

XV

The Activity of the *Judenrat*

The *Judenrat* received a notification from the *Stadthauptmann* to the effect that the Jews were not to show themselves too often in the streets, especially in the main streets. Should the “*herumtreiben*” [drifting about] of the Jews not cease, they warned, the authorities would “draw the appropriate conclusions”. The *Judenrat* was, therefore, forced to form a Jewish “*Ordnungsdienst*”¹ in to take care that the Jews should not go about in the streets too much.

Several dozen young men were recruited for the *Ordnungsdienst*, which was stationed at sentry posts on all streets. These Jewish keepers of order wore armbands on both arms - on the right, a white band with a Star of David and, on the left, a blue band with an inscription in German, “*Jüdischer Ordnungsdienst*”.

Included among the duties of the *Ordnungsdienst* was also keeping order in the offices of the *Judenrat*, the Employment Office and the kitchens, and “disciplining” the Jewish populace in general. In any place, where several Jews were standing together, Jewish “order keepers” would immediately appear and order them to disperse.

The Jewish *Ordnungsdienst* was given a precinct of its own. Those taxpayers, who did not bring the appointed sums into the *Judenrat*’s coffers so freely and those Jews who did not report regularly for work, were summoned to this precinct for interrogation. In cases of theft or fighting between Jews, the Jewish *Ordnungsdienst* also intervened. Eventually, the Jewish *Ordnungsdienst* began to gain a certain amount of trust from the Jewish population.

It is self-evident that the authority of the Jewish *Ordnungsdienst* only extended to the Jews. In contrast, it was powerless and helpless, not only against any non-Jew, but even against small children, if they were not Jewish.

More and more German families were arriving in our city and schools were created for their children. These schoolchildren, aged from eight to fourteen, on their way to school or inside it, would assault Jewish children and even adults and beat them with sticks or *Spitzruten* [pointed rods]. When the little Germans were sometimes driven away by the Jews, they sought out a gendarme, who took up the wrong that the German children had to endure from the Jews, and he taught the small and also the big Jews manners, letting his heavy hands down upon the Jewish faces. As a result, the impudence of these little Germans grew, and Jews were forced to conceal themselves when they appeared in the street.

It once occurred that the president of the *Judenrat* and the leader of the *Ordnungsdienst* were in the street at the very moment when Jewish children were being beaten up by the little German hooligans. The Jewish “representatives of the authorities” first tried to hold the little Germans back with moralistic arguments, such as “*Nächstenliebe*” [neighbourly love] and the

¹ [TN: Ger., “Security Service”; official name of the Jewish police.]

like, but the little hooligans were not affected by these kinds of Jewish “sermons” and carried on doing their work. Then, the leader of the Jewish *Ordnungsdienst* fetched his men with the armbands on both arms and tried to make order. The little Germans, however, also jumped into the faces of these “*Ordnungsmänner*” [men of order], so that a German gendarme in the street was finally asked to intervene. The gendarme launched a whole tirade against the president of the *Judenrat* and the *Ordnungsdienst*, to the effect that they and the ill-bred Jewish children, and the whole “*verdammte Gesellschaft*¹” were not to disturb the peace of the well-bred German children. In the end, he declared to them, “You may only give orders to your Jews, but you are to respect German children!”

Our president and the “*Ordnungsmänner*” were jeered by the “well-bred” German children and they left in disgrace.

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The *Judenrat* received an order from the authorities to register all Jewish property on special forms, which needed to be filled in and presented to the *Stadthauptmann*. Every Jewish man and every Jewish woman was required to accurately report their possessions. On the form, the following categories were listed: factories, shops, workshops, securities, furniture, linen, bedclothes, tapestries², pictures, girandoles and all other household items; clothing, suits, coats, furs, shoes, hats and all other articles of dress (in addition, the colour of each item was to be reported); gold, silver and other precious metals, in every shape and form, and all other valuables. Everything had to be listed in the appropriate category of the form and signed by the relevant person. In the inspections that were subsequently held, items that were found were compared with those which had been reported in the form. If they found items which had not been reported in the form, they were seized - and their owner received such “payment”, that he would already remember it all his life.

During this same period, registration of all those wishing to travel to Russia was also conducted. Those presenting themselves for this registration were people who had relatives in the cities which had been occupied by the Russians at the start of the War. They reckoned that they would now be able to connect with their families. Youth also reported for this registration. All these registration forms were presented by the *Judenrat* to the authorities.

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Jews, who had been driven out of the surrounding *shtetls* by the Germans, began arriving in our city. The first homeless came from the *shtetl* Bodzanów. They recounted that once, in the middle of the night, gendarmes entered the *shtetl* and drove everyone out to the road behind the *shtetl*. Thus, they set out to wander in the darkness, until they came to us. At first, they went to the *Judenrat* and occupied the courtyard, the corridors, the steps and any free spot – men, women, children and old people, all of them depleted, tired, spent and starved, with dismal faces and in rags.

¹ [TN: Ger., lit. “damned company”, as one would say in English “the whole bloody lot”.]

² [TN: The term used in the original – “*Teppicher*” – can also mean carpets.]

When night fell and the exhausted, homeless people still had no roof over their head, they were quickly divided amongst Jewish houses, where it was already also crowded enough, due to the fact that the local Jews, whom the Germans had evicted from their dwellings, also had to be housed with other families.

The very next day, the *Judenrat* set about creating shelters for the homeless. To that purpose, they appropriated all the premises where there were prayer quorums, public *cheders* and small synagogues, that were located somewhere deep inside the courtyards. The new study-hall, which had been damaged, was fixed up a little and the homeless were set up there.

These shelters, however, became increasingly more overfilled. Almost every day, new people arrived, those who had been driven out of their homes. Our city which, before the War, had numbered 25,000 [Jewish] souls, now reached 40,000.

Life in the shelters became ever harder. Men and women, with their children, were forced to live [all] together in one room - people of different classes. There were not enough beds and many had to sleep on the floor. Almost everyone was ragged and tattered. From amongst us, we collected as many garments and linen as we could and made every possible effort to help those even more unfortunate than ourselves.

The kitchen for the homeless was always busy, but there was not enough food. Large cauldrons of food also began to be cooked in private homes and were given to the kitchen. But, with every day, the conditions for the permanent residents became worse - everyone was occupied with himself and his close family. Private aid continued to diminish and things for the people in the shelters worsened. Contagious diseases, such as spotted and abdominal typhus, began to appear in the shelters and in the poorer houses. Disinfection vehicles drove about in the poor Jewish neighbourhoods and cleaned the houses. The authorities ordered the *Judenrat* to set up "delousing facilities", with quarantine for suspected typhus cases and also to create a hospital for epidemic diseases.

Jewish doctors threw themselves into the work to fight the contagious diseases. A former captain in the Polish army, Dr Wolberg, was given the mission to turn the *mikve* into a quarantine with a delousing facility. After a short time, the facilities were opened with a staff of sanitary workers, medics and assistants. A hospital for epidemic diseases, under the management of Dr Kagan, was opened in the premises of the I.L. Peretz Jewish kindergarten.

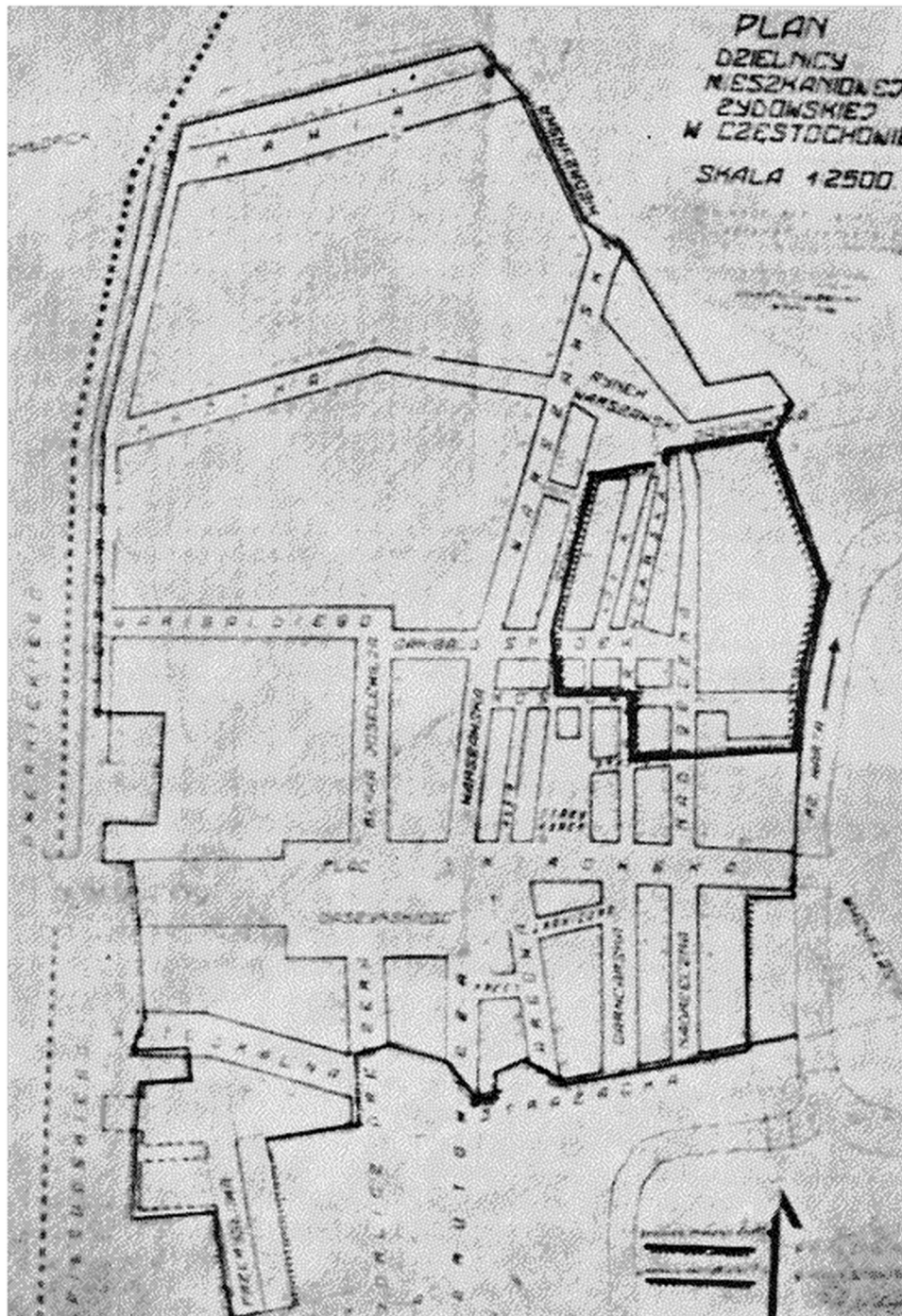
All residents of the shelters were frequently taken to the quarantine, where their hair was cut, they were shaven, their clothes were disinfected and they took baths.

The *Judenrat* collected - from those who were still able to give - linen, beds, bedclothes and everything that the facility and the hospital needed. Money was collected for medicines and [medical] instruments.

The hospital soon became filled with patients. The quarantine took hundreds of people in for observation. The doctors and sanitary workers, with the assistance of the whole Jewish populace, worked so energetically that, over time, the situation was brought under control.

The German sanitary authorities also put our facilities to use for the non-Jewish population. All the beggars and uncared-for people among the Polish populace were brought, under police supervision, to the Jewish sanitary facilities and were served by the Jewish personnel. Gypsies also, who were heavily persecuted by the Germans, were brought to us.

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A map of the Częstochowa "Big Ghetto" and "Small Ghetto"

The poverty constantly grew in such a manner that the *Judenrat* did not have enough means to aid the thousands of people, who had no possibility of earning for their necessities. It was, therefore, decided to form a *Judenrat* aid committee in order to raise funds for the Jews suffering poverty. The aid committee also took all the shelters, the two hospitals, the sanitary facilities and the entire poor Jewish population under its auspices.

The committee formed separate sections for medical and monetary aid. Special personnel discreetly investigated who was in need of aid. It turned out that people, who were assumed to be rich, had already, for a long time, been living in want and need. Their property had already been taken long ago. Others, yet, were living from having sold the last of their possessions and goods for [mere] *groszy*. Thus, it emerged that the larger part of the population was in need of aid.

In order to be able to fulfil their duties, the aid committee needed to possess large sums. The *Judenrat* could not put such sums at the aid committee's disposal. It was, therefore, decided to tax the wealthy Jews, who were still running their businesses, even more and, in this manner, large sums came in.

Yet despite all this, the *Judenrat* still faced difficult tasks, both in relation to the authorities and in relation to the Jewish population. Thousands of Jewish families needed to be supported and thousands of workers needed to be paid, on a daily basis, for the work that they performed for the Germans. Several hundred officials of the *Judenrat* and its departments needed to be provided with provisions, besides which they were also paid small salaries. The *Judenrat* also had to pay for various raw materials that were used in renovating houses for the Germans. Quite often, they were also forced to pay "contributions" in order to pay off the Gestapo. So, despite the fact that the aid committee made work easier for the *Judenrat*, huge sums were still required to fulfil all the obligations that the Germans lay upon the *Judenrat*.

At the *Judenrat's* meetings, the conclusion was reached that, if in our city the state of the Jews was not as bad as in other cities, it was solely thanks to the fact that we were giving the Germans all that they demanded and, therefore, everything also needed to continue being done in the future to find means to meet their demands. As a result, a financial commission was formed, which was tasked with raising as much money as possible.

The financial commission was made up of several council members and a few individuals, who had formerly engaged in lending³ money with interest. These people were chosen as "specialists", who knew from whom and how to receive as much money as possible.

The financial commission formed, in each building, a committee and, in every building committee, a member of the main committee was chosen, who represented the building committee at the financial commission.

³ [TN: The word *באריגן* in Yiddish can mean either to lend or to borrow; in the current context, we deem it more likely that the individuals in question were lending and not borrowing.]

Every Jew, who was not completely destitute, was taxed with a sum of money for the main committee. Part of the money was distributed directly, in the building, among the poor Jewish tenants and the rest went into the *Judenrat's* coffers.

The financial commission constantly thought up new taxes with different names: "premises tax" - because, after all, one was still living in a corner inside a house and not on the street; a tax for the *Ordnungsdienst*, because they "taught" one how to walk and stand; a "kitchen tax", because you were not yet forced to resort to the public kitchen; a "labour tax", because you were working less than others; an "electricity tax", a "hospital tax", a "special tax" and more and more. Craftsmen, who were still working in their workshops, had to pay "trade taxes". The financial commission evaluated each tax separately for each taxpayer. Every Jew, who did not enjoy the benefits of the aid committee, was bombarded with tax notices. Besides that, the German Tax Office demanded taxes, which all citizens in general were forced to pay.

The wheel of taxes spun ever quicker and stronger. Large sums flowed into the coffers of the *Judenrat*, but thousands of complaints also came in from those who were unable to bear the heavy tax burden. Frictions arose between the appraisal commissions and the taxpayers. The financial commission sent out into the city new inspectors, who had to accurately investigate the situation of each payer. Numerous "taxpayers" went over to the side of the aid-takers, because it had emerged that they had already been suffering hunger for a long time, for they had not been able to bring themselves to turn to the aid committee for support. "Higher appraisal commissions" were formed, which evaluated the payers' complaints. For some of them, the sum of the tax was decreased, while for others it was actually increased.

There were, however, also stubborn payers and, on one occasion, when the *Judenrat's* treasury was empty and there was nothing with which to cover the expenditures, the *Judenrat* presented the authorities with a list of those Jews who had not paid taxes.

Early one morning, gendarmes drove up, in motorcars, to the Jewish neighbourhood and arrested those who had not paid the taxes by the designated deadline. If the husband was not at home at the time, they took the wife. The detainees were taken away outside the city and, even though it was winter at the time, they were put into a large stable. Only three weeks later, when a large part of the demanded taxes was paid and guarantees were given for the remaining sum, were the arrestees released.

The Germans turned the *Judenrat* into an instrument for extracting, from the Jewish populace, whatever they wanted.

On one occasion, the *Judenrat* received an order to bring to the *Stadthauptmannschaft* [city administration] the most expensive toys for children. As it turned out, in Germany, an outing had been organised for German children to the eastern territories which were occupied by the Germans. The children were to receive toys upon travelling through our city. The *Judenrat* looked in the shops and was unable to come up with the appropriate items. When the *Stadthauptmann* learned of this, he telephoned the *Judenrat* [and said] that should the toys not be supplied within a few hours, the *prezes* himself was to report to him. The most capable

officials were immediately sent out and they conducted searches in the Jewish shops and the private residences of former wealthy people and gathered all that they could.

The toys were promptly presented to the *Stadthauptmann* within the deadline and German women went out to the railway station and gave the gifts to the German children travelling through. At the same time, Jewish children were crying their eyes out for their toys.

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The Germans continuously attached themselves, like parasites, to Jewish toil and exploited the Jews in every which way.

They began to pay visits to Jewish craftsmen. The *prezes* of the *Judenrat* and the Jews, who hung about the German offices, informed the Germans as to who were the best tailors, cobblers, sewers of linen etc. The Germans and their wives began visiting these craftsmen and ordered work from them. The Jewish craftsmen, on their part, gladly took on the German clients, in hopes that, through them, their bitter lot might improve a little. The Germans ordered work from the best craftsmen and flung them a few small coins for the finished work, to make it look as if they had paid. The Jewish craftsmen endeavoured to ensure that the work for the Germans should come out as well as possible. The German “clients” were delighted with the Jewish work. The *Stadthauptmann* was dressed by the city’s best Jewish men’s tailor who, during the measuring for a beautiful suit or fur, would take the opportunity to ask a favour for himself or a Jew who was in some trouble and, at times, something was achieved in this manner.

The German women also sought out the best Jewish ladies’ tailor and had their clothes sewn by him. They comprehended that it would be more advantageous for them to come in the company of their husbands, from whom the Jewish tailor would ask some favour and therefore perform the work for free.

The same happened with all other Jewish craftsmen, who sewed for the Germans and clothed them from head to foot - both the military men and civilians, with their wives and children. They were, therefore, freed from the terror that was employed in regards to the Jewish population.

Over time, the *Judenrat* also began taking advantage of the relationships of the craftsmen with the Germans to affect the repeal of harsh decrees for individual Jews or for the community. In such cases, the craftsmen worked for the “clients” absolutely for free and the *Judenrat* provided the materials.

Hope began to rise that, through these craftsmen, perhaps some of the troubles, which the Jewish population was having to withstand, would be successfully alleviated.