

The Deaths of Józef and Szmul - Józef's Will

At the beginning of the deportations, the Movement's active [members] are concentrated in the Landau factory, which is on ul. Nowolipiki. The seat of the leadership had already been there before.

All members receive detailed instructions on how to resist at the time of deportation. In those days, Józef Kapłan organises the "production" of German work certificates (stamped by the Gestapo or the "Rüstungskommando*"). These papers are given to all resistance activists inside the Coordination and even outside it. In the first days of September, ten members, who during the inspection showed suspicious documents, were caught in front of the Otwock railway station. After a two-hour interrogation, all was revealed - the detainees were immediately executed. Before that, the Germans tried to obtain information from them, by promising to release them if they revealed the man who had prepared the papers for them. One of the group, J.Z., yielded to temptation and revealed Józef's name and address. Józef was arrested and sentenced to death. This was during the thick of the days of deportation and the Germans would send all the convicts, together with the deportees, to the carriages. The leadership makes superhuman efforts to get Józef out of the hands of the Gestapo. Everything is already prepared for escape for when Józef arrives at the *Umschlagplatz*. But the plan fails. The gendarme, who was leading Józef from the infamous Pawiak prison, took him on the way into one of the gates on ul. Dzielna and killed him on that very spot.

Józef's death, even though it took place in the middle of the days of deportation, caused great consternation in the ghetto, amongst the youth and also in the adult community. One of the pre-War public leaders said, "A great Jew has fallen". The Movement holds a funeral. A great multitude gathers in the cemetery, people from different walks of life - youth, adults and the elderly.

A few days before his death, Józef sent his last letter to the *Kibbutz Ma'apilim* in Częstochowa, which is a kind of will. "Do not believe the Germans anymore", Józef wrote. "They exploit the wildest instincts in human nature. All their stories and promises are nothing but lies and deception and their mission is to deceive us and destroy us completely."

"The end of our existence has come", Józef wrote. "However", he added, "if we are sentenced to die, let us die with dignity. Oppose the Germans by force and everywhere. Do not go to the carriages!"

These were Józef's last words. In closing, he also asked any of the comrades who might make it to the Land [of Israel], to give [it] his regards, as this was probably his last letter.

Józef Kapłan headed the Movement from the beginning of the War until the day of his death. He was one of the great leaders of the Jewish masses during the War. He was amongst the initiators of the collaboration amongst all the pioneering organisations in the "Coordination". He was a member of the first central command of the [Jewish] Fighting Organisation [ŻOB - *Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa*]. He participated in all the enterprises of the self-help organisations among the Jews. He often left Warsaw and visited Jewish centres around the country, despite the fact that this was fraught with particular peril, due to his distinctly Semitic features. [He helped in] the development and growth of the Movement during the War, which attained a decisive influence on the Jewish public in the horrific days of meltdown. All of these were, in no small manner, the fruit of Józef's work. Józef was among the few among the Jewish populace who kept their hand on the pulse during the Polish Jewry's tragic days. The Movement - of which Józef had become like a father - was

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severely damaged by his death, yet it was not broken. The credo of resistance that Józef commanded to his successors in his death, since then became a candle to light its path in all its actions, and its breath of life in the days of the struggle of the *Surviving Remnant* in 1943.

In those days, Szmul Bresław also fell. His death is connected with the first attempt, in the ghetto, to oppose the Germans by force. There were no firearms yet and the members of the resistance were equipped with cold steel - knives and daggers. During the deportation days in early September, Szmul was arrested by German gendarmes on ul. Gęsia. He pulled out his knife and fell upon the German. That same instant, his chest was pierced by the bullets of the automatic pistol in the hands of the second gendarme.

With his death, the Movement and its leadership lost one of its best sons. Szmul was the chief councillor in the Warsaw cell and was also one of the first organisers of the defence. He was a member of the central command of the Jewish Fighting Organisation [ŻOB], which was founded a little over a month before his death.

From the day he returned from a mission from the Movement, from Wilno, where he lived during the first months of the War, Szmul became wholeheartedly addicted to the Movement's work and, especially, excelled in organising educational activity among the youth. In 1940, he coordinated the Educational Seminary in Warsaw and worked, on behalf of the Movement, in the Department of Culture of the ŻTOS, in organising the "Block Schools". In the years 1940-41, he visited many cities on behalf of the leadership - Radom, Kraków, etc.

Shortly before his death, Szmul appeared at a meeting of the Coordination with the representatives of various Jewish institutions, and he made an aggressive demand for forceful opposition - even if there were as yet no firearms - against any attempt at deportation. Loyal to this call, Szmul was the first in Warsaw to fall with a knife in hand.