

# The Revolt

In April 1943, the Germans begin the operations which the Organisation has already been awaiting. After the written propaganda did not bear fruit, the Germans decide to use force.

Two days before the start of operations, the Fighting Organisation's Central Command became aware of it. In a special directive, it bid the branches of the Organisation in other cities farewell, promising that the battle would continue to the last fighter.

At the very last moment, the Germans tried to contact the headquarters of the Fighting Organisation through the mediation of the Jewish Council [*Judenrat*]. This manoeuvre, too, came to naught.

On 19<sup>th</sup> April, SS squads enter the ghetto precinct. Immediately upon entering, the fighters welcome them with fire and grenades. The surprise was great. Dozens of Germans were immediately killed and the rest retreated in haste, without returning fire. There were no casualties on the side of the Fighting Organisation. At noon, not even a single German was still to be found in the ghetto. The peace also reigned into the afternoon and during the night.

The next day, several police and SS battalions were called in to Warsaw from Częstochowa, Radom, Kielce and Kraków. Early in the morning, Polish police and Ukrainian squads were sent to attack. The previous day's scene repeated itself, with one small change - the number of casualties on the enemy side was much larger and reached several dozens more than one hundred. On the side of the fighters, a few were wounded. The Germans withdrew this time also and the rest of the day passed peacefully.

Only on the third day did the great battle flare up. From the early hours of the morning, elite squads of the SS, police and gendarmes, in readiness for battle, moved towards the ghetto. They were equipped with automatic weapons, armoured vehicles and freight vehicles mounted with heavy machine-guns. Tanks crawled along at the front. A few dozen metres before the entrance to the ghetto, a huge explosion was heard. The first tank flew into the air, along with the group of infantrymen which was marching behind it. Moments later, the second tank approached the entrance. It went in amongst the buildings. A cocktail bottle was immediately hurled at it. The tank catches on fire and flames burst out of every crack and hole in it, without its crew being able to extricate themselves from it in time. Nevertheless, the infantry bursts into the gates of the houses. The houses are empty of people. The Jews had left them in time. The combatants are on their guard. An invisible hand closes the gates after the Germans and a hail of grenades immediately rains down the heads of the Germans inside. The Germans run up the stairs and onto the roofs, leaving the dead and wounded inside. They throw aside not only their weapons, but also their steel helmets and footwear, to make it easier for themselves to run on the roofs. On the houses, along the streets of the entrance to the ghetto, many Germans are seen running like mad, and with wild hair.

In the afternoon the battle ceased, but the squads of fighters hunted down the Germans who remained inside the houses. In the evening, the last shots cease. The victory is absolute. Among the ghetto residents, who hid well in bunkers and cellars, there were almost no casualties, as also among the fighters. In contrast, more than six hundred Germans were killed and much booty was taken.

The fourth day brings with it a change in the tactics of the Germans. They avoid entering the ghetto, but surround it with the anti-aircraft guns in Warsaw (there was no regular artillery there). The cannons fire into the ghetto for more than a week - without any major results.

At the end of April, the commander of the deportation squads in Warsaw retires and is replaced by the famous criminal, the SS man from Vienna, [Odilo] Globočnik. Once more, he changes the strategy. The anti-aircraft guns were sent back to their positions. Globočnik used the method of a strong "*Einsatz*" [deployment] - large forces of SS and police would surround a small block of buildings at the entrance to the ghetto after a heavy bombardment, with machine guns, grenades, and gas grenades. Afterwards, special "technical assistance" squads approached the buildings under a strong cover of fire and dug under the buildings and blew them up with "dynamite candles". After the explosion, the "*Einsatz*" started on the neighbouring block. The Germans advance slowly but steadily and tighten the ring of fire around the warring ghetto.

The situation in the ghetto increasingly worsens. Hunger is growing among the masses of residents who are concentrated in [just] a few streets. The Fighting Organisation's stockrooms have also run out of supplies. Twice, the masses attempt to burst into the *Aryan side*, but most of them are captured by the Germans and killed.

Fighting desperately, the units of fighters retreat to the Centre. The lack of long-range weapons is taking its toll. In the end, the Central Command decides to come into contact with the *Aryan side*, through the sewers under the ghetto. After six days of work in indescribable conditions, the boys reached the mouth of the drain on the other side. During the work, the fighters stood bent over (the sewer was too narrow to allow a person to stand upright) in the noxious sewage.

The workers often fainted and the labour was [therefore] executed in frequently changing shifts.

Once contact was made, it was decided to first transfer two squads of forty men each. There were very few of our comrades in them, among them *Tosia* and Dawid Nowodworski. The majority remained with the third and last company, in which the Central Command remained, with the group of squad commanders and elite fighters, who had decided to leave last, and only if there was no other option. The members on the *Aryan side* (including our comrades *Kazik* - Symcha Rathajzer - and *Tadek* - Tuwja Szajngut) contacted the people of the PPR and, with their assistance, obtained an automobile that arrived, at an appointed hour, at the mouth of the drains. Forty members of the PPR, with weapons in hand, guarded the access to the street - the comrades got into the cars and drove to Łomianki near Warsaw and, from there, to the woods.

On the following day, the automobile, once again, comes to the drain. Those who brought the vehicle descend into it and find all the comrades, who remained in the ghetto yesterday, killed there, except for Juda Wengrower, who was transferred, in critical condition, to Łomianki and died two days later. Before his death, Juda managed to tell the story of the last company:

The day after the first squads left, the Germans arrived at the Central Command's main bunker on ul. Miła 18, from where one could access the sewer. They threw gas grenades into it and the fighters began to choke. Szymon Heller, who was standing by the exit, jumped out holding two pistols. He managed to kill three Germans and fell under a hail of shots. Then Aryje Wilner called on the fighters to commit suicide and not fall alive into the hands of the enemy. Some of them, including Juda, lost so much blood that they could not raise their weapons.

Juda Wengrower was appointed at the time, by the leadership, as the Movement's archivist. A fortnight before the uprising, the leadership decided to send someone to the *Aryan side*, whose job it would be to maintain all the Movement's expenses and other important documents from the days of the underground and the German reign of terror. To this end, a special bunker was purchased on the *Aryan side*. All the candidates for this position were unwilling to assume a task that would

require leaving the ghetto on the eve of the battle. After a stormy meeting of the leadership, which knew full well that all members of the Movement would fall in battle, it was decided to force Juda Wengrower to fulfil this mission and he left the ghetto.

On the day the revolt broke out, Juda abandoned the bunker and the archive, stealthily entered the besieged ghetto, took part in the battles and was among the last ones to fall.

The Organisation's two greatest figures - Mordche Anielewicz, the commander of the uprising, and Aryje Wilner, the Fighting Organisation's representative on Warsaw's *Aryan side* - both fell during the battle of the ghetto.

From the time of Józef Kapłan's death, these two had stood at the helm of our movement. Even before the Great Deportation in the summer and autumn of 1942, they had demanded more active operations and a real defence organisation. At that time, these ideas were not popular with the Jewish public, who deceived itself into thinking it would outlast its enemies ("*Mir weln ajch iberlebn*" [We will outlive you] as they used to say in the ghetto).

Once it became clear that the people were being taken away to be physically exterminated and the Organisation had been established, they both stood at the head of the operations, in which they persevered with passion and zealous devotion. All the important actions which laid the foundation for the Fighting Organisation in Warsaw and in the provincial towns (in Częstochowa and in the Reich) - the acquisition of armaments, the purge against the sold-out OD men, the transfer of weapons and defence plans to the provincial towns and, last but not least, the great battle of the Warsaw Ghetto - all these are inextricably connected with the names of Mordche and Aryje. They were the soul of the Fighting Organisation and fell, as befits commanders, at the head of the last company of fighters, in which was concentrated the flower of Warsaw's pioneering youth.

Tragic fate decreed that Tosia Altman, the only member of the Movement's leadership to leave the ghetto, was also killed in the woods shortly afterwards. The details of her death are unknown. It is reported that she was killed by accident, when some dynamite exploded. From the day she arrived on a mission from Wilno to Warsaw in the first year of the War, Tosia operated non-stop in the Movement and held the most responsible and perilous positions there.

After the German occupation (in 1941), she went from city to city in all the occupied territories in the east, gathering information on German deeds of pillaging and killing, bringing the remaining survivors together. Many times, she also visited Galicia (she stayed for a time in Tarnów, which was the designated centre of the Movement in western Galicia), in Częstochowa [and] in the Reich. Prior to the uprising, she worked regularly in carrying out missions for the Movement on the *Aryan side* and was appointed, along with Aryje, as a representative of the Fighting Organisation to the Polish Underground.