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The Hunger Strike in the Częstochowa Ghetto



Any historian, who has ever researched the internal life of Jews in the ghettos, will need to dwell on the unique labour institution *Der Arbeiterrat*, which existed during the Second World War in the city of Częstochowa.

The *Arbeiterrat* was an illegally organised body, which represented more than five thousand slave workers in the ghetto and which conducted immense social, political, and cultural work amongst the workers in the Częstochowa ghetto.

Let one wonderful chapter from that heroic period be mentioned here - the hunger strike which was organised by the *Arbeiterrat* and which was successfully carried out.

The strike was conducted against the *Judenrat*, which controlled the distribution of provisions to the entire Jewish population. The *Judenrat* supposedly had to provide for the slave labourers - for those who toiled in place of the affluent Jews who, by paying the *Judenrat*, had freed themselves from the work.

As one who actively participated in the communal life of the Częstochowa ghetto, I wish to impart those stormy events at the mass-meeting of the workers on the day of the hunger strike. There, the bitter complaints and the demands of the workers, and the reasons for the strike, were expressed.

It was a day in December 1941. Hundreds of Jewish workers stream to the Maccabee Hall, where one of the workers' kitchens is located. They come after a hard day of slave labour, tired [and] frozen from the biting cold. Jewish labourers arrive from the water management [works], from the railways, from Raków and other forced labour factories. All wear wooden clogs on their feet and paper [thin?] outfits on their bodies – old, torn rags that were once coats. The paper garments of many are torn and their naked bodies show through.

The hall, which can barely hold several hundred people, is soon filled by a crowd of over a thousand.

In the kitchen, which distributes more two thousand meals every day, today there is no eating. A jam-packed, hungry mass sits here languishing, with pale, sickly faces, but deeply determined to achieve their demands.

The first to speak is the Chairman of the *Arbeiterrat*, Mojsze Lubling (who later perished as leader of the uprising in the Treblinka death camp). He delivers a report on the strike's progress. He mentions how difficult it was for each and every one to pass the decision of a hunger strike, notwithstanding that everyone knows how difficult, superhumanly difficult, the conditions of the workers are. To work in water or laying railway tracks under the whips of the Nazis, without proper clothes on the body and to additionally starve oneself and not eat one's fill and to come home and see the suffering of a wife and children... Lubling mentions that there was indeed the danger that, due to the hunger of the workers' families, the strike would be broken, simply because the wives and children would scramble to pick up a piece of bread discarded by the Nazi murderers. The strike, however, exceeded all expectations. None, among the thousands of starved workers' families, attempted to break the strike.

Lublin also mentions that the *Judenrat's* threats, that those who did not take the bread [now] would no longer receive it [even after the strike], were absolutely to no avail. To this statement, the female strikers cried out, "We would rather die than break the strike!".

The writer of these lines then spoke about the battle taking place between the forced labourers and the *Judenrat*, and about the reasons for the hunger strike in general. The Jewish masses, I said, are conducting a bloody wrangle for their lives, which the murderous occupier wishes to destroy. Deadly perils loom over the lives of the Jewish masses. And in this same difficult wrangle, a small group of Jews in the city placed themselves on the side of the enemy and this group - the *Judenrat* - assists the enemy to carry out the Nazi decrees, if only to protect the interests and the lives of the wealthy class of Jews.

As we have witnessed, all the edicts until now against the Jews in town, such as forced labour, deportation camps, etc., were forced to borne exclusively by the poor Jewish population. The members of the *Judenrat*, with the Gestapo's aid, control the Jewish life of the Jews in town. They take away the food that is apportioned for the entire population and distribute it as they see fit. Of the money that is paid to the work fund to be freed from forced labour and which is meant [to be used] to support the workers, there is no account. To all our demands to the *Judenrat* to render an account, they answer that they only present the account to the Gestapo. The rations of bread which, until now, we fought to obtain, of 40 *deka* [400 grams] a day for the light labourers and 60 *deka* a day for the heavy labourers, the worker, for the 20 *złoty* a week, cannot buy anything at all due to the high prices. With these meagre earnings, he cannot feed his family, his wife and children.

Our demands are therefore:

1. to increase the bread rations for light workers to 60 *deka* a day, and for heavy workers, one kilo a day;
2. to increase the wages to at least 30 *złoty* a week.

I concluded with the words:

It should be clear to everyone that the struggle is a very difficult one and, over time, will become even more difficult, because the Judenrat will not be too particular about the means of the battle against the workforce. We have even heard threats from members of the Judenrat that, if the representatives of the workers will not stop the strike, they will be made shorter by a head. But we are sure that our workers' organisation, the only one in place in the whole of Poland, will not for - even one moment - halt its struggle until the victory over dark Nazism!

Then the beloved representative of the Częstochowa workers, the young comrade Jisroel Awigdor Szyldhaus spoke. He spoke with heart and soul and he was continually acclaimed with thunderous applause. Szyldhaus called to battle against the enemies of the workforce - the *Judenrat*.

Mordechaj Openhajm, as representative of the workers in Raków, and Wolf Szymkowicz (he is now in Israel), in the name of the railway workers who, through him, expressed their acknowledgement to the *Arbeiterrat* for their bold leadership of the strike, also spoke. Wolf Szymkowicz reported that the railway labourers were prepared to proclaim a general working strike, should the minimum demands not be met.

At the end of his speech, Szymkowicz proposed that the workers in the hall should, after the meeting, go on a protest demonstration to the *Judenrat's* premises.

This proposition was accepted by everyone with resounding applause.

And in an excited-enraged state, the crowd made their way to the premises of the *Judenrat*, at *Aleja 11*, went inside and occupied all the rooms.

It also did not take long before the premise's barriers had been disrupted, the writing tables smashed and the typewriters strewn over the floors. Meanwhile, a group of the workers tore the door off to the presidium. The members of the presidium sat there deathly pale. The labourers entered, shouting, "You would leave us to starve to death! Give us the bread that we are owed for the work!" One worker ran up to Kosiński, grabbed his hands and shook them about, while yelling in his face, "Our wives and children are becoming swollen with hunger and cold and you steal the little piece of bread which is distributed to us! Unless you give us what we are owed, we will not perform the slave labour for the well-fed *zindelech* [laddies] who hang about here!"

Serious events would surely have ensued had the representatives of the *Arbeiterrat* not arrived at once, headed by Lubling. Lubling immediately stood on a table and, with his thunderous voice, asked the workers to control themselves. And here, again, was demonstrated the immense influence of the workers' representatives. When, in the midst of the tempestuous emotions, the workers heard the voice of their representative Lubling, to compose themselves, at once silence fell. All listened to him speak.

Lubling said:

Comrades, I understand your feelings and your anger well! I wish you to know that, a long time before we proclaimed the hunger strike, we already had conducted negotiations with the gentlemen of the Judenrat. And we appealed to them to follow our minimal, fair demands through, but they cynically rejected everything. "The Gestapo is behind us", they answered. We shall continue with our strike, even though we know what consequences may come of it. Besides dying, we have nothing to lose. I ask one thing of you, comrades, in the current serious moment. And that is – 100% worker discipline. A larger delegation must go in to the Presidium of the Judenrat and present our demands and the rest of the workers are to wait here, in the halls, for the results of the negotiations.

Then and there, a delegation of the members of the *Arbeiterrat* Executive was chosen. The stormy negotiations continued late into the night. The members of the *Judenrat* unconditionally demanded that the mass of workers leave the premises of the *Judenrat*, as they were not willing to negotiate under terror. But representatives of the workers stuck tenaciously to their decision. They knew that, without the masses, the delegation would, as until now, be held under terror. The negotiations were frequently interrupted. It seemed that they would lead nowhere. The regular "intermediary", Berliner of the *Judenrat*, tried influencing the workers' representatives to go along with compromises. But it was to no avail. The workers' representatives stood, [as if made of] steel and iron, by their demands. In between, deliberations were held - by the workers' representatives separately and by the members of the *Judenrat* separately. And, finally, after long hours of arguments and counter-arguments, the *Judenrat* complied with all the demands presented by the workers.

Then, in those tearful days under the gruesome reign of the bloody Nazi barbarians, this success of the hunger strike greatly heightened the prestige and the respect of the *Arbeiterrat* in the eyes of the entire Jewish population of Częstochowa