

The Weapons Problem

From the first deportation until the complete liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto in April 1943, the problem of obtaining weapons was the focal point and the essence of the lives of the resistance fighters. The only path to the acquisition of weaponry led to the arms market, which had been established on the *Aryan side*. There, they could obtain a vast array of different kinds of implements. They paid a fortune for each item. The pistols and grenades, regardless of quality, were snatched up, without bargaining, by the emissaries of the Jewish Fighting Organisation [ŻOB] on the *Aryan side*.

With the founding of the Jewish Fighting Organisation, efforts were made by Aryje Wilner (*Jurek*), who was sent on behalf of the Central Command to obtain, from the Polish underground, a certain quantity of weapons needed for defence purposes in the Warsaw Ghetto. Some of the meetings *Jurek* had with the representatives of the underground movements ended with a promise, a temporary postponement and finally with the well-known rationale - "We do not have enough weapons for our own people".

The purchase of the weapons entailed colossal sums, which the organisation's headquarters did not have. Therefore, it decided to obtain the necessary sums from wealthy Jews. If the money was not given willingly, it was taken by force.

The armaments purchased were mostly from secret caches from before the contemporary war or from the days of the war between Poland and Germany.

The grenades were mostly of Polish manufacture (with a handle), as well as from the days of the previous World War (French and with German detonators). But there were also Russian and German grenades from recent times. They were of the most suspicious quality. They were rusty on the outside but, worst of all, there was no way to verify their operability. This was due to two reasons:

- a) From the standpoint of economy, it was a pity to waste the grenade! And the extraordinary difficulties in obtaining the grenades were a greater determining factor here, rather than the money;
- b) There was no way to test if the grenades worked. They were usually bought individually [or,] at most, two or three of the same make. Examination of one did not at all indicate the nature of the rest.

In 1943, after the first operation of defending the Warsaw Ghetto, the Central Command came to the conclusion that the manufacture of homemade grenades was essential. As early as February of that year, two small factories were producing grenades in three shifts. They also set up a weapons repair department, which repaired pistols with weak springs and, when necessary, even firing pins. This required great proficiency in the profession of turnery. Quite a few pistols were repaired there, which before had not been at all fit for purpose.

Attempts to make homemade pistols were unsuccessful, due to the lack of lathes and the necessary raw materials.

The method of manufacturing the grenades was based on engraving heads 75 mm long [and] 50 mm in diameter. The cavity was 30 mm in depth and 23 mm wide. It was drilled in a lathe. The bottom of the cavity was enlarged with a special knife on the lathe, so that the chemical compound could be put in place. The screw threading outside the cavity was done and the head was ready. After filling the inside with the chemical compound, they screwed on a wooden cylinder, 30 cm in length, through which they threaded a fuse dipped in sulphur. This grenade was ignited by rubbing it with a

matchbox. From ignition until the grenade exploded, six to eight minutes passed. In its external shape and structure, except for the detonator, the grenade was just as good as a German one. We had quite a bit of trouble discovering the chemical formula and, more than that, in purchasing the chemicals essential for its preparation.

The two factories produced a daily output of fifty units. The founder and director of the factories, and also of the weapons repair department, was *Koza*, Icchak Sukenik (*Kibbutz Ma'apilim*). Those who worked there were members of the Jewish Fighting Organisation. The work was done non-stop, guarded from the outside by fighters, who kept an eye on the movements all around.

At first, the method of manufacturing grenades in Częstochowa was the same as in Warsaw. Only then, due to a technical inability to increase production (lathes were lacking; at first the grenades were manufactured in German factories, where Jews worked), the lads switched to another method, which was to cast the heads from aluminium, adding a ten percent mixture of other materials. The casting was done under primitive conditions in a small crucible, which they found in one of the foundries in the camp. Soldering [was done] with an autogenous welding device, which was also found in the workshop. A serious problem was making the screw threading inside the cavity to insert the wooden cylinder, because the die-cast material would often crack. In the end, malleable screwdrivers¹ were made that were suitable for screwing in aluminium which tends to crumble easily. The primitive detonator was also slightly different. At the end of the fuse, which ran the length of the grenade, three matches were attached, so that only the sulphur heads stuck out. At first, to prevent the heads from getting wet, they tied them with a rag. But, later, they fitted them with a hermetically sealed wooden cap, which kept the matches from becoming damp. The grenades were ignited by rubbing [them with a matchbox].

Externally, our homemade grenades resembled grenades of the German type. By the way, the wooden cylinders in our grenades were of German origin. The people, who worked in the wood engraving workshops, stole them for us.

Our grenades were tested outside Częstochowa in the presence of two representatives of the Polish Underground Movement. First, they threw a Polish grenade and a German one, and then the grenade made in the ghetto. Astonished by our grenade's explosive power, the representatives of the Polish Underground ordered one hundred and fifty of them (by the way, we did not fill this order, due to various reasons).

The grenade's only downside was its weight. It was slightly heavier than other types of grenades. To prevent rust, the heads were painted with black lacquer.

The pistols that the Organisation purchased at the end of 1942 were literally a repository of all sorts of antiquated pieces - "Colts" with the long barrel; the pistols we called "Giantess", with a twelve-millimetre calibre, whose stamps had been erased by the long years. Firing these guns was much noisier than shooting a rifle. Obtaining any additional bullets over the five which were sold along with the gun was beyond the realm of possibility. There was also no lack of Russian Nagants², [which were called] "Cowboys" with a 7.65 mm calibre. The only cartridges that fitted them were long ones, with the bullet concealed inside them. Even for these [revolvers], it was impossible to acquire extra ammunition. The "Walther" pistols were of an old type, 7.65 mm in calibre, from the days of the previous World War. There were also some modern "women's" pieces of this type, nickel-plated, with a calibre of 6.35 mm. These had one important advantage - they could be concealed with ease.

¹ [TN: It is unclear whether this was an actual hand-held screwdriver or a screw-cutting tool on the lathe.]

² [TN: Almost certainly refers to the 1895 Nagant M1895 seven-shot revolver, which took 7.62mm calibre ammunition and which resembles a "cowboy pistol".]

In exceptional cases, there were also some 9 mm “Steyr³” types. The majority of the pistols were usually small-diameter FN [Fabrique National (Herstal)] 6.35 mm. There were some of the same make with a calibre of 7.65 mm and also ones made by the *Bayerische Waffen und Munitionswerke*⁴, as well as the Spanish 6.35 mm calibre “Astra”, Belgian [pistols], Hungarian ones with a diameter of 7.65 mm, and others.

This entire collection was of very bad practical use. In testing, almost no gun fired any shots. More than once it happened that the bullet got stuck in the barrel after it was fired. This was due to the differences between the different kinds of bullets [fired] and also because the rifling of the gun barrels had become askew.

At a later period, in February 1943, the quality of the pistols purchased by the Organisation improved. The 9 mm “State-issued” pistols (so we called them) were considered the best ones, as well as the Polish WiS⁵. The department in charge of the Organisation’s weapons depots was in no small manner the cause for the improvement in the quality of the weaponry. Each new implement, which was brought to the ghetto, was thoroughly inspected there.

In the last months before the uprising, the first implements of the Resistance begin to disappear - the famous “bottles” with a cocktail, as well as the “dry” bottles with Lysol⁶ [and the] axes, iron rods, etc. They are stashed away, on special shelves in storerooms, inside the bunkers. The lads proudly called it “our museum”. They had with them various plans for the production of pistols (among them was a “permanent pencil”, which was a one-shot pistol). None of these plans were implemented, due to technical difficulties. But no one took any notice of this. They all turned their heads towards the shelves upon which the “State-issued” or WiS pistols lay.

Purchasing weapons on the *Aryan side* entailed extremely serious problems. The arms trade, in which huge sums were made, attracted the worst elements, such as thieves, bandits and various “brothers”, to whom the smell of sulphur was not alien even before the War. More than once, arms dealers came empty-handed and offered scare-pistols⁷ for sale. Those who refused to buy them were turned over to the Germans or were threatened with being “stood up against the wall”. It was forbidden to refuse. And the main thing was that this was our only source of weaponry.

The merchants, confident in the great demand for arms, raised the prices without limit. For example, for a pistol with a small calibre, they asked 2,000-3,000 *złoty*. For a pistol, with a larger calibre, they asked 4,000 *złoty*. The “state” guns were even more expensive. Each bullet cost 25 *złoty*. And yet, every piece was snatched up by the representatives of the Organisation without haggling.

The best weapons were obtained from the battalions of the Italian army that had been disarmed on the Eastern Front. When they returned home, the soldiers handed over any weapons they had left for half a loaf of bread. All sorts of rogues bought these from them at the railway stations and later sold them to Jews for astronomical prices.

The WiS pistols were stolen from the warehouses in parts and reassembled in the [repair] department. The parts were mostly brought to the “market” by Polish women, who worked in German armaments factories. They sold them at considerable profits. But the biggest profits went to the middlemen, who were in direct contact with the Jewish clients.

³ [TN: Austrian handgun (Steyr M1912) developed in 1911 used by the Austro-Hungarian military.]

⁴ [TN: “Bavarian Arms and Munitions Works”; we have as yet been unable to ascertain the existence of a company with this exact name.]

⁵ [TN: “Wis” in Latin characters in the original; this Polish pistol was later renamed “Vis wz. 35”.]

⁶ [TN: Brand name of powerful American disinfectant.]

⁷ [TN: Presumably non-functional imitation pistols.]

The Jewish Fighting Organisation's most important agents on the *Aryan side* were *Jurek* (Aryje Wilner), *Tosia Altman* and *Tadek* (Tuwja Szajngut), as well as *Zosia* (Astrid Miller).

There were many denunciations and arrests in connection with the arms trade. In March 1943, they detained *Jurek* (the Organisation's leading agent on the *Aryan side*). He was arrested near his home. The house was surrounded by Gestapo men, wearing civilian clothes. When *Jurek* (Aryje) tried to enter the gate, the Gestapo approached him and seized him by the hands, thus taking from him any possibility of defending himself. In the course of the search, they found seven pistols, which he had bought earlier, as well as the plans for the defence of the Warsaw Ghetto. The prisoner was taken to the Gestapo centre. The Aryan woman, who had brokered the purchase of the weapons and accompanied *Jurek*, was released, of course. And in all this, the real role that she had played in his imprisonment was revealed.

It is difficult to describe all the torture that they put Aryje through. After several weeks of torture, the Germans despaired of obtaining from Aryje any details about the Organisation, its warehouses and plans of action. He was then transferred to Pawiak Prison. From there, Aryje manages to escape on his own, while being led to work in a group of prisoners. On the same day, Aryje appears in the ghetto, to the great joy and surprise of the members of the Jewish Fighting Organisation, who thought that they had lost him.

He was very weak from everything he had been through and there were fears for his life. The Organisation's Central Command hid him in an attic under the strong guard of fighters armed with pistols and grenades, who were ordered to open fire on Germans if they approached his hiding place. The searches for Aryje lasted for several days, but to no avail, and the authorities were forced to stop them.

Despite his poor health and the danger to his life due to his popularity, Aryje did not stop fulfilling his role.