

The Workers Council

Once the Germans had marched in, groups of Jews began to go to work at different points in the city. The workplaces were in factories which operated for the German forces. This was unpaid, forced labour. The workers belonged to the poorest echelons, who did not have the financial possibility of buying, from the *Judenrat*, their way out of that work. Their material situation was bad. They did not have anything to live from. They had no clothes and lived under the worst of conditions. There were many cases when such exhausted, starving labourers fainted at work. The regime at work was unbearable. The foremen and *meisters* victimised the workers, forcing them to complete impossible quotas of work and, when the quota was not filled, they were put in a special list. After work, these people were taken to the guardhouse, where they were beaten.

This state of affairs caused the labourers to be displeased with the *Judenrat* for the following reasons:

- 1) Only the poorest strata were employed in the unpaid forced labour.
- 2) The *Judenrat* took in large sums of money from the wealthier Jews, who did not go to work.
- 3) Those incoming sums were used for unspecified purposes.

These reasons caused the workers to organise themselves for a fight, against the *Judenrat*, to implement appropriate working conditions for the workers. The first sprouting of a communal organisational life, during the era of occupation, were to be noted following "Bloody Monday". A few days after "Bloody Monday", representatives of *Ha'Chalutz* and the League for a Working Land of Israel got together to discuss the situation that had been created. The most burning issue was how to continue maintaining the longstanding *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair hachshara* [training] farm, which would become a centre for the underground movement and for training combat units.

The engineer Lajb Horowicz and Symcha Lastman did much in this field. They took over guardianship over the live and dead inventory (machines and livestock). Unfortunately, the further [implementation] of this plan fell through as a result of the uncertain and uneasy atmosphere.

The second attempt was to rebuild organisational cultural-educational work. A group of *Ha'Chalutz* activists called a meeting in the home of Comrade Daniel Jarzombek at ul. Warszawska 11. Those who took part in the discussion included Eng. Lajb Horowicz, Daniel Jarzombek, Nuta Slomnicki, Szoszana Frankenberg, Chaskiel Holand, Berl Gewercman, Izrael Szyldhaus, Juda Cymerman, Josef Kantor, Lajb Mandelbaum, Icek Holender and Cwi Rozenwajn. The newly-created situation was discussed at the meeting, and they worked out a plan as to how to conduct clandestine cultural and political activity.

The meeting places were set at various locations. Comrade Jarzombek's home was set as the meeting place for the executive committee and, for the separate groups, the homes of Mania Cieciora at ul. Kiedrzyńska 14; Szoszana Frankenberg - Stary Rynek 30; Josek Kantor – ul.

Nadrzeczna 32; Małka Weltman – ul. Berka Joselewicza 1, and Chaja Frydman – ul. Garncarska 5. The elected executive committee was made up of the following members: Szoszana Frankenberg, Nuta Slomnicki, Chaskiel Holand, Daniel Jarzombek and Cwi Rozenwajn. It was also the executive committee's task to establish relations with other socialist labour circles as regards conducting joint political activity. It was very difficult for the executive committee to carry out any work. The persecutions and gruesome terror paralysed the entire work. The Gestapo constantly carried out searches and arrests of former communal and political activists. As a result, many of the activists were forced to flee from the claws of the Gestapo. They went away to the Soviet territories. Because of this outflow of the best forces, the activity was greatly weakened.

Opinions were that the [results of the] *blitzkrieg* would be soon decided and that the Soviets would arrive in Częstochowa. Everyone was keenly interested in this topic and it was discussed at every meeting. [But] the hopes that the Soviets would soon come did not materialise. The arrests intensified many times over, aided by the criminal activity of informers. Until November 1939, it was possible to go across to the Soviet territories. In November, the border was closed and it was no longer possible to cross over to the Soviet side.

During that same period, the law regarding forced labour for Jews was implemented in Częstochowa. In May 1940, the *Arbeiterrat* [Workers Council] was established, whose task was to organise the unpaid forced labourers against the *Judenrat* and to create resistance combat units to fight the Nazi regime. The illegal *Ha'Chalutz* organisation handed out flyers against the *Judenrat's* handling of the unpaid forced labourers. It also called the working youth to the fight against the *Judenrat*. In this announcement, they branded the activity of the *Judenrat* [as that of an organisation] which assisted in the enforcement of the German occupation's villainous laws. To this end, several members were appointed to organise the individual workplaces and to call the workers to a mass rally at the *Judenrat's* premises. Comrades Izrael Szyldhaus and "Malay"¹ Szmulewicz went to Kucelinka and Comrades Abram Łażniarz, Juda Mandelbaum and Cwi Rozenwajn went to Bugaj. The labourers happily took up the call and, immediately after work, everyone marched together to the mass rally.

On 12th May 1940, the meeting was held at the *Judenrat* premises at Aleja 22 (the premises of the former Business Bank²). One thousand workers took part in the rally. The entrances and exits were immediately shut, so that no one should be able to get out. The *Judenrat* members, who were present, were unable to leave and they stayed during the meeting.

Comrades Szyldhaus, Szmulewicz and Rozenwajn delivered speeches. They described the working conditions in the different workplaces. In Bugaj, at the water-management [works], people stood barefoot in the water and were wasting away from hunger and arduous labour - the *Judenrat* was making money at the expense of the poor man. It was taking huge payoffs from the wealthier Jews and putting the money to its own private use. The assembled were raging with discontent towards the *Judenrat*. The large workers' demonstration made a huge impression on President Leon Kopiński, Berliner, Richter and the other members of the *Judenrat* who were present. They proposed negotiations to regulate these painful issues.

¹ [TN: Nickname of Leizer Szmulewicz, as stated in *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. II, col. 324.]

² [TN: According to the 1929 Polish business directory, this was the "Bank Przemysłowców i Kupców" (Bank of Industrialists and Merchants).]

All of a sudden, German gendarmes arrived, holding pointed revolvers. Finding the hall jam-packed with workers and speakers sitting at the presidium table, they ordered everyone to disperse – except for the presidium, which was to remain. As it [later] turned out, the gendarmerie had been summoned by the *Judenrat* and they were, in fact, present throughout the negotiations. The Workers Council formulated its demands: to pay wages, feed and clothe the workers from the funds taken in by the *Judenrat*. President Leon Kopiński, who at the meeting had been prepared to give in to all the demands, spoke in a completely different manner in the presence of the gendarmes. He declared that the communists were not in power in Częstochowa – that the Workers Council had started to play with fire. As a result of this declaration, relations between the Workers Council and the *Judenrat* became acutely stressed. The demands were met partially. Kitchens and distributions of bread were created for the workers and, later, each one received payment. In this fashion, the unpaid forced labourers became salaried workers and their employer was the *Judenrat*.

In the autumn of 1940, the city went into commotion - once again, new regulations from the German authorities. This time, the matter in question was to present a thousand young men to be sent away to the camps in Cieszanów and Hrubieszów. The *Judenrat* employed the same tactic - the affluent bought their way out with large sums of money, whilst the entire calamity was directed towards the poor.

The first news arrives from the camps - great hunger, filth, tortures and mortality. The *Judenrat* is attacked by the families of those deported. They demand that they should be released or exchanged for others. Negotiations ensue once again. Those concerned must pay huge sums of money for it. But they are poverty-stricken people and are unable - even after selling their last possessions - to pay the sums required of them. The Workers Council takes the matter into its own hands and, under its pressure, the *Judenrat* allocates a large monetary sum to free the deportees. Bernard Kurland³ then travels to the deportees. After great efforts, he manages to buy off the main leader of the camp, the greatest sadist and murderer of all time, [Hermann] Dolf [sic Dolp], and the *Częstochower* Jews are freed.

In December 1940, a conference of all those working was held. Every fifty people sent one delegate. Representatives of the newly-established workplaces participated in this conference. The delegates of the first Jewish railway workers were Mojsze Działoszyński and Mendel Wilinger from the "Iron Guard" [and] Ch. Wilczyński from the Rudniki railway workers; Mordche Openhajm and Icek Opoczyński from the Housing Bureau, and Izrael Szymonowicz and a great number of delegates from the water-management, with Comrades Mojsze Lubling, Mojsze Lewenhof, Cwi Rozenwajn, Izrael Szyldhaus, Icek Rozenfeld and Abram Łażniarz. Pre-war labour activists also participated: Dawid Szlezinger, Szyja Nirenberg, Gerszon Prędko, Abram Bratt, Abram Szczekacz and Jakow Kaufman.

During this conference, expression was given to the tragic reality of the Jewish people - the atmosphere in the Jewish working street, the political and strategic situation, the difficult political and financial state of the Jewish labourers, the political persecutions, the prevailing poverty, and the great battle that was forthcoming against the direct enemy - the barbaric Hitler regime - as well as the fight against the *Judenrat*, which was the enforcer of the

³ [TN: Deputy of the *Judenrat*'s Employment Bureau, as mentioned above on pp.57-58.]

murderous laws of the German authorities, whose goal was to annihilate the Jewish people. The conference unanimously decided to form an impartial professional and political authority to lead the fight in all these fields.

The primary tasks were to conduct political, cultural and professional activity and a struggle for the betterment of the workers' wages and to create a whole series of institutions, such as an HMO, a mutual aid fund, an invalids' fund, workers' kitchens, kindergartens, primary schools, evening courses, drama circles, a workers' choir and to publish an illegal newspaper.

There were representatives of all the political affiliations at this conference. What decided matters was not political interests, but the general questions of the workforce - complete unanimity reigned. Those elected to the executive [board] were Mojsze Lubling, Cwi Rozenwajn and Izrael Szyldhaus [from] the League; Icek Rozenfeld and Mendel Wilinger - the Bund; Mordche Openhajm and Icek Opoczyński - KP⁴; Chaim Birenholc and Izrael Szymonowicz - Left-wing *Poalei Zion*, and Mojsze Lewenhof - Independents.

The subcommittee consisted of the following members: Dawid Szlezinger, Gerszon Prędko, Abram Bratt, Abram Szczekacz and Jankiel Kaufman. The executive [board] was in close contact with the subcommittee. The office-bearers of the executive were Mojsze Lubling - Chairman; Mojsze Lewenhof - Secretary; Cwi Rozenwajn - Finances; Izrael Szyldhaus - External Work; Icek Rozenfeld - Kitchens; Izrael Szymonowicz - Culture; Mordche Openhajm - Propaganda and Chaim Birenholc and Mendel Wilinger as members.

In the spring of 1941, the Workers Council conducted a great campaign for [what was], in those times, one of the most important questions of life [and death] - to increase the bread rations from forty to sixty *deka* a day. A hunger strike was proclaimed. The exhausted and starving workers maintained their discipline and fasted. The Workers Council warned that it would call on them to not go to work. This frightened the *Judenrat* and they called for negotiations. The result was a positive one - the *Judenrat* gave in to the demands.

A stormy period begins. In the spring of 1940, the ghetto is implemented in Częstochowa. First [of all], the wealthy are provided with apartments for large sums. The working families are left out on the street. The Workers Council conducts a struggle for housing for the working families.

The number of members of the Workers Council grew from day to day. New workplaces were constantly added - such as the *Luftwaffe* [Air-force], Hagen, Giesche, Wulkan and others, as well as the camps in Przyrów and Gidle. One thousand members turned into three thousand. The Workers Council premises was at Aleja 9.

During the summer of 1941, the hunger grew more and more. Once again, the Workers Council went out on strike for the bread rations to be increased. The struggle took on acute forms. The *Judenrat* ordered the Jewish police to arrest the Workers Council's executive members. Mojsze Lubling, Izrael Szyldhaus and Cwi Rozenwajn were detained.

⁴ [TN: Polish abbreviation of "Komunistyczna Partia", or Communist Party.]

When the labourers returned from work and found out that the executive members of the Workers Council had been arrested, with clenched fists, they went to the *Judenrat*. Under the pressure of these demonstrators, the executive members were freed and the *Judenrat* began to hold negotiations with them. The Workers Council demanded that the *Judenrat* issue a financial report. President Leon Kopiński declared that he was only obligated to render such a report to the Gestapo. This answer led to bad blood on the part of the workers' delegates. The result was that the bread rations for those working in the more difficult workplaces was increased to one kilo per day.

The Workers Council proposed to the *Judenrat* to conduct a joint campaign against the rising prices, establish cooperatives and create collective courtyard kitchens in order to alleviate the constantly increasing poverty. The *Judenrat* cast all these proposals aside, labelling them as communist.

The Workers Council was joined by the communal activists Jakow Roziner, Adv. Konarski, Adv. Lajb Fogel and Dawid Szlezinger, who actively worked together. The Workers Council's funds, on a basis of mutual communal support, distributed 100,000 złoty a month. A drama circle was organised under the leadership of Chaim Praport and Dawid Orbach, as well as a children's and youth's choir, directed by Jakow Rotenberg. An entire array of performances was put on, with a rich musical and literary programme. Fiszl Blumenkranc distinguished himself with the ghetto scenes that he wrote. Sholem Aleichem's *Dos Groise Gevins* [The Big Lottery/The Jackpot] was also staged with great success.

At the end of 1941, the renowned writer Ch.L. Zytnicki arrived from Lemberg [Lwów]. He worked alongside the Workers Council until 22nd September 1942, when the Nazi hangmen sent him to Treblinka, where he was perished.

In the winter of 1941-1942, various reports arrived from the territories conquered [by the Germans] in the east, and later also from Warthegau⁵, regarding the mass extermination of entire Jewish communities. This made people ponder the fate of Częstochowa and methods of resistance. The idea arose to establish *kibbutzim* [collectives], which would be political bases and the foundations for an organised resistance.

The active members of *Ha'Chalutz*, who worked together with the Workers Council, turned to the *Merkaz* [Central Office] in Warsaw. As a result, the members of the *Merkaz*, Josef Kapłan (*Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*), Lajzer Geler (Gordonia) and Rywka Glanc (*Dror*) arrived [in Częstochowa]. Two *kibbutzim* were established - one of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*, with its seat at ul. Berka Joselewicza 1, and the second of *Dror* and Gordonia, which was initially set up at ul. Mostowa 17 in the premises of Comrade Mojsze-Rywen Stroz and, later, after great efforts, at ul. Przemysłowa 2, in the Bund's old premises. The leaders of this *kibbutz* were Rywka Glanc, Szlama Wilnicki, Guta Dam, Izrael Szyldhaus and Cwi Rozenwajn. Rywka Glanc worked in the secretariat of the Workers [Council] in the area of *kibbutz's* affairs.

With the beginning of the year 1942, a wave of repressions from the German authorities poured down. That was the start and preliminary to the extermination operations.

⁵ [TN: Aka "Reichsgau Wartheland", Warthegau was a Nazi German Reichsgau (administrative subdivision) formed from parts of Polish territory annexed in 1939, which comprised the region of Greater Poland and adjacent areas.]

In May 1942, the active co-workers of the Workers Council, Opoczyński, Fiszman, Borzykowski and others were arrested. They were sent to the Auschwitz (Oświęcim) death camp. The Workers Council's activity became more cautious and conspiratorial. A special fund was created for the families, whose men had been killed due to their political activity and for the families of the political activists who had gone to the Soviet territories. More than fifty families benefited from this fund.