

Evidence of **Dov Ben Yaakov (Blek) Czestochowa Ghetto**

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Our comrade Ferdka Mazia has already described in general the developments of the events in the Sosnovitch ghetto and its surroundings. These were similar to the developments in our ghetto at Czestochowa.

We were amongst the few ghettos that knew about the deportations and the destruction of the other ghettos in our area and in more distant parts. We knew about Auschwitz, about the first attempts at fatal gassings in Chelmo, about the slaughter of the Jews and 'The Warsaw Destruction', about Vilna – Paneriai. We received this information from friends in other movements and from refugees who came to us from other areas. We had visitors such as Josef Kaplan, Arie Vilner, Mordechai Aneleivich, Tussia Altman, Fromka Poltaniska, Mark Fulman and Huka Fulman.

We asked ourselves again and again, during the time in our ghetto and after the war, how it happened that despite the information we received, the start of the revolts came so late. It seems that this was due to several reasons, the main ones being the lack of public support, the lack of internal communications because of the many individual movements and parties, the special conditions in the way the ghetto was constructed and the influence of Judenrat which claimed that, 'Here, with us, it will be different'.

The day following the outbreak of the war, the Germans conquered our city. The large ghetto was established in April 1941 with free entry and passage through the ghetto. This condition allowed many visitors from outside. Czestochowa was one of the important trading centres in our area. The Jews traded and prospered. Goods were also smuggled through the town in a big way. Right at the beginning of the invasion the Judenrat was established. At its head was Leon Kopinsky, a well-known character and who was involved in many different organisations. He was a faithful Zionist, a Hebrew speaker and Chairman of 'Tarbut'. The Judenrat controlled all aspects of Jewish life. The lack of intervention by the German authorities in daily life managed to persuade the people that they should carry out its orders to the best of their abilities.

Our attitude to the Judenrat was dictated by its attitude towards us during the different periods of its existence.

The various movements and political parties continued their activities clandestinely. Particularly notable was the way these organisations helped the needy and the refugees with medical services, establishing new schools in addition to those already set up by the Judenrat and in promoting school activities in the areas of culture and entertainment. The pioneering organisations even expanded their activities.

Of the visits we had, the visit of Yosef Kaplan who established Hashomer Hatsair, was special and particularly memorable. His members were tremendously helped by his tutelage. People tried to warn Kaplan of the attitude and antisemitism prevalent in the Polish society, which was demonstrated by Poles handing Jews over to the Germans, and with Kaplan's 'semitic' face, we were very scared for him, but he continued his ways nevertheless.

Despite the various decrees which sent people to the work camps at 'Warshin' and 'Tshazanov', known as notorious work camps, the arrest of political prisoners and their deportation to Auschwitz, the situation in the ghetto itself was quite relaxed.

We had three meetings with the Judenrat management and attempted to explain to them the seriousness of the situation of the Jews in the various ghettos.

Yosef Kaplan instigated the first meeting in March 1942. He duly informed them of the liquidation of 'Warsaw Jewry' and the death by gassing at Chelmo. The members of the Judenrat were amazed and decided to send a delegation to Doctor Vendler the German Commissar. Doctor Vendler said it was malicious propaganda spread by Germany's enemies. "And even if there was even the slightest truth in these stories, here in Czestochowa it would not happen. I am here and you know that in our town things are handled differently".

Sometime later we had another meeting with the Judenrat. Rivka Glantz the coordinator of the pioneering group 'Dror', who had recently arrived in our town, managed to forge strong ties with the public and cultural

organisations in our town, explained to them in more detail the destruction of the ghettos. The members of the Judenrat were impressed by her as they knew this information was based on that of friends visiting us. Kopinsky, the Chairman, answered: 'We were deeply affected by the information given to us, but I must tell you that only a few days ago Dr Vendler visited us. He also knows about the destruction of the ghettos and the deportations. He assured us that it would not happen here.' Vendler had great influence in higher circles, including the SS. The Germans decided to create centres of essential work groups as in Warsaw, who would receive orders to supply the German Army and therefore there was no need to worry.

I knew Kopinsky personally. He came to me and warned us against hasty decisions. You are too young. You are putting the ghetto in danger... *(not clear)*.....exit from the ghetto, on warning signs written in three languages Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew, He said , 'Show me another ghetto where in official publications, Hebrew is used'. He also asked us to calm our comrades with the belief that here, it would not happen.

The third meeting came about due to the initiative of Natan Ac and Israel Geller in August 1942. They told the Judenrat staff about the breaching of the Warsaw Ghetto walls. They were most surprised by the relaxed and nonchalant atmosphere prevailing in our ghetto. The answer they received from the Judenrat people was, 'Don't Panic .We believe that here, it will not happen'.

Things began to change drastically for us in March 1942, after the visit of Josef Kaplan, when he told us about the destruction of the Jews of 'The Warsaw Area' and the gassing attempt in Chelmo. We then began to believe the rumours could be true. Later we heard from Josef and Arie Wilner about Vilna and Paneriai. Additionally we received a letter from Josef Kaplan written to members of the pioneer groups. Don't believe the Germans anymore. All their stories and assurances are designed to send us to our destruction.

Several times we approached our friends in other organisations and told them what we knew and they reacted in different ways .At the

beginning, the Communists told us that they had heard of the deportations to Auschwitz, but not about 'the killing camps'. At one stage they decided to establish a fund and to raise money to purchase arms and they worked together on this with friends from the Polish side. Our friends in the 'Bund' were active, particularly in improving Yiddish schools. Nearer to the time of the ghetto's destruction we heard about groups who wished to purchase arms but sadly we never reached the position where we met together in a comprehensive way in order to decide on a common policy.

At the beginning of September 1942 our friends from the two Pioneer groups together with members of Hashomer Hatsair and Gordonia decided on some kind of defence plan, to prepare barrels of oil in order to set the maximum number of fires and to purchase guns for self-defence before the various 'actions' commenced .

Our bad luck... The 'actions' commenced on September 22nd when a chain of Ukrainian SS Commandos and the Polish police surrounded and closed the ghetto. The ghetto was closed for five weeks, together with a general curfew. As a result of the 'actions' and selections forty one thousand Jews were deported to Treblinka, and more than six thousand were transferred and concentrated into the small ghetto.

During the operations we were unable to contact each other. The members of the two Pioneer groups and those who knew what was going on, lived in different places and some were in fact sent to Treblinka and nothing of our plan transpired.

Around six thousand Jews were squeezed into the small ghetto in six or seven narrow streets surrounded by barbed wire. Surviving members of the Pioneer groups and friends from the 'hachshara' groups were concentrated in one house that after a time was called 'Kibbutz Garansarska 71'. This was where the joint secretariat was located and here they lived a 'collective' life. We discussed the way forward and it was obvious that we had to learn from our previous mistakes.

The Judenrat hinted and warned to us that we should not try to inflame the ghetto and they also spread rumours from an apparently reliable source, that everything was over, that those that had been deported,

were deported and those remaining in the ghetto would be sent out to work.

In December 1942 Arie Vilner (York), on behalf of the 'Fighting Jews Organisation' in Warsaw came to visit us. Arie told us about the events in Warsaw and the attempts to establish fighting organisations in different areas. We arranged a meeting of the members of the Kibbutz and an argument ensued as to what was the right way for a fighting body to act. Should we fight in the ghetto? Go to the Partisans? Look for a way to escape? It was agreed to establish a Jewish group to fight in the ghetto. For those who wanted to escape, the organisation would help them to get forged documents etc.

Also a group of left-wing youth was organised, known as 'Group 66' after their home address. We fully cooperated with them. We met together with members of the Communist Party, Group 66, The Bund, Zionist Youth and others. With the influence of Arie Vilner it was decided to establish a united fighting group in the ghetto and an organising committee was set up.

For days and days we discussed in great detail on how we would cooperate together and it was clear that there were great differences of opinion among us. The Communists were in favour of moving the fight against the Germans outside the ghetto, and were in favour of cooperation with the progressive Polish organisations as the fight had to be a joint one together with all the people in the town. Our friends in the kibbutz and Group 66 were of the opinion that we had to prepare for a fight within the ghetto, that the fight had to have a Jewish character and that we also had to recruit those who were still not affiliated with any organisation and involve them in the fighting. We had to declare that 'we will no longer cooperate with the 'Actions' and also that they 'would never remove us from the ghetto'. We knew we could not win but at least we could impair and hinder the Germans and make them pay a price for our lives. We had to fight like Jews. The fight was not political, but rather a fight to defend our self-respect and our lives and as long as Jews remained in the ghetto, we would not leave it.

In the end it was decided: Our armed resistance would be from inside the ghetto and fight for all the Jews in the ghetto and also we would investigate if the Partisans living in the forests near our town would be prepared to absorb those of us remaining after the battle for the ghetto and its surroundings and then allow them to continue to operate with the Partisans.

The organisation also succeeded in some financial operations. The first revolver was purchased. Two of our friends were sent to Warsaw to contact the Centre. We organised armed groups and began training.

But right at the beginning we had a surprise. On the 4th of January 1943 most of our colleagues from the ghetto went out to work. The SS surrounded the ghetto and started an operation. They explained to the Judenrat that it was their purpose to expel all those who were not working from the ghetto. Those that remained in the ghetto had no choice but to go to the collection area. When they realised that this was really a selection process, our friend Fishlvitz tried to break away. He took out his gun (the only one we possessed), aimed it at Lt. Rahan who was in charge of the operation but to his bad luck the gun malfunctioned. Fishlvitz kept calm and tackled Rahan and after a struggle forced him to the ground. After that Izzie Feiner, with a knife in his hands broke ranks and fell upon Lt. Sunfahrt, tore his clothes and started fighting with him. For a moment the Germans did not realise what was going on but they quickly recovered and then a wild scream 'Fire' was heard and Fishlbitz and Feiner fell to the ground in pools of their own blood.

As an act of reprisal against what had happened the Germans took twenty seven Jews from the line stood them against the wall and shot them on the spot. Afterwards, the selection process continued and the Jewish Police were instructed to bring the bodies for burial in the ghetto.

When the workers returned later, they hear all kinds of stories about what had been happening and about the 'Ghetto uprising' and about Germans being killed. The event had huge repercussions and there was a great deal of uneasiness and bitterness all round. The Police recruited workers to dig a communal grave and our colleagues were the first to volunteer for this work. But then we were tremendously disappointed by the reactions of the people and all kinds of rumours started, that our colleagues were guilty of the fact that innocent people had been murdered and guilty of starting provocation against the Germans.

Already from the beginning the Kibbutz was the centre of our activities and our friends were identified as being members of the Kibbutz, so now it was decided- The Kibbutz was guilty. The axes and spades being used to dig the graves would soon turn on us. We decided to leave the place in order to avoid a confrontation among Jews. Some of those returning from the burial threw stones and shattered the windows of our house.

And so we had some very tough days. Hateful and antagonistic remarks were directed at us. We decided that despite the difficulties, we had to overcome them and continue on our path and investigated the various options open to us for the future. We expanded our operational headquarters and arrived at the conclusion that in view of the special situation, we had to stop purchasing revolvers and to start manufacturing explosives by ourselves.

We managed to overcome severe difficulties and by ourselves made our first hand grenade. After a successful experiment outside the ghetto we started a new stage of our operations. We dug a central bunker with several underground passages and an exit to the outside of the ghetto and of course our secret plan centered on the defence of the ghetto. We set up two units, for attack and defence .We organised intelligence units whose job it was to warn us of German plans to destroy the ghetto and to expose traitors and informants on the inside as well as on the outside.

We succeeded in making more than one hundred grenades and Molotov cocktails, made according to the 'recipe' we received from our friends in Warsaw and brought to us by Rivka Glanz from one of her visits to the Capital. Two of our colleagues were sent to the forests in Konitzpul to prepare the way for us to join the Partisans in battle after the fight for the ghetto. And so our organisation was able to record substantial achievements.

Our intelligence sources told us that the Germans knew about the existence of our fighting group and in order to destroy it they infiltrated the ghetto with a number of informants, and some of them were even (caught) and executed.

We learned that the Germans were about to embark on the destruction of the Ghetto and on the 25th of June 1943, our headquarters declared a state of readiness and a call up of fighters. On the same day Marek Folman, an emissary from Warsaw arrived and a general assembly was held in the main bunker. Mark told us about the resistance in the

Warsaw Ghetto and its subsequent destruction and emphasised that the fight was not over. Our people reported that up to now there had been no change in the prevailing atmosphere, that the situation in our Ghetto was normal and that no special concentration of SS troops had been noticed. The Headquarters then announced the end of the state of readiness and of the call up and the arms were returned to the central bunker and placed inside. The commander remained inside the bunker and the fighters dispersed to their homes. During that time shots were heard in the ghetto. Some of the fighters ran towards the bunker and were trapped in the line of fire. The Germans surrounded the ghetto with a large force of troops and entered the bunker. Due to our bad luck, the commander Mutek was in bed with high temperature. They killed him and brought out the armaments. Towards the evening the fighters discussed the situation with Marek Folman and it was decided to take advantage of the underground passages and to send out various groups. Only a few managed to reach the forests and most were killed on the way. Rivka Glanz and Marek tried to get out through one of the passages but were discovered by the Germans and fought bravely with the small amount of arms they had. Rivka Glanz was killed after she fought to the last bullet and then Marek threw a grenade and managed to escape through the commotion it created. In this battle one German was killed and some of them were injured.

The remnants of the fighters continued their fight in the forests and in the Resistance movements in the work camps.

That's how it was that the fighting unit in our town was destroyed. Our strong will was not sufficient to survive against the trend prevailing both outside and inside and to go against things. Obviously, in retrospect it was possible to point out our mistakes but in the heat of the moment and with the limited opportunities we had, it was difficult to predict the upcoming events and those were the consequences.

(Translated by Cedric Olivestone)