

B. Work is Our Life

During the years of occupation, there were three tiers of workers amongst the Jews of Częstochowa:

1. the majority were “official” forced labourers, who were assigned to various workplaces;
2. labour camp prisoners;
3. a small “aristocratic” group of excellent craftsmen, tenants of “*Dus Wajse Hoyz*” (Yid., “The White House”).

When Icze Katz, a well-known Torah scholar in Częstochowa, heard that, according to the order of the authorities, the *Judenrat* had conducted a census of the Jewish population and was about to arrange organised workgroups, he was beside himself with rage:

“No action or order should be carried out for the enemy! After all, for years, Hitler has been declaring that he will exterminate the Jews – so let him do everything himself! Let him register, capture, kill and murder! After all, he will not kill us all. Why should we make easier his occupation?”¹

It was easier to warn than to change the orders.

From the first day of the occupation, the Germans did not stop capturing Jews in the streets and apartments, at gunpoint. No Jew, who went out into the street, was sure that he would return home safe and sound. And some never returned at all.

With the publication of the order on forced labour for Jews, the SS was tasked with its implementation. But, due to organisational difficulties, from July 1940, the affairs of Jewish labour were transferred to the Labour Department of the *Generalgouvernement*. Therefore, the “Department for Forced Labour” (*Arbeitseinsatz*), which in the *Judenrat* was headed by Bernard Kurland, was subordinate to the authority of the German Labour Office in Częstochowa.

The men registered there were divided into six divisions according to profession, from which groups of workers (“brigades”) were sent to 120 workplaces in the city. Among these were 300 men sent to the Raków foundry and about 400 Jews sent to Pelcery.² The *Judenrat* collected a payment from those, who wanted to be released from labour duties, and set a daily wage of 4.00 zł. for the workers.

¹ Landau, YVA, 0.3/5868, p.14.

² Landau, YVA, 0.3/5868, p.47.

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This arrangement caused enormous unrest amongst forced labourers and, under the influence of representatives of the left-wing parties, in May 1940 a "Workers Council" was established. The council organised a demonstration of about 1,000 people against the *Judenrat* (something certainly unusual in the reality of the *Generalgouvernement*) and, under its pressure, Kopiński agreed to increase wages and bread rations.⁴

In 1942, the Częstochowa Ghetto supplied an average of 7,600 forced labourers every day. Each labourer was required to carry a work permit (*Arbeitsausweis*), without which he could not receive food stamps or a permit to go to work in the city.⁵

With all the strict supervision, many evaded. Stanisław Rybicki, the mayor of Częstochowa, recounts that, in September 1941, the *Judenrat* was required to send 550 men to work on the road and many did not report. This happened to be reported to the city's Deputy Mayor Kadner, who ordered a severe inspection of those reporting for work. Rybicki quickly warned Kopiński and, in the following days, all the recruits reported for work. Kadner was angry with Rybicki and accused him of being a "Judenfreund" (friend of Jews)⁶.

Such miracles also occurred in Częstochowa.

For all the shortcomings of the system, the *Judenrat*'s work arrangements also had advantages. Workers were guaranteed a minimum subsistence and captures on the street for local work ended.

But the *Judenrat* was also required to recruit shipments of men to labour camps in the east, where a line of fortifications was being built along the Russian border. As early as the autumn of 1940, 1,000 young men were sent to the Bełżec, Hrubieszów and Cieszanów camps, which gained the reputation of "Hell on Earth". The information about the terrible living conditions in the camps reached the parents, who demanded that the *Judenrat* act to free their sons.

And two months later, a miracle happened! Thanks to the mission of Bernard Kurland, who managed to bribe Dolf, the commander of the Cieszanów camp, the prisoners were released, including Dawid Sandler. When asked by an interviewer as to why he did not escape from the camp into Soviet territory, he replied, that he knew many families who had returned from there because of difficult living conditions. "And no one could have dreamed of the *Final Solution* back then."

³ Landau, YVA, 0.3/5868, p.47.

⁴ Churban Czenstochow... pp. 64, 81-82

⁵ Brener, O pracy przymusowej... p. 51

⁶ Rybicki, Pod znakiem lwa i kruka... p. 82