozens of Jewish wooden houses in the Jewish



Children in the ghetto

neighborhoods. As a result, about 250 Jewish families were left homeless.⁶⁹

Due to the persistent impoverishment of the Jewish population, the Council's resources became increasingly scarce, especially after the ghetto incarceration in which the vast majority had already become economically ruined and social assistance expenditure increased exponentially. The Council turned mainly to the "*Joint*" for outside help, which until the outbreak of war conducted a wide range of aid activities in most of occupied Poland.

The "*Joint*" relief effort in the annexed Eastern Territories, which also included the province of Wartheland, was severely hampered by formalities, as German occupation authorities allowed "*Joint*" to carry out his charitable work only on the territory of the "General Government". In order to transfer money from the "General Government" to the "Wartheland", which was considered part of the Reich, a special permit from the Cracow "*Devizen Schtelle*"⁶ had to be obtained and this was not always successful.

In a letter to the Krośniewice Council of September 12, 1940, the board of directors of the "*Joint*" promised that it would make every effort to be able to expand its activities outside the "General Government".⁷⁰ The Council also applied to the Poznań "*Devizen Schtelle*" for permission.⁷¹ At his request, the council received a refusal from Poznań. In her confession dated May 26, 1940, the "*Devizen Schtelle*" offers only one possibility of being able to transfer money – namely, by way of transfer through the "Accounting Institute" in Cracow.⁷² It was not until June 2, 1940, that the "*Joint*" informed the council that such permission had been obtained from the "*Devizen Schtelle*".⁷³ As a result, the council received the first financial support at the level of 5,000 Reichsmarks. The amount was not even able to cover the council's monthly budget, which amounted to 15,000 RM. From this detailed memorandum, dated 19 July 1940, in which the council bases its demand for a monthly subsidy of 15,000 RM, we get an insight into both the tragic-difficult situation of the ghetto and the enormous growth of social assistance.⁷⁴ The expenses of council amount, according to that memorandum, to 800 RM daily. Revenue from various

⁵ TN: see article on page 326 of the original book.

⁶ TN: "Foreign Exchange Office".

fees (for meals and mail), 300 RM, so that the daily deficit is 500 RM.

The difficult situation was somewhat eased by the transport of food and medicine,⁷⁵ which the *"Joint"* sent out in July or early August 1940. The products benefited 1,513 children aged up to 13 years and 915 sick and elderly people. Some of the products went to the kitchen and hospital. But all this was like a drop in an ocean of distress.

As it was difficult to get help from the *Joint*, following its instructions of August 20, 1940, the Council turned to the "Reich's Union of German Jews in Berlin". After his telegraphic message to Berlin, the Council received from the "Reich's Union" 3000 RM at the end of November or beginning of December.⁷⁶ But further appeals by the Council to the "Reich's Union" have remained without results. Upon the Council's dispatch of January 29, 1941, Berlin responded with a refusal, motivating it by the lack of a permit from the relevant office, to which the *"Joint"* had pointed.⁷⁷

In December 1940, a central aid organization was set up in Sosnowiec, led by the leader of the "Union of Jewish Communities in Eastern Higher Silesia"⁷, Moshe Merin, who took over the Aid action from the *"Joint"* for the Reich-annexed Polish western regions and others, including "Wartheland".

It is not clear from the documents whether the "Jewish Wohlfahrt's Union" in Sosnowiec subsidized the Kutno ghetto in any amount. The documents contain two appeals from March 17th and 24th, 1941, from the Council to the Sosnowiec Central Office, "as the only body that handles all matters of the *"Joint"* and the Union of German Jews⁷⁸ in our cities and towns." Also, the *"Joint"* forwarded all messages from the Council to the Sosnowiec Center. We do not know what came out of it. By the way, the Sosnowiec "Wohlfahrt's Union" did not last long. In a letter to the *"Joint"* on May 15, 1941, the Council announced that it had received a letter from Sosnowiec a few days ago stating that its activities had been suspended.⁷⁹

As a result, the sources of aid began to dwindle gradually, and the situation in the ghetto became increasingly difficult. Expenditure on medical care had grown tremendously in connection with the terrible typhus epidemic. For example, hospital spending in November 1940, when the epidemic was first in its infancy, accounted for almost a third (32%) of all expenses (2,784 RM to 8,564 RM). In addition, due to the high mortality rate and the growing number of orphans, the council had to open an "orphanage".⁸⁰ The number of people who had to come to the public kitchen was growing. In August 1940, their number was 1,102, but by March 1941, it had grown to 2,340, making it more than a third of the ghetto population using the public kitchen.⁸¹ No more outside help was coming in. The *"Joint"* had no means of sending direct aid due to the administrative difficulties and after the outbreak of war with America, in December 1941, it

had to cease completely its activities. Sosnowiec had limited possibilities and after a short existence completely ceased his activities. This dying ghetto was dependent on its own, rapidly shrinking forces. Of course, these forces could not be useful for very long.

h. Liquidation by epidemics and murder

Prior to the actual "deportation" action, the extermination of the Jewish population took place in a dramatic and systematic manner through murder and epidemic. The German authorities deliberately placed the *"Konstancja"* inhabitants in such dire sanitary conditions that the outbreak of epidemics was unavoidable.

First of all, the Jewish population remained without any serious medical assistance for the first time. Some Jewish doctors fled before being deported to the ghetto. A couple of months later, on September 6, the council addressed the Łódź mayor, as the landlord of the Łódź ghetto, with a request to send to *"Konstancja"* a Jewish surgeon and dentist, justifying it by the fact that the only medical capacity of the ghetto (the barber-surgeon Aspersztajn) was far from sufficient for its population of 7,000.⁸²

The mayor responded to this request with a refusal, citing the shortage of doctors in the Łódź ghetto.⁸³ The Jews used the local Polish doctor Jędraszko, who had the right to enter the ghetto and provide medical assistance.

After the cases of typhus multiplied, the Elders' Council was able to bring in two Jewish doctors, Dr. Brzoza from Warsaw and Dr. Weinzaft from nearby Krośniewice. It is typical that during the final liquidation of the ghetto, the German authorities allowed Dr. Jędraszko to see the Jewish doctors only in the guard room and in the presence of the SS men.

The epidemic broke out in the fall of 1940 and lasted until the ghetto was liquidated. The nature of the epidemic was disputed between the Poznań and Łódź Bacteriological Institute. The Poznań Institute concluded that it was a typhoid fever. Dr. Jędraszko proved, with the help of the Łódź Bacteriological Institute, that there was an outbreak of typhus in the ghetto.⁸⁴

Due to the lack of the most basic disinfectants, even soap and water, as well as the constant famine, filth and lice, the epidemic spread rapidly.

Not only the German authorities did not provide any assistance, but they deliberately opposed the medical response. The two Jewish doctors were constantly exposed to harassment. When Dr. Jędraszko approached the authorities about serum injections, he was replied that there was no serum for Jews and Poles. The Jews had to deal with the epidemic on their own, with more than modest means exposed to persistent obstacles from the German authorities. In the building designated for the school, as we mentioned above, a hospital was installed. Dr. Weinzaft and barber-surgeon Aspersztajn, with funds that were secretly collected from the ghetto residents

⁷ TN: text says "Lower Silesia" but Sosnowiec is in Higher Silesia.

themselves, provided the hospital with a large number of medicines and instruments. A steam-disinfection machine was also installed by their own means.⁸⁵

As the hospital was constantly overcrowded, a large number of patients had to remain in the crowded block, infecting the healthy this way. Later, probably thanks to the energetic efforts of the ghetto pharmacy director, the pharmacist and social worker Meir Bozhikowski, it was possible to obtain medicines from outside. For example, the ghetto was provided medicines and bandages by the Berlin companies Hugo, Rember, Kurto and Co., and by the Pabianice bandage factory Anton Jankowski.⁸⁶

The youth vigorously helped in the fight against the epidemic, setting up a hospital kitchen where the feeding of the sick was adequate, according to the testimony of Dr. Jędraszko. The girls raised money, cooked, did the laundry and nursed the sick. Of course, there could be no question of stopping the epidemic in such conditions. It took its bloody toll. The Jews were the only nation against whom the Germans also waged a brutal bacteriological war.

Out of a population of 7,000, about 1,000 cases of typhus have been recorded throughout the year. From March to December 1941 alone, 679 deaths were recorded. The mortality rate thus averaged 10% a month! The following figures give some idea of the scale and course of the epidemic during the 10 months, March-December 1941:

In March there were 77 deaths, 31 were from typhus (42.6%), in April, 81 – 52 cases from typhus (62%), in May, 105 – 70 cases (69.2%), In June, 115 – 69 cases (60%), in July, 15 – 27 (36%), in August, 48 – 13 (27%), in September, 42 – 8 (18%), in October, 36 – 3 (8.5%), in November, 47 – 4 (8.5%), and in December, 40 – 1 (2.5%).

The mortality curve presents the following picture: the peak of the epidemic in May (just under 70% of all deaths). June was the month of upheaval. At the beginning of the month, the intensity of the epidemic decreases, until it reaches its minimum levels in October and November (8.5%) and disappears by the end of the year in almost all of all deaths (2.5%).

Beginning in June, however, the place of typhus was taken by a no less terrible disease – tuberculosis. For the exhausted and starving ghetto inhabitants, tuberculosis also took its bloody toll, especially for those who have survived typhus. The predominant deaths in the months of August-December indicate a cause of tuberculosis of the lungs and digestive organs.⁸⁷ The following figures show the magnitude of the deaths: An official German list of ghetto inhabitants, dated April 18, 1941, shows the number of 6,604 people. At the end of the list is a note: "Status of the Jews 1941.7.15: 6015" – meaning that between April 18 and July 15, 589 people died or were killed.⁸⁸

Murder was also not uncommon in the ghetto. For example, on May 19, five Kutno Jews were shot dead on May 19, according to the German cliché style "trying to escape": Yitzhak-Meir Percec, Lazer-Yosef Percec,

Mordechai Nosal, Henech Ertman⁸ and Moshe Buksztajn. From July 24 to December 17, nine Jews were shot, according to official German documents: Israel-Yehoshua Jastrzǎb, Moshe Pasternak, Israel-Yehoshua Rosenberg, Lipman Rozenblatt, Anshel Frenkl, Eliyahu Rzepkowicz, Freide Rasz, Mates Kornberg and Moshe Hersh Wajnsztajn. The cause of murder is not even stated, as in the first five. This formality has already been considered, it seems, superfluous.

According to official German figures, as of January 1, 1942, the Jewish population in *Konstancja* numbered 5,762. This means that in the course of eight and a half months it has decreased by 842 persons (barely 13%). The figure of 5,762 people should be considered too high, as not all deaths were recorded in the death notices. In addition, a number of people agreed to flee. A number of Jew successfully escaped from the ghetto.⁸⁹ Their actual number is naturally difficult to determine.

The burial of the dead took place in a manner that was a shameful disgrace. A small baker-carriage was used as a cart. Two undertakers, a cart-driver, accompanied by a German gendarme, accompanied the victims of the epidemic, famine and murder, on their final journey. The dead were simply thrown on the cart, which could not be closed because it was too small for their number, and the shaking of the cart caused the dead bodies to hit each other, especially the heads that were jumping like balls.

i. The Council of Elders and the public order service

The above-mentioned German lists, April-June 1941, indicate the names of the members of the Council of Elders: Bernard Holcman (Chairman), Sender Falc (Treasurer), Yitzhak Kowic and Feivish Opoczinski (Members). It is not known if this was the full composition of the council.⁹⁰

The materials give us meager information about their activities: Sender Falc (Zionist) was a councilman in the municipal council before the war and Yitzhak Kowic (Alexander chassid, *Agudat Israel*) was a teacher. Before the war, Holcman was chairman of the *Maccabi* sports club. The members of the Elders' Council, unlike all other Jews who had to wear two yellow Star of David attached to their breasts and shoulders, wore blue-and-white armbands.

We have already mentioned above about the clash between the revolting mob and the members of the Elders' Council. From this fact and from other information passed to us by Kutno Jews who had escaped from the ghetto to Warsaw (as long as this was still possible), one can conclude that the relation of the masses to the Council was clearly negative.

The testimonies given by these fugitives to the staff of the Ringelblum Archive in Warsaw, highlight the hidden intentions and corruption of the Elders' Council shortly after settling in the ghetto, and more: concern only for their own and indifference to the plight of the masses, trafficking with permits, etc.⁹¹

⁸ TN: "Erdman" in the original text.

The main function of the Council of Elders was, according to the intention of the German authorities, the exact fulfillment of the orders and instructions. This was the role of the Councils according to the declaration of the General Government, published on November 28, 1939, and similarly in all the official and informal announcements of the Nazis.

The instructions and orders were varied. They usually consist of compiling accurate statistical lists of the number of Jews, their occupation and their wealth, collecting contributions, furniture, laundry, bedding, and household equipment for the military, civilian, police administrations, provide the required number of workers for the needs of the power, compile lists of able-bodied men to be sent to labor camps, candidates for "transfer" and so on. These were, so to speak, the normal "legal requirements for the Councils. Besides, there were extraordinary, so to speak, special demands. They depended mostly on the will, inclinations, imagination and even "humor" of the local "leaders".

In addition to these main tasks, the *Judenrats* also performed other functions of an internal nature: procurement and distribution of supplies, organizing social assistance (in parallel with the "Jewish Social Self-Help" created in September 1940), creating work in the ghetto by establishing workshops, which should work mainly for the benefit of the military, maintain the inner peace and order, cleanliness. They also performed certain police and court functions.

And these things were also true of the Kutno ghetto. The Kutno Elders' Council had in its bureau a couple of official employees. In 1940, the Secretary of the Council was Moshe Flugler. In 1941, Council officials included David and Henrika Aronowicz, Neta Krajer (formerly the synagogue *shamash*).

[added part in the Hebrew version of the article]

There is no doubt that the Germans did not see the councils as institutions whose job it was to organize ghetto life, in order to strengthen their resilience to the harsh conditions, but as an instrument of aid in their policy of extermination. And this is no coincidence, because in Reinhard Heydrich's famous letter, dated September 21, 1939, already hinted at the "final solution" of the Jews in the occupied territories, there is a special section dedicated to the "*Judenrat*" and its help in concentrating the Jewish population in special districts.

If the Jewish Council had set itself the goal of an activity for the benefit of the ghetto population, the German authorities would certainly not have come to terms with its existence even one day. There were known cases of removal and murder of councilors who refused to comply with government orders, or were considered by the Germans to be interfering with the execution of their plans.

In this situation, the Councils, if only they wanted to maintain their existence, assuming that they might at least alleviate the suffering of the ghetto residents, were forced to maneuver between two opposing "fronts": the Jewish internal and the Nazi external. It goes without

saying that such a maneuver could not last long. It was a walk on a tight rope. The Nazi "front" was strong and it was it that decided and determined the policies of the Councils.

Every single day, the Councils faced the choice: to obey the orders of the Germans, or to defy them and bear all the consequences that entailed including physical extermination. There are known cases where the chairman of the council or one of its members, could not come to terms with the role assigned to them. To be helpful to the Nazis and seeing no other way out for themselves but to flee, or commit suicide.

So, the field of action of the Councils was a pre-determined area: assistance in carrying out the Nazi plans. All other actions of the Councils with the consent of the German supervisory authorities – such as social assistance and economic and cultural activities – were of a temporary nature whose main purpose was to disguise the Nazis' plots, and hiding the "final solution" they prepared for Jews ("You can live quietly in the ghetto, no danger to be expected for you ", the German authorities used to assure the councilors). Until September 1941, when the "final solution" began to be carried out, the "*Judenrats*" could not know what a threatening role awaited them. Some of the councilors, those who were far-sighted, may have been able to speculate.

[end of added part in the Hebrew version]

A story told by a "*Konstancja*" ghetto survivor sheds light on the machinations of certain council officials. Risking his life, the storyteller managed to bribe the German guard to let him transfer to the ghetto his property that was hidden in his previous apartment in the city. However, the Jewish officials of the so-called "Customs Office" confiscated the goods and demanded such huge sums for their release that the owner of the goods preferred to give it up and leave it in the hands of these extortionists.⁹² The same "Customs Office" is described in this testimony as the one who levied taxes and extorted from the living and from the dead. Of course, this negative description of an office whose job it was to find means for the general needs of the ghetto must be treated with caution. It is beyond any doubt, however, that in this specific ghetto atmosphere, which was tense with a constant struggle for physical existence and salvation, and was often dictated by a much stronger self-preservation instinct, abuses and even open injustices were committed against individuals.⁹³

The Elders' Council also had a Jewish court, which was competent to impose prison sentences. In a single note we have about the ghetto court, its chairman is described as "an honest and energetic man"⁹⁴ (his name was not given).

The materials give us even less information about the Jewish police in the Kutno ghetto. It was not uniformed and was armed with sticks only. One witness described the Jewish police's behavior as "despicable."⁹⁵ Another narrator: "The behavior of the [Jewish] police was also reprehensible. When someone obtained an exit permit [from the ghetto], he still had to pay the police."⁹⁶ In the

documents, we find only a couple of names of the Jewish police officers: Frankensztajn, Gurker (one of the oldest Jewish officials in Kutno municipality). At the end of the "Action"⁹, 40 men were left to clear the camp. Among them was probably a certain number of Jewish policemen. The following are listed: Helman, Praszker, Mendel Warszawczik, Kirsztajn, Celemenski, Frankensztajn, etc.⁹⁷ Whether all of those listed belonged to the Jewish police is difficult to say. Of course, the Jewish police shared the fate of all Kutno Jews.

3-The transfer to Chelmno death camp

The winter of 1941/1942 dawned. There was hunger, cold, sadness and despair in the ghetto. But worst of all were the rumors, one more staggering than the others, that had begun to spread in the hermetically sealed ghetto – information which was hard to believe. There had been reports of "displacements" in the neighboring communities of Koło, Kłodawa, Izbica Kujawska, Bugaj Sompolno and others. These communities were liquidated between December 7, 1941 and February 42. On December 8, 1941 the extermination camp at Chelmno (14 km from Koło) was activated.

The decision to physically exterminate the Jewish population in Wartheland was made no later than October 1941, as preparations were made for the Chelmno camp in October-November 1941. On January 2, 1942, the governor of the Wartheland, Arthur Greiser¹⁰, issued his decree on the "*Entiudung des Warthegaus*"^{11,98}

The first "transfer" operation in "Wartheland" began in Konin area. At the end of September, or beginning of October 1941, the entire Jewish population in the Konin area (nearly 3,000 people) was concentrated in Zagórow, a town near Konin. Each had to undergo a medical examination and pay a four Reichsmark fee. The medical examination, which included men aged 14 to 60 (women up to 50), was supposed to establish the ability of the examinees to work. After that, the "transfer" began; it was said that people would travel by car to Koło and from there by train to Łódź. With around 60 men per truck, they were taken to the Kazimierz forest¹², where they were killed.

A witness, a former Polish detainee who was taken out of the forest with two other detainees to bury the dead and sort their clothes, said that Jews had been thrown alive in graves filled with quicklime, on which water was poured from pipes. At the same time, cars with gassed Jews were brought to the forest and they were also buried there. This was, so to speak, the primitive, technically still weak, beginning. After the Chelmno camp was activated, the extermination operation became "perfect" and quickly gained momentum.

At the beginning of March 1942, the second and strongest exodus wave erupted across the province, which lasted until the end. On March 2 and 3, the ghettos in the

two nearest towns, Krośniewice and Żychlin, were liquidated. The wave approached the gates of the Kutno ghetto. The "transfer" campaign began there on March 23 and lasted until mid-April.

Everything worked in a systematic way. Every day, in alphabetic order, 300-400 Jews were transported in trucks in the direction of Koło. Here, too, the victims were demanded to pay a ransom in advance, which has since been raised and has already reached 10-12 RM.

The members of the Elders' Council were liquidated on the spot, by shooting. According to one version, the Germans ordered the head of the Council to fetch a glass of water, and while he was carrying out the order, he treacherously received a bullet in the head from behind. The execution of the rest took place outside the area of the ghetto, probably in a Jewish cemetery. The Jewish ghetto police were shot dead last.

After the deportation of the Kutno Jews, forty Jews were brought from the Łódź ghetto to clean up and sort out the remaining Jewish property. This "cleanup commando" stayed in the former ghetto until September, almost half a year. After they had finished their work and were to be transported back to Łódź, the following incident occurred: one of them hid somewhere in the hope of escaping later. He was found, however. As a punishment, the whole group had to march through a line of S.S. armed with machetes. A couple fell on the spot and the rest had to be thrown into the car, as they could no longer stand on their feet. Following the departure of the "cleanup commando", the Gestapo conducted thorough investigations into the walls and all sorts of hiding places. After them, the city administration and the order police did the same. Eventually, the entire former ghetto area was handed over back to the city as warehouses.

The first thing the Polish civilian population noticed when entering "*Konstancja*", were the scattered utensils and household items, old torn laundry, clothes, bedding, and large piles of paper, books, and open pits. This was all that remained after the approximately 6,000 Jews were deported to Chelmno.

Finally, a few words about the death "procedure" in Chelmno camp.

The trucks with the "transferred" were usually taken to a building that had been a Polish nobleman's palace before 1914 and had not been used since, due to its poor condition. For the newcomers, a member of the "*Kulmhof Sonderkommando*" (Kulmhof was the German name for Chelmno) used to give a speech, assuring them that they would be sent to work in the East, where they would be well-treated and fed. Before the trip, they had to go out and hand over the clothes for disinfection. It often happened that at the end of the speech, the deceived victims would burst into applause (the speaker was just an elderly German and his words aroused confidence).

⁹ TN: the liquidation of Kutno ghetto, to Chelmno.

¹⁰ TN: judged and hanged for crime against humanity in Poland, 1946.

¹¹ TN: German, "Purification of the Warthegaus".

¹² TN: near Kazimierz Biskupi, between Kleczew and Konin.

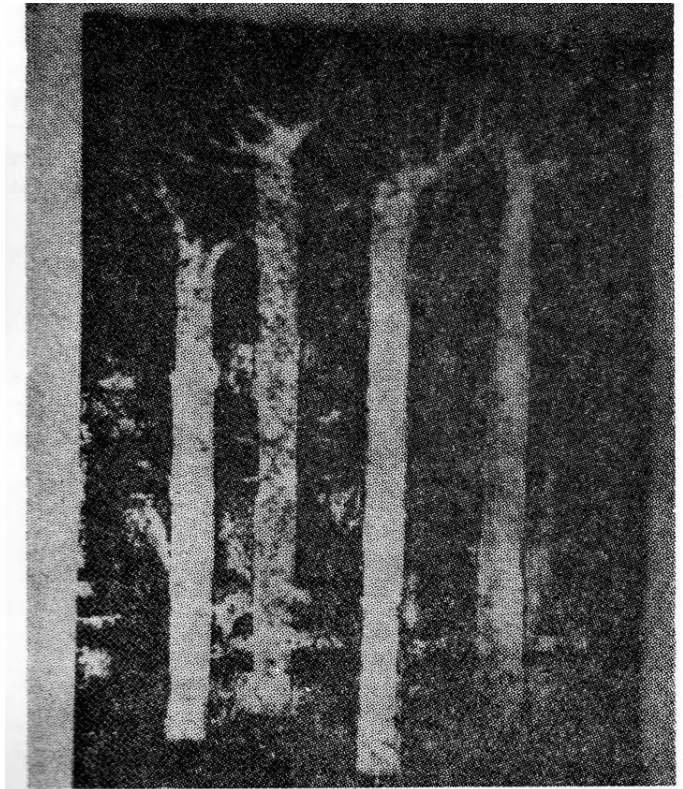
From the yard, the arriving transport, which used to consist of 100 to 150 people, was taken into a hall on the first floor, where they were ordered to get out, to put their clothes in order ("they will need them later") and stay in their underwear. From the hall, the victims were led down to a corridor with inscriptions "to the doctor", "to the bathroom" on its walls. The corridor led to an exit. Here they were told that they would take a car to the service center. Near the exit door, a large covered car was waiting for them, with its doors facing the exit of the corridor, so that from there they would immediately enter the car on the steps provided. On the way to the car, this "peaceful" atmosphere changed very quickly. The gendarmes, who were lined up in the corridor, used violence and beating to force the victims to get into the car at a fast pace, paralyzing every reflex of resistance. After the car engulfed the people, the hermetically-sealed doors were closed and the engine was left running, from which a hose led the exhaust gases to flow into the car from below. Screams were heard from hermetically sealed cars and desperate knocks on the walls, but after 4-5 minutes (sometimes longer, it depended on the fast or slow action of gas) there was dead silence in the car. From there, the car with the gassed drove to the nearby Rzuchów forest, four kilometers away. There, the dead bodies were dragged out, searched for hidden places, perhaps someone hid valuables, golden teeth were pulled out, rings torn off from the fingers. Until the spring of 1942, the gassed were buried in mass graves. From that date on, after two crematoria were built, the bodies were cremated (later, in order to erase the traces of murder, the bodies excavated from the mass graves were cremated there).

Meanwhile, in the camp, where all the signs of the previous shipment had been removed, a fresh load of people arrived and the death process began anew. On average, 1,000 people were gassed daily in this way. Children and elderly were, in many cases, brutally murdered earlier by sadistic SS.

In addition to the "*Sonderkommando*", which consists of about 100 members, the camp was also served by a group of Jewish workers (an average of 70 men, who were constantly renewed from fresh transports (the weak were usually killed). They were forced to remove the victims from the cars, inspect them and bury them in the prepared graves or burn them in the crematoria. They were divided into a "*hauskommando*", who was employed in the camp itself for the needs of the SS and a "*waldkommando*" who worked in the forest. It was not uncommon for Jewish prisoners to recognize their murdered close relatives. They worked with chains on their feet and lived in a strictly guarded cellar. Food was distributed to them using the food bags that the victims brought with them.

The physical and mental despair that tortured these "gravediggers" could not be imagined. No devil had

invented it until the Nazis' version of Inquisition. Three of them escaped and were saved (they are in Israel today). During the final liquidation of the Chełmno camp on January 17, 1945, when the last Jews of the "forest commando" were shot, another, severely-wounded, managed to flee and escape.⁹⁹



Matzeva in Chełmno, erected by Polish Jews.

Among the Jewish death-slaves in Chełmno camp were also employed Kutno Jews. We hear the news of a will¹³ that was found after the war inside a sewing machine in Łódź, which a group of tailors from the "*hauskommando*" apparently hid there.

The will was signed by 12 men, among them three from Kutno: Yosef Herszkowicz, Moshe Płocker and Feivel Płocker. As these are the "last words" from the Kutno ghetto, we bring you the full text of this will: "We are the last Jews who worked for the Gestapo in (Chełmno), which is situated between Dąbie and Koło. These are the last days of our lives so we give a signal. Maybe there still will be relatives or acquaintances of these persons. So that you will know that all the Jews who were sent from Litzmannstadt (Łódź) were killed in a very cruel manner. They were tortured and cremated. Goodbye. If you survive, you must take revenge."

Followed by 12 signatures. In addition to the three from Kutno, we find the names of four Jews from Łęczycza, one from Łódź, one from Grabów, one from Sanniki, one from Lutomiersk and one from Turek.¹⁰⁰

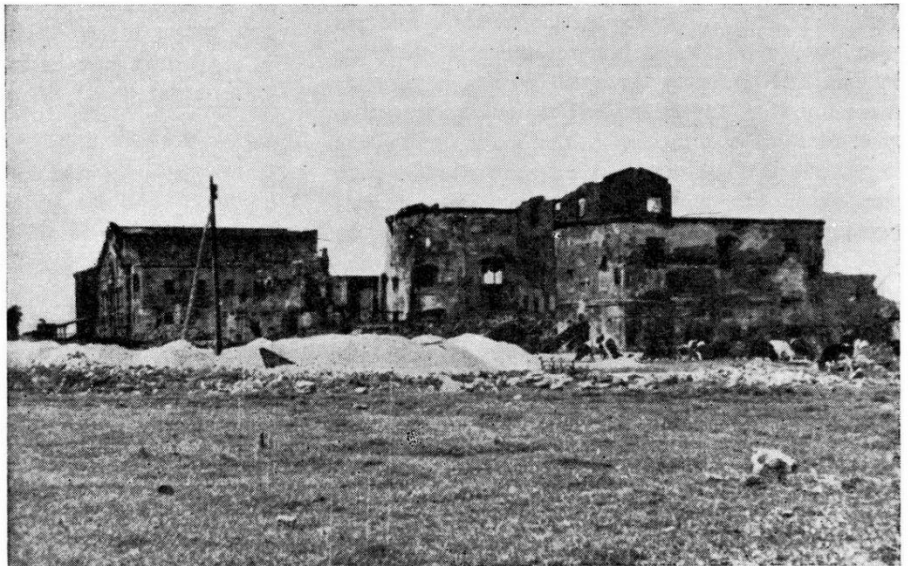
¹³ TN: see article about Chełmno, on p. 383 of the original book.



The transfer to ghetto *Konstancja*



Yosef Kam in the ghetto



Ghetto *Konstancja* – after the liquidation



Members of the "*Judenrat*" with Sender Falc at its head



Camp prisoner Plotkin



The transfer to ghetto *Konstancja*

NOTES

¹ **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1157 "History of War Experiences in Kutno", Written by Yosef Piotrkowski, pp. 7-8

² *ibidem*, No. 1155, "Experiences of Kutno Jews in Early War" (Anonymous).

³ *ibidem*, No. 1158, "Ludność żydowska Kutna pod okupacją niemiecką" ("The Jewish Population of Kutno under the German Occupation"), pp. 2-3.

⁴ **Jerry Kirchmayer**, "Kampania wresniowa" ("September Campaign"), 194 p. 54-152.

⁵ **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1157, pp. 9-10.

⁶ *ibidem*, No. 1155.

⁷ *ibidem*, No. 1157, pp. 12-19. The ethnic German, who warned Jews not to break the law, had already beaten Jews five hours before taking to the streets.

⁸ *ibidem*.

⁹ The first ordinance concerning the prohibition of slaughter appeared in the General Government on October 26th, 1939.

¹⁰ *ibidem*, No. 1157, p. 13.

¹¹ *ibidem*, No. 1155.

¹² The Elder Council was nominated in 1940.

¹³ *ibidem*, No. 1157, p. 13.

¹⁴ *ibidem*, No. 1157, p. 15.

¹⁵ Anniversary of Polish national holiday.

¹⁶ *ibidem*, No. 1155.

¹⁷ *ibidem*, but there were also some where no one was annoyed and even given food.

¹⁸ *ibidem*, No. 1157.

¹⁹ In December 1939.

²⁰ *ibidem*, No. 1155.

²¹ Beginning October 1939.

²² *ibidem*, No. 1155.

²³ *ibidem*, No. 1158, p. 7.

²⁴ **Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute** in Warsaw, Testimony of Moshe Liszak, No. 375.

²⁵ On January or February 1940, an order was issued by the German authorities requiring all refugees to leave the city, which had become part of the German Reich. A panic broke out in the city. Within three days, a large part of the refugees left the city and some hid and remained.

²⁶ Earlier, in November 1939, the Gestapo conducted a census of the Jewish population. Heads of families had to indicate how much cash they had, the value of their movable and immovable property, all the documents were handed over to the protection police. These lists have not been saved.

²⁷ **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1159, p. 5 (anonymous author). In the area of Kutno, which was included in the Germanization campaign of the Wartheland, 20 villages were evacuated, among them, of course, their Jewish inhabitants. The Jews were given the right to settle in the nearest towns within a circle. However, they decided to stay in the nearby forests "until the storm passes".

²⁸ The border checkpoint was located in Żychlin (14 km from Kutno).

²⁹ **Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute**, Warsaw (JHI), materials from the "Jewish Support Position" (hereinafter "JSP" for short), No. 33.

³⁰ See the chapter "g. Self-help and help from outside".

³¹ **JHI Archives**, Acts of the "Joint", No. 106, p. 106.

³² *ibidem*, p. 80.

³³ In a series of letters to the "Joint", the Włocławek Committee complains about the unfair treatment of the refugees by the Council, that they are disqualified from receiving support that the "Joint" has sent especially for them. As a result, a Włocławek refugee who worked in the Council resigned. *ibidem*, pp. 82, 48.

³⁴ **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1157, p. 18.

³⁵ *ibidem*. The two sources, numbers 1157 and 1158, give out different dates (12th and 15th February) and different number of ethnic Germans (10 and 40). On the same day, a group of Jews, probably in connection with the requisitions – among them Lazar Levin, Lazar Korn and Aharon Kopel – were sent to a concentration camp. **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1157, p. 23, Questionnaires from *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*, Warsaw No. 6.

³⁶ **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1157, pp. 18-19. It is said that, in defiance of danger, a 70-year-old woman risked her life and ran to the gendarmerie to report the fire. The commander is said to have issued an order to save what could be and it turned out that the assailants had done so "on their own, without an order".

³⁷ Of the popular family of goldsmiths in Kutno.

³⁸ **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1157, pp. 22-27.

³⁹ *ibidem*, No. 1156, Acts of "Joint" No. 106, pp. 95-99. The detainees were not fed by the German authorities. Provision had to be made by the Elders' Council.

⁴⁰ It has been one of the coldest winters in Europe of the last 10 years.

⁴¹ an Austrian from Linz.

⁴² **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1159, p. 7.

⁴³ **Archive of the JHI**, Manuscripts of Cities, No. 45.

⁴⁴ **Archive of the JHI**, Testimony, No. 303 by Lucia Stuczyńska (in Polish).

⁴⁵ *ibidem*, Testimony, No. 305.

⁴⁶ **Archives of the JHI**, Ghetto Administration, File No. IX/54, p. 64 (letter from Kutno Elders' Council to the Łódź ghetto administration dated 6.9.1940; poll from "Joint" poll of 20.12.40; "JSP", No. 21).

⁴⁷ **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1156. This even led to an inquiry on the part of the chief of the German "Transfer Office." From a heavily damaged witness account in the **Ringelblum-Archive** (No. 1159), it is possible to make out that an internal conflict has erupted on the ground of the dwelling-distribution, which led to an investigation by the authorities. Only thanks to the consistent opinion of all those who were asked (the chief had inquired about paying the Elder Council 1000 marks for a room), were repressive measures against the council avoided.

⁴⁸ **Archive of the JHI**, Testimony, No. 303.

⁴⁹ *ibidem*, Testimony, No. 312.

⁵⁰ *ibidem*, Testimony, No. 315.

⁵¹ **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1158.

⁵² **Archive of the JHI**, Testimony, No. 309.

⁵³ *ibidem*, 1941 VI 10, in "Ostdeutscher Beobachter", Testimony, No. 303, states that, at that time, the Kutno Jew Leon Stuczyński was also hanged. This case was also reported in the New Yorker "Our Time," No. 8, September 1941, p. 37.

⁵⁴ *ibidem*, Testimony, No. 307.

⁵⁵ *ibidem*, Testimony No. 314.

⁵⁶ "JSP", No. 106, p. 87.

⁵⁷ **Archives of the JHI**, Testimony, No. 307.

⁵⁸ *ibidem*, Testimony, No. 312. **Archives of the JHI in Warsaw**, G.V., File No. XVI/5, p. 22, Letter from Kutno "Mayor to the Łódź Ghetto Administration, May 18, 1942".

⁵⁹ **Archive of the JHI**, G.V., File IV/4, p. 246

⁶⁰ **Archive of the JHI**, Manuscript No. 45.

⁶¹ *ibidem*, Testimony, No. 303.

⁶² *ibidem*, Testimony, No. 304.

⁶³ *ibidem*.

⁶⁴ **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1157, p. 22. According to one witness, a special delegation from Berlin once visited the camp. During the visit, it determined that this could not continue. The mayor, who accompanied the delegation, should have called it out, "This is a croaking camp for the Jews of Kutno."

⁶⁵ **Archive of the JHI**, Testimony, No. 303.

⁶⁶ Unfortunately, with the exception of the above-mentioned song, this interesting folkloric ghetto material did not survive.

⁶⁷ **Ringelblum-Archive**, No. 1156, p. 93; No. 1159, p. 13.

⁶⁸ Materials of the "Jewish Support Position" ("JSP"), No. 106, Letter from the Elders' Council to the "Joint" of 12.4.40.

⁶⁹ *ibidem*.

⁷⁰ *ibidem*, p. 41.

⁷¹ *ibidem*, p. 97.

⁷² *ibidem*, p. 98.

⁷³ *ibidem*, pp. 86-98.

⁷⁴ The memorandum contains the following entries: 2,000 people for the soup kitchen, 1,000 of them free of charge. 1,000 people get in addition to this to a quarter kilogram of bread and 100 grams of milk. The labor battalion, numbering 50 men, cost 50 Reichsmarks daily (the workers did not receive a salary from the Germans for their work), the hospital (before the outbreak of the epidemic) – 50 RM daily, the police – 150 RM, the repairs for the destroyed factory-halls and erect barracks – 300 RM.

⁷⁵ "JSP", No. 106, pp. 55-51, the shipment contained 4,358 bushels of condensed milk, 100 bars of chocolate, 33 bushels of cheese, 20 bushels of "Ovomaltine", 300 kg of matza, 9.25 kg of fats, bouillon-cube, 2 boxes of medicines etc.

⁷⁶ *ibidem*, p. 31.

⁷⁷ *ibidem*, p. 7.

⁷⁸ *ibidem*, p. 15.

⁷⁹ *ibidem*, p. 6.

⁸⁰ *ibidem*, p. 11.

⁸¹ *ibidem*, pp. 56-69.

⁸² **Archive of the JHI**, G.V. XI/54, p. 64.

⁸³ *ibidem*, p. 63.

⁸⁴ As an error between typhoid fever and typhus after a bacteriological analysis is virtually ruled out in an epidemic, we must assume that the Poznań Institute deliberately wanted to introduce an error in order to obviate the fight with the epidemic and thus assisting in the holy *mitzvah* of extermination. In the light of the now widely known cruel deeds of German medicine during the war, this fact cannot be completely ignored.

⁸⁵ *ibidem*, Testimony No. 311.

⁸⁶ **Archive of the JHI**, G.V. 33/32, not paginated. These companies have, right after the liquidation of the ghetto, sent invoices to the Council for the sent drugs, which have been made available to the Łódź ghetto administration. The Pabianice company writes: "As we have learned, the manager of your pharmacy, Mr. H. Bozhikowski, has been transferred to a waiting area (Koło). We believe, however, that this should not be an obstacle to paying the debt."...

⁸⁷ **Archive of the JHI**, Handwritings of Cities, No. 46 (original German death certificate).

⁸⁸ *ibidem*, K. No. 49.

⁸⁹ *ibidem*, Testimonies, Nos. 303, 312.

⁹⁰ In the General Government, the number of members of the *Judenrat*, according to Frank's decree of 28 November 1939 was 12 (in congregations up to 10,000 persons) or 24 (in congregations numbering more than 10,000).

⁹¹ **Ringelblum Archive**, Nos. 1156, 1159.

⁹² **Archive of the JHI**, Testimony, No. 315.

⁹³ People complain about injustices in (**Archive of the JHI**) testimonies Nos. 312, 315 and Doc. No. 1159, pp. 8-10 in **Ringelblum Archive**.

⁹⁴ **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1159, p. 12.

⁹⁵ **Archive of the JHI**, Testimony, No. 312.

⁹⁶ **Ringelblum Archive**, No. 1156.

⁹⁷ **Archive of the JHI**, Testimony, No. 307.

⁹⁸ Yeshayahu Trunk – "Study of the History of Jews in Wartheland in the Period of Destruction (1939-1944)", "Pages for History", Volume II, 1950, p. 150.

⁹⁹ Władysław Bednarz – "Obóz straceń w Chełmnie nad Nerem" ("Extermination camp in Chełmno nad Nerem"), Warszawa, 1946. N. Blumental – "Dokumenty i Materiały" ("Documents and Materials"), T. I. Obozy, Łódź, 1946, pp. 225-253.

¹⁰⁰ Document in the **Archives of the "Yitzhak Kacnelson Ghetto Fighters' House"** in Kibbutz Lohamei HaGetaot