

The Great Deportation from Warsaw – “*Vernichtungskommandos*” (Extermination Squads)

The elimination of “The Fifty” and the news coming from the Warta district and the occupied territories in the East cast a storm of emotions upon the Warsaw Ghetto. The meetings of the representatives of the various parties continue - fruitlessly. The Movement, as well as the other pioneering bodies in the Coordination, are beginning preparations for the defence. The people organise in battle squads, distribute knives and daggers [and] messengers are sent out to the “Aryan side”.

In the summer of 1942, Lublin Jewry disappeared within [just] three days. The news arrives in Warsaw and arouses extraordinary excitement. The leadership immediately sends *Wiga*¹ (from the Włocławek cell, who had been in Wilno during the War and, after the German occupation, returned to Warsaw) to Lublin to find out the details. *Wiga* leaves the ghetto as an Aryan and returns three days later without any further information. The Christians in the city could only tell him that the Jews had been led through the city streets with their rucksacks on their backs, were loaded onto cattle carriages and then transported to an unknown destination.

The events in Lublin served as a last alarm [siren] for the Jews of the *General Gouvernement*. A few days later, the proclamations on behalf of the authorities announcing the deportation appeared in the ghetto. Warsaw must be *Judenrein*, the Germans proclaimed. All the Jews were to be taken outside the city (Where to? - the posters did not specify). The details of the deportation were also made public - everyone had to take food with them for three days, with packages not exceeding the weight of twenty kilograms. Those volunteering, the notice stated, could take with them any luggage they pleased (!).

This notice caused an unimaginable panic. True, the situation in the ghetto was desperate. Hundreds of people died of starvation and epidemics every day. Yet no one wished to go to “deportation”. A huge multitude gathered on ul. Grzybowska, next to the *Kehilla* offices, demanding explanations. [Adam] Czerniaków² had some words with the German commissioner, but the latter gave no answer. He promised to put Czerniaków in contact, by telephone, with Governor Frank in Kraków. Frank asked Czerniaków to calm down the masses - all the details would arrive on the following day, but no evil was to happen to the Jews. Czerniaków went out in an open taxi, to drive around the streets of the ghetto and silence the crowd. He showed a beaming face and recounted his conversation with the Governor.

The next day, the Jewish Council [*Judenrat*] received an official demand from the authorities. The Germans demanded that the Council take upon itself to provide six to seven thousand Jews every day for deportation and that it would be responsible for organising and “peacefully transferring” the deportees to the trains. The rest of the communiqué dealt vaguely with the workers employed in the German arms industry and other details. At the end, the Germans stated that if the Council did not commit itself to fulfilling the requirements, the German security institutions would attend to the matter. That day, Czerniaków makes further efforts with the authorities. He tries to lower the “quota” - to no avail. The Germans meet their demand and Czerniaków commits suicide.

¹ [TN: Codename of the ghetto fighter Jehoszua Wyszynski.]

² [TN: Head of the *Judenrat* in Warsaw.]

Czerniaków's death made waves in the public and news of the event also reached abroad. Some see him as a national hero. He took his own life and did not descend to the lowest level of other heads of *Judenräte* and OD men of all kinds, who aided in the expulsion of the Jews with their own hands, hoping that, by their diligence, they would buy for themselves the right to exist. It should not be forgotten, however, that the entire organisation of the Jewish Council and the police, which stood at its disposal, who sucked the bone marrow from the people rotting in the ghetto, were all done with the knowledge and under the leadership of Czerniaków. It was with his knowledge that large shipments of Jews had previously been sent to different types of slave labour, a great many of whom had never returned. Czerniaków and the Jewish Council, in all its branches, were hated in the ghetto. The public saw them – and rightly so - as the Germans' enforcers (countless satirical songs spread throughout the ghetto, expressing the subdued hatred for the Council. One of them, "The Cabinet Works", refers to the Council's office cabinets that "worked well" - expressed the bitter grievance about the corruption that spread like a plague in all the *Judenrat's* institutions). And thus the *Judenrat*, too, gained its own "national hero".

The day after the Germans announced the deportation, gendarmerie squads and SS men appeared in the ghetto, as well as Estonian and Ukrainian divisions. They surrounded a block of buildings, took out all its occupants and, after these were put into carriages, they left the ghetto area. At that time, movement throughout the entire ghetto was [still] free - the "quota" was easily filled every day from each individual block. The Jewish OD men cooperated with the abovementioned squads with excessive diligence – from the flats, they forcibly removed the people who were hiding, landing true blows with the rubber clubs in their hands, etc. At the *Umschlagplatz*^{*}, they were also cruel to Jews and especially to girls who tried to escape at the last moment before entering the carriages.

In the early days of deportation, it was easy to hide. The Germans easily collected the required number of thousands every day and did not particularly search. The situation changed after a few days. Jews began to hide in cellars, attics and other hideouts and places of concealment. They also started coming up with different ploys. They moved, for example, to the deserted quarters - to the empty flats from which the residents had already been expelled. This did not help either - the Germans conducted searches a second time. An organised manhunt began that lasted until mid-September, when the Germans officially announced the cessation of the deportations. About seventy thousand people were left in the ghetto.

The deportations were carried out by a special organisation which the German hangmen, themselves, called the "Extermination Squads". At its disposal were, as stated, special squads of gendarmes and SS men, as well as SS squads from Lithuania and Estonia, and Ukrainians.

This organisation was not dependent on any local German civilian or military authorities. Sometimes, the industrial circles and also the German war industry opposed the deportation of their Jewish labourers, who worked and even ran whole factories. And they did not succeed. Entire cities were deserted, industrial neighbourhoods were destroyed, but the deportations did not cease. There was never a lack of carriages and locomotives for transporting millions to the extermination camps, although there was a huge shortage of them and the Germans conducted extensive propaganda to improve the work on the railway network ("*Räder müssen rollen für den Sieg*" - "the wheels must turn for the victory" - they would proclaim).

During the last deportations in Upper Silesia [Górny Śląsk], one industrialist, [Alfred] Rossner (the manager of a factory [in Będzin] which supplied clothes to the military, where thousands of Jews worked), demanded that his workers not be deported. The commander of the [Katowice] Gestapo, [Hans] Dreier, replied, "*Die Sache der Aussiedlung von Juden ist ein staatswichtiger politischer akt*"

* The place where people were concentrated and sorted [pending deportation].

["The matter of the expulsion of the Jews is of political value for the State"] - no other reasons are taken into account here.

The extermination squads would appear suddenly and their movements would be kept very secret. All their actions were done according to the plan and orders which came directly from Berlin, from Himmler. They surrounded, for the most part at night, entire towns, driving out, within a few hours, all the inhabitants with brutal beatings, many of whom fell before they even got into the carriages. The dead were put, with the living, inside the carriages that set out, guarded by Ukrainians who sat in the openings and on the roofs. Those who fled the death camps said that, more than once, the Ukrainians themselves were put into the gas chambers together with the Jews and were also annihilated.

The main operation of the extermination squads within the territories of the *General Gouvernement* took place between March and October 1942. During these months, more than ninety percent of the Jews of the GG were exterminated.