

“The Small Deportations” in the Reich – Mordche Meets Merin

The main purpose of the visit to the Reich was to establish the Movement’s stance regarding the question of the “small deportations” and to inform the public.

In that period, the Reich had already begun deporting, on a weekly basis, several dozen Jews to Oświęcim for different offenses. A Jew was not allowed, for example, to go out without a yellow Star of David on his clothes. He was not allowed to walk on the pavement. He was not allowed to eat eggs, etc., etc. Anyone caught for this type of “offense”, who did not free himself on the spot with a suitable ransom, was deported. All this was back in the time when Zagłębie Jewry still lived under much better conditions than those in the GG.

Only in 1942 were the Jews of Będzin put inside the ghetto in the Kamionka suburb and the Jews of Sosnowiec in Środula. In other towns (Dąbrowa, for example) the ghetto remains in the same place where the Jews had previously lived. The fundamental difference, however, was in the food situation, which was better than in the GG. The Jews in the Reich received a fixed ration, which was only slightly smaller than the ration given to the Aryan population. The Jews also received a little oil, butter and margarine, while in the GG these luxuries were no longer to be seen. The bread rations (250 grams a day) were three times larger than in the GG. The Jews also received vegetables and potatoes almost without limit. From time to time, the Jews received coupons, with which one could purchase clothes, shoes, etc. In short, it was - compared to the GG, where thousands and tens of thousands had already starved to death - a real paradise.

I still remember Kamionka (the Będzin Jewish Ghetto), to which I came in 1943. Then, within the boundaries of the ghetto, there were even fields, vegetable patches, potatoes, etc., whose Aryan owners lived in the city. The Jews did not touch them, to my great astonishment.

The organisation of public life was no different from that in the ghettos within the GG. The same institutions operated here also, starting with the German Labour Bureau, the Provisioning Department, the postal [service] and finishing with the Jewish Council, which was headed by a famous “personality” in Zagłębie - the “King of the Jews”, Moniek Merin¹.

Merin was appointed by the Germans to be the head of the Jewish “independent” institutions as early as 1939 and he very quickly acquired the trust and sympathy of his masters. In 1941, he becomes a *de facto* dictator, ruling over the lives of all the Jews of the Reich. At his disposal is a private taxi, in which Merin even travels to Vienna and Berlin. At his command are not only the Jewish Police, but also several SS squads. [And] how did Merin reach such “heights?”

From the day he comes to power, he organises an entire propaganda apparatus, which is at the disposal of the Germans. With the aid of a series of public meetings and “explanatory” lectures, early in the War, he recruits people who enlist for forced labour in Germany. He, himself, appears at the meetings, explaining his good intentions [and] attesting that only diligence in fulfilling all the demands of the Germans (even before they express them) will save the Jewish people from annihilation. Rabbis, bribed by him, hold prayers for the life of the “King of the Jews” - the Saviour of Israel. Merin's impudence reached such levels, that he appeared before the people, even on the days of the deportations, demanding that the “quotas” set by the Germans be filled and, when he

¹ TN: His full name is Mojżesz Israel Merin. He headed the Sosnowiec “Judenrat”.

sensed opposition to his actions on the part of the pioneering youth, he tried to organise his own "youth circles" (in which were concentrated a handful of degenerate *Philistines*). Concurrently, he appeared before the youth and stated that to be a pioneer is not only to go to The Land of Israel in peacetime, but also - in wartime - to go, at the head of the people, to the camps and deportations.

It is in those days that Mordche appears in the Reich. He visits Merin. The latter reacts in a way that no one expects. He holds special banquets in his honour [and] tries to explain to him his good intentions. In a letter sent in those days by Mordche to the comrades at the farm in Żarki, he describes the luxuries in which Merin lives. "Such dishes", Mordche writes, "I have not tasted in Warsaw, even during peacetime in the good restaurants." The "diplomatic game" continues for a long time. Mordche, meanwhile, is organising the defence in the Movement and in all the organisations of the Coordination of Pioneering [Youth Movements]. He also reports at internal meetings on behalf of the Coordination on what is happening in the GG, clarifying the Movement's position regarding the *Judenräte* and the Jewish Police.

The relationship with Merin turns consistently edgier. Mordche hopes that the latter will not dare go against the youth in practice, but he is mistaken in this assessment. In one of the talks, Mordche categorically demands that the Council cease aiding the Germans in the deportations and, no, the youth will no longer be able put up with this in silence. Merin roars with laughter. "For that", he says, "I prepared a long time ago. I have enough OD men and the even German Police is at my disposal".

And, indeed, Merin carries out his threats. He arrests some of the members and two of them - Cwi [Brandes] and Lipek from Sosnowiec - are handed over to the Gestapo. All "relationships" cease. Mordche explains that it is not possible to organise a defence before the purge within the Jewish public and issues a death sentence on Merin. (This was only executed, after several months, by *the Germans themselves*, who sent Merin on one of the transports to Oświęcim.)

But, in the meantime, the news arrives of the great deportations in Warsaw. Mordche comes into telephone contact with Warsaw via Landau's factory. He is informed of the deaths of Józef Kaplan and Szmul Bresław and of the great deportations. He leaves the Reich and, on the way to Warsaw, meets in Częstochowa with Aryje Wilner, who had [just] come from there [viz. Warsaw], and with Cwi Brandes. Aryje renders an account of the events in Warsaw. After discussing the plans of action, Cwi Brandes is sent to Zagłębie to organise the resistance. The task of organising the preparations in Częstochowa is assigned to *Kibbutz Ma'apilim*. Mordche and Aryje return to Warsaw.