

B. The Watchword is “Survival”

In December 1942, the Polish underground established in Warsaw the “Żegota Council for the Assistance for Jews,” (Rada Pomocy Żydom - Żegota).

It included representatives from the Polish left-wing parties and two Jews - Adolf Berman, a member of Poalei Zion, who represented the Jewish National Committee¹ (ŻKN – Żydowski Komitet Narodowy), and Leon Fajner, a representative of the Bund.

The main goal of “Żegota” was to provide assistance to Jews, who were living in hiding or under Aryan guise. Later, it was also to provide financial assistance to Jews in labour camps. Polish and Jewish liaison officers volunteered for this task. The Council received financial grants from the underground representation of the Polish government-in-exile, the *Delegatura*. Over time, funds also poured into Żegota’s coffers, which came from donations of Jewish organisations abroad.

Berman and Fajner operated within the framework of a coordination committee (*Komisja Koordynacyjna*), whose role was to determine the plan for distributing the grants.²

The period of organisation of “Żegota” took place during the existence of the “Small Ghetto” (the first half of 1943) and there were still connections between the local ŻOB and the coordination committee in Warsaw.

Among the activists of the ŻOB, in the ghetto, was also Adam Sztajnbrecher, one of the leaders of the communist group. Sztajnbrecher, whose testimony is one of the most important sources for the history of the Jewish underground in Apparatebau, was born in 1909, a locksmith by profession, married and a father to a daughter.

Before the War, he had connections with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) and the Communists. Even in the “Small Ghetto”, he recommended that his wife study locksmithing. In one of the *akcje*, the daughter and grandmother were caught and deported. When the ghetto was liquidated, Sztajnbrecher was transferred to Apparatebau, to the press department of *Meister Wirbatz*, who also transferred his wife Felicia there.

Once, he found her sitting there, exhausted and miserable. “Why are you so sad?” he asked.

Felicia could not help herself, “And why should I be happy? I’ve lost my only child, they killed her!”.

“Are you sure?” Wirbatz asked.

“And who did it?” Felicia burst out.: “Who? The criminals murdered her, your friends!”

¹ The Jewish National Committee was the political arm of the ŻOB [Jewish Fighting Organisation] in the Warsaw Ghetto.

² *The Encyclopaedia of the Holocaust*, Sifriat Poalim publishing, Tel Aviv, 1990, p. 485.

Wirbatz turned pale and left without answering.

"I was very scared", Felicia admits, "but the spirit of rebellion won."³

Since then, Wirbatz's attitude towards the Sztajnbrechers changed much for the better. He transferred Felicia to lighter work. He would warn Adam, when engineer Fasold was in sight. Wirbatz had conversations "from the heart" with the couple and had what to talk about.

Once, in the autumn of 1944, he returned from vacation completely horrified. When he suggested to his soldier son to transfer to the Apparatebau factory, the son flatly refused, calling the offer "treason" and even threatening his father with imprisonment. What kind of regime is this, that causes a son to rebel against his father?

The couple heard the confession with mixed emotions. If the *Meister* speaks to us candidly, then he suspects us. After all, Adam is a member of the underground movement.

It was clear to all the activists of the rebellion movement, who remained in Apparatebau, that establishing a fighting underground, under the conditions of the camp, was an impossible task.

Therefore, they accepted the definition of Fajner, the Bund representative who, in November 1943, declared that **the main goal now is to keep the remnants of the Jews alive.**⁴

In this spirit, **the resistance movement** was established in the camp (probably in September 1943). It was joined by the Bund, Poalei Zion Left, Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair and the Communists.

In accordance with the goal, the main tasks were defined:

1. Outreach amongst prisoners to strengthen their spiritual and moral wellbeing.
2. Fighting against informers and against, who behave harshly towards prisoners.
3. Disseminating information about the world political and military situation and at the front.
4. Organising sabotage of all kinds in all departments to slow down the pace of production.
5. Providing financial assistance to those in need, providing medicine and additional food.⁵

At the same time, a **coordinating committee of the resistance movement (*Komitet*)**, was established, which included:

- on behalf of the communists (PPR) – Jakow Wajnrach and Sztajnbrecher;
- Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair – Izaak Diamant (not sure, because he was known to be a communist – F.K.);
- Bund – Liber Brener;
- Poalei Zion Left – Izrael Szymonowicz.

³ Testimony of Felicia Glika-Sztajnbrecher, YVA. 0.3/1352.

⁴ *Remnants*, p. 5, Charles Kotkowski (Private collection).

⁵ Adam Sztajnbrecher, "The Resistance in HASAG-Pelcery", *Sefer Częstochowa*, p. 221-230.

The activists were organised in “fives”. The day-to-day activity was managed by several activists, one of whom was responsible to the *Komitet*.⁶

Under the influence of the July 1943 selection, the *Komitet* decided to prepare a plan for combat defence and mass escape in the event of a similar *akcja*.

The intention was to prepare devices for opening gates, ignition devices, keys to warehouses with explosives, etc., in order to blow them up, if necessary, to cause chaos, to disarm the *Werkschutz* guards and, in this way, to ease on the escape.⁷

Some of the points of the plan were carried out. The information campaign was expanded, the activists held conversations with close people (see the testimony of Dora Szternberg). Against local informants, the weapon of intimidation was used (such as the assembly of overseers initiated by Szymon Gelbard).

Regarding the sabotage, Sztajnbrecher reports that his department had more “broken” machines than working ones, thanks to the “help” of Jakub Józefowicz.

In the area of obtaining information, the situation was better. Sztajnbrecher had renewed contacts with his old friend Marian Imiołek, an AK member, who passed on German and underground press to him. Foreign radio news was provided by the Jewish electrician, who was employed in repairing radio receivers. The other members of the *Komitet* had other means of communication. Sztajnbrecher concludes:

“The modest successes of our underground organisation, at that time, were the result of adapting our resistance activities against the Nazis to the specific conditions of the camp.”⁸

It is worth mentioning here that, following the liquidation of the “Small Ghetto”, the connection was lost between *Żegota* and the group of fighters, who fled to the forests of Koniecpol, where they found refuge with the Polish farmer Roman Pindelak and the Hajdas family.⁹

All their efforts to be accepted into the Polish partisan battalions were in vain, and they eagerly awaited the renewal of connections and help.

⁶ Testimony of Adam Sztajnbrecher, YVA, 03/1351.

⁷ Brener, *Resistance and Destruction*, p. 84.

⁸ Sztajnbrecher, *Sefer Częstochowa*, p. 226.

⁹ *The Book of the Jewish Partisans*, Sifriat Poalim, Tel Aviv, 1959, Volume 2, p. 95.