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Slavery

The German authorities were demanding, from the *Judenrat*, ever more Jews for work. The Jews were being sent to work at the railway stations, loading or unloading iron, coal, hay and other materials for the military. They were also sent to work at the barracks and to distribute coal to the offices and the private residences of Germans and, in general, anywhere the Jewish workforce could be put to use.

The *Judenrat*, itself, employed several hundred people in various renovation works in the German official and private premises, in moving Jewish furniture to the German warehouses, to the German casinos and to restaurants, to the Gestapo's office and to the private dwellings of various German officials and military men.

The newly-founded German firm "*Wasserwirtschaft*" [Water Management], which was tasked with regulating the banks of the Warta and Stradomka [rivers], demanded more workers every day. 1,200 Jews were already employed there and still they requested more labourers. Besides that, the *Judenrat* received orders to provide several hundred workers for construction work that different military formations would undertake upon establishing their professional academies and other facilities. The city administration also required working hands to clear away the wire fencing that the Polish military had erected surrounding the city.

In short - "Working Jews, Jewish work" [is] all that was heard everywhere.

The *Judenrat* was compelled to form a special office for labour affairs. This office was given the name "*Arbeitsamt*" [Employment Office]. This office was required to provide the German authorities with Jewish manpower at any time and at any place.

During this same period, by decree of the General Governor, forced labour was implemented throughout the entire country for Jews aged between fourteen and sixty.

The *Judenrat's* Employment Office was faced with a difficult task - thousands of workers had to work for the Germans for free, but from where would all these people obtain their livelihoods? The food products, which the city administration gave out to the Jewish population, were too meagre for people to be able to manage, and the prices of products rose from day to day.

The *Judenrat*, therefore, organised the matter of labour in the following manner – Jews, who were still able to pay their way out of the forced labour, were taxed a certain sum, from which those, who were sent to work for the Germans for free, were maintained. Thus, two classes of people were formed - payers and labourers. The *Judenrat* paid the workers small sums, gave them bread, set up kitchens where they received lunches and bought them paper

outfits¹ and wooden shoes. The payment for not having to work was, at first, a small one and was constantly raised as time went by.

However, despite all the efforts of the *Judenrat*, the need amongst the workers became increasingly greater. The Employment Office, therefore, raised the payment of those not working in order to have more money. But the problem was not solved due to a rapid “overlapping effect”, which continuously took place. Yesterday’s “taxpayers”, today, became labourers themselves. The takings vanished visibly, as fewer and fewer people were left who could buy their way out of work. As a result, the ranks of the workers constantly grew and the ranks of the payers became smaller every day. And the less payers there were, the higher the payment had to become.

The Germans, however, were always demanding more people for work. The Employment Office was therefore forced to also call to work those who had paid the labour tax. After a short time, they were compelled to summon all the men to the age of forty-five for work.

Now, only the extremely wealthy could buy their way out of work and, those aged between forty-five and sixty, if they only had the possibility of paying. But the German demand for working hands grew to such an extent that, in the end, the Employment Office was forced to call to work even those who had paid very large sums into the labour fund. Thousands of summonses were sent out each day to the payers to report on the following day for work at an appointed location.

The situation became ever harder and the slavery greater. Quite frequently, the German leaders of various workplaces, who had not received the requested number of labourers by the deadline that had been set, came to the *Judenrat* and beat the leadership and the Jewish officials and took with them, to work, the entire personnel. In a single stroke, the entire administration of the *Judenrat* would come to a halt. It was only when the president of the *Judenrat* had provided other labourers and had interceded several times that the *Judenrat* officials were left alone. It also often occurred that, if the *Judenrat* had not supplied the requested number of workers on time, German gendarmes, along with Polish constables, went out into the city with automobiles and, cordoning off streets, captured all the Jewish passers-by, taking out men from their shops and houses, leaving everything free for the taking.

Shouting and bellowing like savage beasts, they herded the Jews into a square, after which they sent them off, in groups, to large wooden barracks outside the city, which had been erected only recently - who knows for what purpose? The Jews were held in these barracks. From there, they were sent out to work and, after work, they had to return to the barracks. They were guarded by German gendarmes and Polish policemen, who treated them like slaves.

When several days had passed and these people had not returned home, their wives and family members ran to the *Judenrat*, begging them to intercede with the authorities. It turned out that the Germans demanded a large payment from each one who desired to be released.

¹ [TN: During the War, the Germans used various low-grade substitute materials, some of which contained specially treated paper pulp.]

The *Judenrat* wished to take this opportunity to also gain something for its own coffers and worked out a certain sum, additional to what the Germans were demanding. Those, who had money, paid their way free of the robber. Those who were poor or obstinate remained in the barracks for another few weeks in the barracks. Due to bad nourishment, the inability to sleep well and the worst hygienic conditions, the men were debilitated by the arduous labour and a typhus epidemic broke out. The Polish and German police were then withdrawn and the *Judenrat* was made answerable should the Jews leave the barracks.

Seeing how the affair was taking such a perilous turn, family members and wives of the internees in the barracks made the greatest efforts. They sold their last possessions and ransomed the prisoners from the Germans. There were, however, still some remaining, for whom there was no money to pay for their release. These people were transferred to yet another camp, which had been set up in a former Jewish factory, from which the Germans had removed the machinery. They stayed there for a long time, until a sanitary committee ordered the camp dissolved - needless to say, not for the benefit of the Jews, but due to the hazard that the disease might spread.

On top of the persecutions and torments that the Jewish populace had to bear from the Germans and Poles, there was the added painful feeling of also being persecuted by Jews. This, too, was part of the diabolical German system - that one Jew should oppress another. Jewish officials were employed in the administration of the Employment Office. Every day, they sent out thousands of slips to the working people and gave out coupons for lunches and bread. There were also overseers, working in the Employment Office, who led the labourers in groups to their workplaces. These overseers were called "brigadiers".

Although they were workers or functionaries themselves, they treated the hapless people, who were working under their supervision, very badly. There were some brigadiers who took their "office" very seriously and demanded strict obedience. If one of the workers or the entire group did not conduct themselves exactly as the brigadiers wished, they reported this to the "higher authorities". When the brigadier reported this to the Jewish Employment Office, the matter would be settled between the sides, as among their own kind. But, if the brigadier reported it to the Germans, the labourers were immediately beaten murderously on the spot, or they were summoned to the Gestapo and, very rarely, that such a worker was able to return unaided. In the majority of cases, such workers had to be taken home, as they could no longer walk.

There were also Polish brigadiers leading Jewish workgroups. They beat the Jews as they worked. But it was worse if they reported some transgression to the Germans. Consequently, the Jewish labourers were forced to get along well with their Polish brigadiers. The workers had to pay the brigadiers weekly fees and give them food products and gifts.

Every morning, at five o'clock, there was great movement in the Jewish streets and all the larger squares. Workers streamed from all the buildings to the assembly points. Here, the brigadier called out [the names] of his workers from a list and marched with them to the designated workplace.

Multitudes of Jews then marched, each group led by a brigadier. In the long files, among the thousands of ragged and enslaved, there were people who only recently had been smaller or larger merchants, owners of factories, *gimnazjum* professors, lawyers, craftsmen and labourers - younger, older and very young. Indeed, even thirteen-year-old children. Classes and echelons no longer existed. The foe had made everyone equal - Jews, Jews, just Jews!

At nightfall, the same multitudes returned, tired, covered in dust and depleted. The older ones and the children could not maintain the military pace which was forced upon the workgroups. They dragged behind their group wearily. The brigadiers goaded them on, "*Faster! Stay with the group!*"

Polish brigadiers of the *Wasserwirtschaft* firm, wishing to amuse themselves at the expense of the Jews, would order the Jews to sing on their difficult march. The gist of these ditties was that "good Hitler is teaching the Jews to work".

Every day, after work, Jews presented themselves at the Employment Office with split heads and hacked bodies. But there was nothing they could do to assist them there.