

## Chapter Six

# Who Needs heroes?

### A. The Fateful Census and Its Consequences

On 4<sup>th</sup> January 1943, all the Jews of the “Small Ghetto” were deported to Ryneček Square. Rumours spread that the *Schupo* officer, Rohn, would conduct a selection to assemble a transport. During the census, several things happened, which were given different versions in the testimonies of the survivors. By comparing them, it is possible to partially reconstruct the course of events:

As the selection began, the policemen searched the houses and the people found were arrested and detained in the guardhouse (*Wache*) building, where they gathered the victims for transport. The Germans also discovered one of the underground bunkers at ul. Nadrzečna 88 and arrested a group of fighters, who were all directed to the guardhouse.

There – unfortunately for him – Alfred Kromołowski was also imprisoned, and he saw the members of the group, who were quietly listening to the words of their leader, Fiszlewicz. Alfred managed to escape from prison<sup>1</sup>, and what happened next is described by Liber Brener:

The police began to take the people out of the guardhouse to the square, where the trucks were waiting. The fighters decided to resist and Fiszlewicz attacked Rohn with a gun and his friend Fajner attacked the policeman Zoppart with a knife... But Fiszlewicz's gun jammed and he fought tooth and nail, until he fell from the German gunfire, with Fajner by his side. Rohn was wounded in the hand and Zoppart fled the square while wounded.<sup>2</sup>

The Germans' reaction came quickly. From the frightened crowd, who did not understand the meaning of the shots, twenty-five men were selected as punishment and who were immediately executed. Three hundred victims were sent to Radomsko, among them members of the underground, who had been captured. They tried to escape, but failed, and only a few girls, among them Sara Gutgold of “Group 66”, managed to return to the ghetto.

There is also another version: in a house at ul. Nadrzečna 88, hiding in the attic that day, sat a twelve-year-old boy, Zygmusz Rozenblat. Miraculously, he survived all the *akcje* and stayed with his mother, who worked in a furniture warehouse. That morning, as always, his mother hugged and kissed him and went to work. Zygmusz remained in hiding and, through the small window, followed the process of the selection.

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<sup>1</sup> Kromołowski, *Wspomnienia*, pp. 573-580

<sup>2</sup> Brener, *Resistance and Destruction*, p. 64; compare the testimony of Mojsze Pantofel, YVA, M/49/ E/2090, p.

First, he saw how his uncle, Leon Zylbersztajn, at the last minute, saved three people, who worked with him. Later, Zygmusz noticed a group of young people being pushed onto a truck, when suddenly a fair-haired girl burst out with a knife in her hand and ran in the direction of Officer Rohn. After her, a fellow jumped with a gun in his hand, pointing it at Rohn's face, and then the girl's call was heard to say, "Brothers, fight! We are many and they are cowards! We will kill them! Fight!"

Everyone in the square, even the Germans, stood as if they were fossils. But the young man's gun jammed and, at that moment, the police began shooting, killing the two assassins.<sup>3</sup>

This version was confirmed by Moniek Dauman, who was present at the roundup, and partly by Adam Zylbersztajn, a member of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*:

"When Fiszlewicz fought with the German, the underground members called upon the gathered Jews to come to the aid of the young men. But no one moved from their place."<sup>4</sup>

Dov Ben-Yaakov, a member of the "Kibbutz", adds:

"When the Jewish police were looking for people to dig a grave for the twenty-five people killed at the roundup, we volunteered, and then the public pointed to us, the people of the Kibbutz, as the ones to blame for the disaster."<sup>5</sup>

**The tragic roundup of 4<sup>th</sup> January was a turning point in the history of the resistance movement in the ghetto:**

**First**, from the course of the roundup, it can be concluded that the Germans had advance information about its existence and now their suspicions were proven to be true. **Second**, the assassination proved that the underground had sources for obtaining weapons. **Most importantly**, the heroic act of the two fighters revealed the attitude of most of the ghetto Jews to the idea of the uprising:

"When the workers returned from work in the evening, they heard rumours that spread around the city about an uprising in the ghetto and 'dead Germans'. The event had a great resonance amongst the Poles, because it was the first attempt to use firearms against the Germans. But the atmosphere in the ghetto remained indifferent. Although there was appreciation for the two young men, there was no encouragement, verbally, let alone in action."<sup>6</sup>

Which means that **the underground did not have broad support amongst the ghetto population**. People feared that any action of this kind would only bring their end closer. What, then, was the value of an individual uprising? Henia Lustiger answered this question:

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<sup>3</sup> S. Rolat, *Jakby to było wczoraj*, see Chapter 3, note 12.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Zylbersztajn, *In the Warsaw and Czestochowa Ghettos*, Poalim Library, Merhaviva, 1945, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> Ma'in, "Moitek", p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Zylbersztajn, as well, p. 75.

“Fiszlewicz’s actions did not benefit us and he caused twenty-four innocent victims. And yet the young man is etched into our memory as a hero. He is among those who sacrificed their lives for the cause of the Jewish people”.<sup>7</sup>

The heroic deaths of Fiszlewicz and Fajner sparked heated debates amongst ŻOB members. Dr Adam Wolberg opposed the individual uprising and the “Wild West”-style of donation collecting methods, because these actions increased the risk of the organisation being discovered by the Germans. The defence of the ghetto remained his primary goal. “Mojtek’s” faction did not rule out individual heroic demonstrations and supported “going to the forest” in addition to defending the ghetto.

Due to differences of opinion, a split occurred, and the Bund members and Poalei Zion, along with Wolberg, left the ŻOB organisation.<sup>8</sup> A compromise was reached and the two factions decided to act in three directions - to begin producing hand grenades, to finish digging three tunnels in the ghetto and to prepare several bases in the forest for the underground fighters.

The mission for the first objective was undertaken by Heniek Wiernik, who recruited a team of experts and the comrades working at HASAG-Apparatebau provided the explosives. Carpenter Szymon Gelbard and his comrades promised to provide handles for the grenades.<sup>9</sup> The first quantity was ready in February 1943, which raised the morale of the fighters. The digging of the tunnels, which seemed impossible under the conditions of the ghetto, progressed well and continued day and night. Each shift was attended by about 100 people. This was made possible thanks to the help of Marzej Krauze and Bernard Kurland, who took care to prepare the necessary number of “permits” to stay in the ghetto during the day for the nightshift workers, who, after twelve hours of hard work, were still digging tunnels.

In contrast, the underground was unable to take root in the surrounding forests. After the failure of the first unit, a second group of five boys was sent into the forest: Heniek Richter, Olek Hirszenberg, Moniek Flammenbaum, Janek Krauze, and Jerzyk Rozenblat. Two examples show that the boys represented the best of the local youth:

Janek Krauze, a handsome young man, a graduate of a vocational school, was a member of the Zionist Youth, one of the first members of ŻOB. After his fiancée was sent to Treblinka, he swore revenge and joined the socialist partisans “Gwardia Ludowa”(GL). He took part in a few bold operations, including taking over the bank in Częstochowa and eliminating several German criminals.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Henia Lustiger, *The Upheavals of Life*, Achiasaf publishing, Tel Aviv 1975, p. 325. This sentence does not appear in the author’s diary.

<sup>8</sup> Testimonies of Sara Gutgold-Edelist, YVA M-49/E/47150.3/3514.

<sup>9</sup> Szymon Gelbard, YVA, 0.3/1574

<sup>10</sup> *Churban Czenstochow*, p.162

About his comrade-in-arms, the youngest in the group, Jerzyk Rozenblat, eighteen years old, some details are known from the memoirs of his younger brother, Zygmusz:

“At a house at ul. Wilsona 34, I saw my brother Jerzyk for the last time in my life...

“For me. he was a giant - strong, robust and very intelligent. He graduated from the Jewish *gimnazjum*, was an outstanding student in history, literature and languages. He managed to publish a few short stories, received a literary award at the age of fifteen... He was an excellent athlete and participated in school plays.

“When his father, with whom Jerzyk had special ties, perished in Treblinka, he swore to avenge his death. I will never forget our last meeting. He stood before me, tall, manly. He ordered me never to forget what I saw... how much I loved him”.<sup>11</sup>

The group, that formed in January 1943, was not affiliated with any one political current, but they all wanted to reach eastern Poland and join the partisans of *Gwardia Ludowa*. The meetings with its representatives had been held earlier at the Braland factory.<sup>12</sup> But, in the spring of 1943, the Armia Krajowa (AK) still dominated the forests of the Radom District, which were known to have antisemitic views. Its hostile attitude forced the group to return to the ghetto. Here, it was joined by Szlamek Szajn, who had been wanted by the Gestapo earlier.

The six now sat in a bunker in the furniture warehouse and, from there, they made sorties for various operations in the city and its surroundings, until disaster struck. One of the children hiding in the nearby bunker was caught by the Germans and, under threat of beating, showed them the fighters' hideout. The police surprised them and they did not have time to seize their weapons,<sup>13</sup> or perhaps they did not want to, in order to prevent the Germans from searching the nearby bunkers, where children were hiding. They were thrown into the Gestapo prison.

A Jew was sitting with them in the prison, who was later released and gave the fighters' families a few details about their last moments - the boys did not give their real names, so as not to endanger their families. After two days of infernal torture, on 19<sup>th</sup> March, they were brought to the cemetery and all were shot. After the War, relatives of the murdered (including Zygmunt Rolat) managed to find their burial place in the Jewish cemetery in Częstochowa. Today, there is a tombstone there with the names of the six fighters.

Life in the ghetto apparently returned to its normal course - going to work, standing in line for soup and bread, in the evening brief meetings with friends or visiting relatives. Several children of *Judenrat* members and doctors still officially lived in the ghetto.

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<sup>11</sup> Rolat, Jakby to było wczoraj, see Chapter 3, Note 12.

<sup>12</sup> Testimony of Julian Zylberberg, YVA, M-49/ E/1532

<sup>13</sup> Testimony of Icchok Szajn, YVA, 0-33/6939

Approaching Purim, the Radom District authorities decided to get rid of the remnants of the Jewish intelligentsia. To this end, registration was announced, in the ghetto for a trip to the Land of Israel (Palestine), to be exchanged for German prisoners of war. One hundred and twenty-seven doctors, engineers, lawyers and *Judenrat* members showed up, along with their children. All were shot in the Jewish cemetery. A few, including Bernard Kurland, escaped by jumping from the truck. Only those who hid remained.

With the “Purim *Akcja*”, **the third and final phase of the existence of the ghetto and the underground began.**

The *Judenrat* ceased to exist. Degenhardt granted amnesty to Bernard Kurland, so that he could continue to manage the *Arbeitseinsatz* office. In April 1943, the official population of the ghetto grew to 4,043 people, of whom 2,662 were men, 1,346 were women, and thirty-five “official” children.<sup>14</sup> This was the result of the concentration of workers from all workplaces in the city, to which were added Jews who had arrived from the “Aryan side” or who had come out of hiding.

The types of employment within the ghetto can be learned from the report dated 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1943. A total of 233 Jews, men and women, were employed here, and the most popular workplaces were the kitchen (100), the laundry (44) and health services (51).<sup>15</sup> From the report, it can be concluded that many Jews preferred employment in the ghetto to hard labour in HASAG.

On 1<sup>st</sup> May, the ghetto was placed under lockdown. Everyone thought that here it is, the end had come. Three days later, the lockdown was lifted. And why was that? Some said that the Germans were afraid of joint demonstrations by Jews and Poles on 1<sup>st</sup> May. Joint demonstrations? In my opinion, Degenhardt wanted to mislead the underground, according to the well-known story of the shepherd and the wolves.

In the meantime, two Schupo men, Heinrich Koester and Heinz Laschinski [aka Laszyński], appeared in the ghetto. Both of them knew Polish, and they walked around the streets sniffing around - where were the underground men, and where were the tunnels?

In the first half of 1943, the fighters continued to attempt to establish regular contact with the Polish partisans. Tadeusz Mutke, a member of the Polish underground, had previously helped Jews escape from the “Small Ghetto” and, in May 1943, was preparing to transport a group of escapees to the forests around Olsztyn. Unfortunately, he was captured by the Gestapo and was executed.

The connections between “Mojtek” Zylberberg and the Pole “Langiewicz”, who did much to help the Jews working in the forests, also failed.<sup>16</sup> Despite all the failures, the ŻOB headquarters decided to send weapons to several groups in the forest.

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<sup>14</sup> Kromołowski, *Wspomnienia*, p. 568

<sup>15</sup> *Obóz w Częstochowie*, 12. April 1943., APCZ, sygn.134/19

<sup>16</sup> *Churban Czenstochow*, p.141; J. Pietrzykowski, *Cień swastyki*, p.185

The movement's member Lajb Tenenbaum recruited two Jewish supervisors from HASAG-Apparatebau, Wojdysławski and Józek Winter, who found a German lorry driver who, for a fee, agreed to bring the weapons to the forest with three companions: Jakubowicz, Potaszewicz and Samsonowicz.

But the driver betrayed them and the Gestapo was waiting for them in the forest. Two of the three fell in battle and Potaszewicz was arrested and executed. Lajb Tenenbaum, who was also arrested, was brought to the Apparatebau factory, where he was asked to identify underground members. He remained silent and paid for it with his life.<sup>17</sup>

After the War it was discovered that the traitorous driver was Christian Westermaier who, in return for providing the information, received a reward of 3,000 złoty from the Gestapo and a medal of merit from the Wehrmacht.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Brener, *Ruch podziemny*, p. 169

<sup>18</sup> Akta dochodzenia p-ko Christian Westermaier, Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance (AIPN), Warsaw, ref. 414, k. 4-21