

# The End of the Workers Council in the “Big Ghetto”

## The Regulation Regarding Work Cards

There were reports that Jews were being concentrated in the larger cities and that deportations were taking place. Every single day, tens of thousands of Jews were being taken away to unknown locations and no further news ever arrived about them. The tragic, unbelievable reality was confirmed - the first escapees arrived from Treblinka, and they reported on the bestialities which the German authorities had concocted in order to annihilate the Jews.

In that same period, in July 1942, a regulation was issued to the effect that every Jew in Częstochowa was required to have a work card with a picture, certified by the German Employment Bureau. The feeling was that this directive had a specific aim - to immediately discover those who had no employment, and to kill them first of all. A feverish scramble ensued for everyone to somehow obtain a work card and thus be covered as far as the murderers were concerned, who lay in wait for Jewish lives with various ways and means.

The formalities were carried out by the *Judenrat*. Every person provided two photos and gave his details and workplace. In order to obtain a work card, one needed to have a workplace. By orders of the *Judenrat*, the engineer Goldman organised an entire range of workshops in the large *Metalurgia* factory on ul. Krótka. These were workshops for tailors, furriers, cobblers, the manufacture of metal haberdashery etc. There was a certain number of [actual] professional workers in each shop, and the others had to be “covered” by this. These were lawyers and their families and the families of the members of the *Judenrat*.

A group of older and younger women was also formed which, each day, went to Zacisze, a couple of kilometres behind the city, and worked there gardening. For the older Jews and rabbis, a group of street-sweepers was formed, which was part of the Jewish police’s sanitary service.

The *Judenrat*, with the aid of the Jewish police, confiscated work machinery everywhere - namely sewing machines, [leather] stitching machines, metal button machines and all others for working metal and, in this manner, they established the [work]shops. People worked in these [work]shops according to the German regulations - they only had Sundays off, and were required to work on Saturdays and Jewish holidays. All those employed in the workshops and the street-sweepers received work cards. Those who, until then, had bought their way out of going to work, were now doing the opposite and looking for workplaces - and the *Judenrat* began to take money for sending people to work and for issuing work cards.

Over 5,000 labourers belonged to the Workers Council at the time, and they experienced the bitterest suffering during the entire period. The Workers Council was now forced to fight to retain the workplaces and to provide the families of its members with employment.

The political terror became unbearable, and it became evident that it was necessary to reorganise the entire activity into a political resistance movement against the German forces.

At a session of the Workers Council, executive member Cwi Rozenwajn delivered a report regarding the bloody events in Warsaw and the extermination of hundreds of thousands of Jews. The desperation became great, and it was decided to conduct a general operation of the entire population against the occupying forces. A joint meeting of the Workers Council and the *Judenrat* was held. The *Judenrat* rejected all the proposals - and even that of passive resistance, which proposed that, if the Germans should wish to deport the *Częstochowers*, they would not come out of their dwellings and board the carriages. The *Judenrat* rejected this, too, on the grounds that any active or passive resistance could bring harm to the 12,000 registered workers.

The viewpoint of the *Judenrat* representatives aroused great embitterment, for it meant that they were taking the pending national annihilation disaster of the nearly 48,000 Jews of the *Częstochowa* ghetto without saying a word, for the price of the lives of their families and acquaintances, who had insured themselves with the work cards.

There were some who joined the police force, in a bid to protect their [own] lives. The Workers Council came out sharply against that, on the grounds that they considered becoming a policeman, and leading one's own brothers and sisters to their deaths, to be a social and moral crime. The Workers Council forbade its members to become policemen. Szwarc, Lajb Jurysta and others were expelled from the organisation for not complying with this directive.

The Workers Council's attempts to organise a general resistance were unsuccessful. The masses had not yet been psychologically and physically prepared for such a struggle.

The tragic last meeting of the Workers Council took place on the evening of Yom Kippur, on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1942, at Mojsze Lubling's home at ul. Katedralna 11. The writer, Ch.L. Zytnicki, participated in this session and he declared, "These are the last minutes of the existence of the ghetto - and also of our own lives."

On the following day, the *akcja* of deporting the Jews to Treblinka began. The members of the Workers Council had planned to set fire to the ghetto, but this fell through for a lack of the means to do so. With the deportation of *Częstochowa* Jewry, the organisation of the Jewish workers, the Workers Council, went under. Many of them perished on the pyres in Treblinka. Those who survived, made up the healthy core of the underground movement in the "Small Ghetto".