

## **“Testing Facilities” - Informational Operations Amidst the Jewish Public**

The liquidation of “The Fifty” was a major event between the period when the ghetto was sealed (autumn 1940) and the Great Deportation in the autumn of 1942. The Germans' attitude to any attempt at propaganda and public activity in the ghetto was made clear in all its terrible severity. This terrifies the public and invigorates the treacherous activities of the *Judenrat* members and the police and, on the other hand, it serves as a warning sign to all those refusing to give up and surrender.

In those days, Aryje Wilner also arrives from Wilno. He brings with him a report on the horrific massacres of the Eastern Jews, the horror stories of Ponary<sup>1</sup> and, yet, [he also brings] the proclamation of our comrades in Wilno, who have already embarked on the organisation of the defence and commenced the first partisan operations.

The first news also arrives as to what is happening in the Warta district, in western Poland. The Movement is starting to take a new path. The idea of an active Jewish defence organisation is being formed. The first step was informational work amongst the public. Józef gathers reports and testimonies of the events that are taking place in the Eastern and Warta districts and, with them, he appears before the Jewish institutions in Warsaw, Kraków, Radom, Częstochowa and other cities.

The first testimony was in a letter from one Jew who, in March 1942, survived from one of the “testing facilities” in the Warta district, and passed the letter to his son in Warsaw, from whom Józef obtained it. The letter shattered the last illusions that nestled in the hearts of many, who did not want to believe the nightmare stories from the refugees who came from the East. And these are its contents:

In one of the towns in the Warta district, twenty Jews were captured by the Germans. They were brought to an abandoned estate, where they stayed for about a fortnight. In due course, they were given work in all sorts of complicated and unfamiliar jobs. For instance, they gave one an engine to disassemble and put back together again. Another was tasked with tending to all kinds of plants which he had never seen before, etc. They were also ordered to work in simple jobs - digging soil, chopping wood, etc. All the work was done under the supervision of professional experts, psychiatrists, doctors, etc., who constituted the management of the “testing facility”, where they “tested” the capabilities of the Jews.

After a fortnight or so, the committee had completed its “investigations”, passed its judgement and went on its way - leaving the Jews in the custody of SS men. These informed the Jews that they would be driven home. After a few days, a large, closed van arrived. All the Jews went inside and only three of them, including the writer of the letter, were ordered to sit next to the driver. They drove into the forest for many kilometres to where some SS men were waiting for them with a huge dog. Near them, a deep pit had been dug. The driver ordered the three Jews to get out and immediately pressed a button. Immediately, a kind of rumble of a powerful engine was heard and, after a few seconds, knocks came from the inside of the van and strangled cries of “*Sh'ma Yisrael!*”, which fell silent after a few short moments. At that point, the SS men gave the three Jews a savage beating and set the dog on them, which tore strips off their flesh. They eventually let go of them and ordered them to open the van, which was hermetically sealed. When they refused to do so, the

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: A neighbourhood in Wilno.]

beatings were repeated. When the door was finally opened, the bodies of human beings could be seen inside, with their eyes sticking out of their sockets and their nails stuck into the palms of their hands by the convulsions.

The Jews cried out, but the Germans did not relent. They were forced to strip the dead and to search their clothes, and all hiding-places on their bodies, for jewellery and gold. One of the Jews refused to search the bodies of the women and was killed on the spot. The rest completed the task. They were then returned to the estate and locked in a cellar with a jug of water and a loaf of bread. A few days later, they were taken out for the same task. The vans departed sealed and it was impossible to warn those inside - so all was repeated. Once, the inspections of the bodies continued until late and, because the weather was cold, the Germans sent the Jews escorted by one German to gather firewood for a bonfire, whereupon the writer of the letter fled into the woods and, after several days of wandering, returned to his town.

A similar report came from Chełmno. The difference was, that there it was not done with vans, but with large "showers" into which the Jews were brought "before the journey to The Land of Israel".

Józef reads these letters to a meeting of the representatives of the Jewish institutions. At the same meeting, Aryje Wilner tells about Wilno and Ponary. Most of those present at the meeting still refuse to believe it.

"Even if there is truth in these stories", they said, "it will not be repeated in Warsaw. After all, that is not why all the Jews, from the near and far surroundings, were concentrated into the Warsaw Ghetto. Had they wished to eliminate them, it would have been easier to do so in the small towns. And as for the reports from the East", they argued, "the matter should be viewed against the political background of an anti-Bolshevik war".

If these people still tried to comfort others and themselves with false hopes, the members of the Jewish Council and the OD men displayed open hostility. They said that all the news were downright lies and advised people, "as friends", to stop "spreading false rumours" which could bring a disaster upon the ghetto. Only a small number of those gathered, the representatives of the pioneering organisations and some of the ŻTOS activists, who belonged to left-wing organisations before the War, demand actual preparations for defence, in case these events do take place in Warsaw. This demand finds no supporters and the meeting disperses with nothing.

The Coordination of Pioneering [Youth Movements] (the alliance of the pioneering [youth] organisations) begins to independently prepare for defence.

Józef does not give up on the public informational activities. He goes out to the provincial cities. Among other localities, he arrives in Częstochowa and reads all the testimonies at a special meeting of the Jewish Council with the representatives of the ŻTOS. The reaction is very typical. Those gathered, astonished and shocked, decide to send a delegation to *Wendler* - the city's German commissioner! This cunning and unscrupulous man - a businessman who has managed to make colossal sums of money with the help of the Jews - reassures old Kopyński, the head of the Jewish Council. "Lies upon lies!", he says. "And even if there is a hint of truth in these stories, there will be no such thing here - I am here!", he cries with pathos, thumping his chest. Kopyński returns to the *Judenrat* and calms everyone down, recounting all *Wendler's* words in great detail and how he swore before him, thumping his chest.

This same spectacle, with variations of time and place, was repeated in all the localities. The public could not comprehend the phenomenon - it had allowed its vigilance to be put to sleep with illusions

and false promises. The German civilian authorities had lied, promising “special” patronage and deferential treatment to each individual locality and for the *Judenräte* and their circles in particular. Meanwhile, there is a horrific turn - the “extermination squads” appear.

The Coordination of Pioneering [Youth Movements] vigorously approaches the organisation of defence, not only in Warsaw, but also in all the provincial cities. Everywhere, joint committees of all the pioneering [youth] organisations are established, whose role is the practical preparation of [partisan] squads and to keeping the Jewish public broadly informed.

Talks are held at the Movement's cells and in the *kibbutzim* in Warsaw, Częstochowa and Żarki, with the participation of leadership members, who visit all the country's major centres. The slogan of defence is loud and clear. For the time being, this activity is intended as a preparation for the members. Only in a later period do the questions of actual defence - the acquisition of weaponry and the manufacture thereof, training commanders and organising squads, local reconnaissance, organising connections, etc. - become the main, and one might say the *only*, idea by which the members of the Movement live and die. Szmul and Tosia go out to Radom, Kraków and other places in the GG. Tosia embarks several times on the most dangerous mission [of all] - to the newly occupied territories in the east of the former Polish state. She makes it, with her life constantly in peril, to Wilno and Grodno, to Baranowicze, Równe, Lwów and elsewhere. Aryje Wilner is sent to Częstochowa and Żarki.

In those days, Mordche Anielewicz arrives in Żarki, on his way to the Reich. He goes out on a double mission - firstly, to attempt to smuggle the *Agricultural Calendar* into the Reich and, secondly, to determine the movement's attitude towards the “small deportations” which had then begun in the Reich - to organise the defence in Zagłębie.

The *Agricultural Calendar* was the last enterprise in the life of Józef Kapłan. As early as the autumn of 1941, Józef began collecting the material published by the movement during the War (all the issues of the *Against the Current* newspaper, leaflets, bulletins and other publications). Arranging the material and the difficulties of printing with the copying machine delayed its publishing. However, during the winter, two hundred copies of the book were prepared and Józef even managed to print (in the only printing house in the ghetto at ul. Leszno 24, and which operated under the supervision of [Anton] Hergel, the German commissioner), the cover of the book *Agricultural Calendar (Kalendarz Rolniczy)*, printed by the “Financial Publishing House” [?]. Inside the double cover was hidden the title page of the book bearing the motto “*Chazak Ve'ematz!*”<sup>2</sup> and an inscription: “A Gift to *Kibbutz Ha'Artzi* for its 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary”. Józef dreamt of smuggling a few copies of the book into Switzerland for the [members of] the Movement in the Land [of Israel].

In Żarki, which was located on the border, we contacted a German border guard, who promised to allow Mordche to pass into the ghetto in the town of Zawiercie, which was already in the territory of the Reich. “But this must have nothing to do with espionage, etc.,” the guard said, “because then ...” – here shows his gun. Mordche, who has three copies of the book tied around his midsection and much written material (various testimonies, instructions for organising defence squads, etc.), laughs out loud and sets his mind at rest with jokes.

After two hours, the guard returned holding a note in his hand, “Everything is in order”.

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: *Be strong and of a good courage (Joshua 1:6).*]