

Zvi Rosenvein

The *Arbeiterrat* in Częstochowa

During the War, the city of Częstochowa, like many other Jewish communities, had a strong, organised resistance movement which, under the gruesome conditions in the ghetto, awakened and called the Jewish population to the battle against Nazism.

However, Częstochowa will quite distinctly go to the forefront of the history of Jewish resistance in Poland, with its unique, illegal organisation called *Der Arbeiterrat* - a body which represented the interests of the Jewish forced labourers in the ghetto.

The fact that the workers organised themselves was a result of the Nazi requirement, at the beginning of the War, regarding forced labour for Jewish men between the ages of 16 and 60.

The time - how many days per week each Jew would be required to perform forced labour - depended upon the needs of the local authorities, who presented the number of required slave workers to the *Judenrat* which, as the enforcer of all German decrees, needed to be the **supplier** of the requisitioned quota of Jewish forced labourers to the Nazi authorities.

The *Judenrat* cast this heavy decree exclusively upon the shoulders of the poor, working Jewish population.

The *Judenrat* created a system by which every wealthy Jew could, for a certain sum, pay his way out of forced labour. It turned out such that the poorer labourer was forced to work for the richer one. Not only were the sick taken to work in order to make up the quota of the healthy who had been freed for money, but they also took the sole providers of families who, through the forced labour, were **completely** cut off from any source of livelihood. This led the Jewish population, in most cases, to starve to death.

In the spring of 1940, the first groups of a thousand Jewish men go to forced labour, to regulate the River Warta [i.e. to change its course or to maintain its channels]. This forced labour, which is accompanied by psychological and physical torture on part of the Nazis, brings with it a tremendous stirring and hatred within the Jewish population, not only against the Nazi tormentors, but also against the **enforcers** of the decrees - the members of the *Judenrat* - who assist the Nazis in the extermination of the Jews.

As in all cities in Poland, where Jews put up a resistance against the Nazis, in Częstochowa, too, the first call to rebellion came from the pioneering youth organisations, which were a subdivision of the Zionist Labour Movement.

May 1940 saw the rise of the *Arbeiterrat* in Częstochowa, which wrote one of the most heroic chapters in the history of the resistance struggle by the Jews in the ghettos.

The *Arbeiterrat*, which later became an elected body, [was] elected by the over five thousand slave labourers (only the slave labourers who had been members for two weeks and who had paid their membership fees, had the right to vote and to be elected. Each group of fifty workers sent a representative to the Council, which then selected the Executive and the Presidium).

The *Arbeiterrat* organised its own aid institutions, such as a sick fund, a fund for the disabled, a loan fund and their own workers' kitchens. It organised its own drama circle and a youth choir.

The *Arbeiterrat* organised the *kibbutzim* [collectives] which existed in Częstochowa at the beginning of the War and partially funded them. The purpose for setting up the *kibbutzim* was purely political, to have organised groups, should they become necessary. The *Arbeiterrat* waged a constant battle against the *Judenrat* in order to improve the economic conditions of the slave labourers. The battle consisted of hunger strikes and mass demonstrations at the *Judenrat*'s premises.

The leaders of the *Arbeiterrat* were often arrested and locked up in the ghetto gaol (at *Aleja 9*) by the Jewish police, on the orders of the *Judenrat* members.

From the beginning until the final destruction, members of the Zionist Labour Movement were in the leadership of this historic institution. Its Chairman was the well-known Labour Zionist, Mojsze Lubling, who later died a hero, as one of the main leaders of the Treblinka Uprising.

The falsifiers of history in today's Poland, however, wish, at any price, to minimise the role that the Zionist Labour Movement played in those tragic years of ruin and annihilation.

Liber Brener, in *Blätter für Geschichte* of January-June 1955, under the title "*The Truth about the Częstochowa Ghetto*", among other things, regarding the *Arbeiterrat*, on p. 180, he writes:

In the handling of the "Arbeiterrat"'s activities, I have only taken into consideration the period of this body's activity from the time it became controlled by actual forced labourers, viz. from May 1941, until the liquidation of the "Big Ghetto". This body, however, was [first] established as an institution, whose goal it was to mediate between the "Judenrat" and the workers and, as such, to restrain the rage of the workers towards the "Judenrat".

It is the most shameful concoction that has ever been cooked up about heroic Jewish fighters fallen in battle.

Fortunately, there are witnesses still alive in America and in Israel, who took an active part in the leadership of the *Arbeiterrat* and they are able to negate Brener's incorrect words.

When Brener says that, "Since May 1941, this institution became controlled by actual slave labourers", this is absolutely untrue and does not fit the facts. The truth is, in fact, that, from the rise of the *Arbeiterrat* until the **liquidation**, this institution was controlled and headed by **active members of the Labour Zionists**, such as Mojsze Lubling, Jisroel Awigdor Szyldhaus, Abram Łażniarz, Chaim Birenholc and others.

Again, on the same p. 180, Brener asks,

What did the beginning of the Arbeiterrat look like?

And he answers:

At the initiative of the Judenrat Chairman, who was a Zionist activist, several Zionistically-disposed workers were apportioned a room in the offices of the Judenrat, where they began to officiate and declared themselves as the "Arbeiterrat", which would look after the workers' interests. Until the establishment of the "Big Ghetto", the workers took no interest whatsoever in this institution. Only in the "Big Ghetto" did the political parties take an interest in this body,

[and] send into it, from among the forced labourers, their responsible comrades, who took the entire initiative there over into their own hands, guided the activities in the necessary direction and led the work there until the liquidation of the "Big Ghetto". Before that period, my contemporary fellow party members - Awrohom Brat, Mendel Wilinger, Szymzel Jakubowicz, and Icchok Rozenfeld - were already in the leadership of the "Arbeiterrat".

It should again be mentioned that Brener wishes to create the impression that the founders of the *Arbeiterrat* were the *Judenrat* Chairman's helpers and [that] they founded the *Arbeiterrat*, at his command, to silence the fury of the labourers and that, only once his listed comrades had entered it, did the workers institution go onto the right path. I therefore wish to assert that:

- 1.) The idea of creating the *Arbeiterrat* arose from secret meetings that were held in the private homes of active members of the pioneering organisations and, particularly, at Watenberg's printing-house.
- 2.) The *Arbeiterrat* already existed before receiving the premises in which to officiate. The large mass meeting at the premises of the *Judenrat*, *Aleja 22* and in the courtyard of *Aleja 6*, where the *Arbeitsamt* [*Judenrat* Labour Council] had been previously located, testify to that.
- 3.) Renting the premises became a necessity, due to the tremendous expansion of the activities, which encompassed thousands of workers and their families. And the *Arbeiterrat* was not allotted the premises by the Chairman of the *Judenrat*, as Brener sets forth, but **it was rented and paid for** - one of the rooms that belonged to the owner of the restaurant and was located in the rear wing of the premises of the *Arbeitsamt*.
- 4.) This same premises only existed as a half-legal safety wall, with the meetings of the Executive continuing to be held in private homes. And this was done also during the time when Brener's comrades were at the meetings - the same comrades whom Brener proposes controlled the *Arbeiterrat*.
- 5.) The *Arbeiterrat*, from its foundation to the destruction, conducted a tenacious struggle against the *Judenrat*, with the Chairman foremost.
- 6.) A large majority of the Presidium and Executive of the *Arbeiterrat* were members of the Zionist Labour Movement and, during the entire time of its existence, it was guided and led by these worker idealists.
- 7.) Chairman Mojsze Lubling, Yisroel Awigdor Szyldhaus and others were arrested many times on the orders of the Chairman of the *Judenrat*, while Brener wishes to create the impression that the *Arbeiterrat* was actually founded at the Chairman's behest.
- 8.) Abram Brat, whom Brener mentions, was never a member of the *Arbeiterrat*, because he was not a slave labourer. Instead, he and Dawid Szlezinger, Jehoszua Nirenberg, Dawid Kaufman and Gerszon Pręcki belonged to the **Advisory Council**, which was created only with negotiating rights. The *Arbeiterrat* wished to have the moral support of the pre-War workers' activists.
- 9.) Mendel Wilinger and Icchok Rozenfeld had been active in the *Arbeiterrat* and had belonged to the Executive since the establishment of the institution and, therefore, Brener's assertion, that only once the comrades mentioned above "became active, did the *Arbeiterrat* go onto the correct path", is false.
- 10.) Szymzel Jakubowicz belonged to the Council, but he was never among the leading members.

In his further writings about the *Arbeiterrat*, Brener denies that the *Arbeiterrat* had its own kitchens, citing a document from the *Ältestenrat* [(Jewish) Council of Elders - the official name of the *Judenrat*], from which it is asserted that the kitchens belonged to the *Judenrat*. I am convinced that Liber Brener is not so naive as to not know that a workers' kitchen could not exist officially under the name of the *Arbeiterrat*, which was not legal as far as the German authorities were concerned. He, himself, actually writes that the *Judenrat* was forced to set up workers' kitchens under the pressure of the workers. But

the truth is that the kitchens were, indeed, managed through the *Arbeitera* and one of the managers of the kitchens was, in fact, Icchok Rozenfeld, at the Maccabee Hall, and the manager of the second kitchen was Abram Łażniarz, although the food for the kitchens, just as the bread distributions, came from the storerooms of the *Judenrat*. Brener also wishes to deny that the *Arbeitera* had a drama circle and youth choir.

Let it be established that a drama circle did indeed exist, under the leadership of Chaim Rapoport and Chaim Orbach and a performance of Sholem Aleichem's "*The Jackpot*", held in the hall at *Aleja 12*, was a huge success.

Also, the youth choir, under the leadership of the renowned conductor Jakub Watenberg, presented a great artistic performance of song and recitations at the Maccabee Hall.

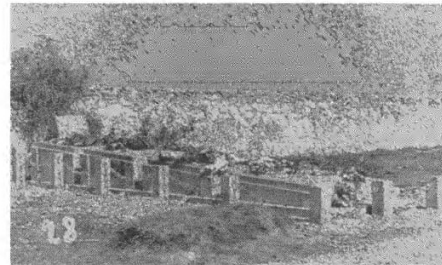
Finally, a few personal words to Liber Brener:

You will certainly recall how the writer of these lines, together with the unforgettable Mojsze Lubling, often came to the offices of TOZ and held conferences with Jakób Roziner and Dr Konarski and, occasionally, you were also present. You will certainly recall our joint concern regarding organising medical aid for the slave labourers. Be, for a minute, honest with your own self and remember our agitation then, in regards to the members of the *Judenrat* and their debauchery. How can you come today and cast such hateful libels upon people who sacrificed their lives in the battle for Jewish honour and in the struggle against Jewish traitors? How can you, today, cast such a bloody libel, that these martyrs of [the People of] Israel "became intermediaries between the *Judenrat* and the workers, in order to restrain the rage of the workers?"

It would truly be an [act of] honesty were you to print a public clarification and to remove from yourself this fleck of shame and to withdraw the untrue allegations that you have made against virtuous, Jewish martyrs.



The new wall enclosing the Czystochowa cemetery, built after the Destruction, with the aid of the New York Czenstochover Relief Committee



The mass-grave of doctors, dentists and other professionals killed on Purim 1943