

The Economic Situation of the Jews in the Ghetto

In order to have an accurate concept of the economic situation of the Jews in the ghetto, it would be necessary to orientate ourselves as regards the economic structure of the Jewish populace in Cześćochowa at the time. Unfortunately, this is something which we have been unable to accurately ascertain because, in the ghetto, there was a constant superimposition* of the population, which was caused by the specific situation of the Jews under the German occupation. Nevertheless, we shall endeavour to report on the economic life according to that which each one of us witnessed and was able to observe.

In the first weeks following the outbreak of the War, the economic situation of the Jews in Cześćochowa was a very difficult one. Hundreds of families were hungry and waiting for some miracle. Gradually, people began adapting to the newly-created conditions and started seeking a livelihood, not waiting for charitable aid. The Polish populace was allowed to come to the Jewish neighbourhood. This gave many Jews the possibility of conducting business, craftsmen to execute various works, and so on. The same thing happened later in the "Big Ghetto". As mentioned, the Polish populace was allowed to pass through the ghetto. This made it possible for Jews, even in the ghetto, to be able to conduct an illegal barter trade with the Polish population. People sold off jewellery, household items, garments, linen and even bedclothes and lived off that. Little clandestine cottage factories were also set up, in which were manufactured soap, candles, shoe polish, washing soda etc. There were also some people who constructed "żarna" (querns for milling corn). This was explained by the fact that the peasants could more readily smuggle corn into the ghetto than flour. Jews bought this corn, ground it in the hand mills, gave it to bakers to bake and received a kilo of bread for a kilo of flour*. The surplus received through baking went to the bakers.

The main sellers of finished goods were children. This explains why, in the *Judenrat's* notification regarding the registration of school-aged children (based upon the ordinance of 31st August 1940 regarding the Jewish scholastic system in the *Generalgouvernement*), of the 3,800 boys of a school age, only 1,194 were registered - which equated to just 31.41%. Of 3,776 girls of a school age, only 1,249 were registered – equating to 33.1%. The majority of the children registered were those born between 1931-1933, which amounted to 60.1% of the boys in those ages and 59.2% of the total of girls⁷⁰. The fact that the percentage of registered among the older school years was smaller, is because the larger majority of them were their families' breadwinners.

A few former manufacturers, on their part, conducted business with the commissars nominated by the Germans over their former factories. (Jewish factories and larger enterprises, based on a decree from Rüdiger, were already confiscated back in the second half of September 1939⁷¹). There were [some] commissars, who were unable to manage

* [TN: Meaning that one who today was wealthy became poor tomorrow and vice-versa.]

* [TN: As one kilo of flour – even without wartime additives such as sawdust – yields 1.6-1.7 kilos of bread, this trade was obviously to the bakers' advantage.]

⁷⁰ Statistics Book of the *Judenrat*, Vol. II, p.178.

⁷¹ Copy of Rüdiger's decree.

without the former owners, and the manufacturers in fact took advantage of this to draw a livelihood from there and, at the same time, kept an eye on their property.

Shopkeepers and merchants “stole” bits of merchandise from their confiscated businesses with duplicate keys, or under the pretext of “airing” the goods of the sealed shops, they received part of the merchandise in partnership with the German “guardians”. All this was sold or bartered with peasants for food, and people meanwhile survived. There were also Jews who conducted legal commercial and industrial enterprises on a small scale and earned a living from it. Some of the Jews, who were compelled to live from their work, were employed at various “*placówki*” and received, from the *Judenrat*, a payment of four *gilden* [i.e. złoty] for each day of work, and they were forced to maintain their families on these starvation wages⁵⁶.

The fact that a certain number of Jews managed to earn a livelihood made it possible for the institutions of social aid to raise funds with which to assist refugees, the sick, the elderly, orphans and the poor in general. This situation, however, also enabled the *Judenrat* and all its departments to impose direct and indirect taxes. The indirect taxes were designated for the hospital, the aged care home and the orphanage. The *Judenrat* proceeded from the unjust standpoint that all Jews had to bear equal burdens. Therefore, they pulled this tax even from the poorest, who were forced to pay taxes just like the wealthiest.

Upon purchasing a food card, [or] receiving allotments of coal or soap, everyone had to buy a two-złoty stamp upon which was printed “*Utilitati et Saluti*”⁷² [Lat., Utility and Safety] (the organisational chief of the *Judenrat*, Adv. Szymon Pohorille, was very fond of using Latin expressions).

Compared with other cities in the *Generalgouvernement*, all things considered, the economic situation here was a bearable one. This caused Częstochowa Jews to make efforts to bring over to them relatives from other cities - from the Łódź ghetto, from which grisly reports were received. Such permits had to be obtained from the *Stadthauptmann*, who provided each request with the answer, written on the back of the appeal to the *Judenrat*, to the effect that the request of the “*Glaubensgenosse*” [co-religionist] so-and-so was denied. No one actually received any permit to come. Nevertheless, news of the Częstochowa “Garden of Eden” spread, bursting out through the ghetto fences, and the Jewish population - against the will of the *Judenrat* and particularly that of the *Stadthauptmann* - still continued growing more and more with illegal and semi-legal refugees from towns and *shtetls*.

A very small number of refugees did not require material assistance. The vast majority was forced to resort to this type of aid. Yet the activity of the relief institutions in Częstochowa was [only] able to alleviate the need in a minimal measure by comparison with the necessities. Even this situation did not last long and possibilities to aid were diminished.

⁵⁶ Statistics Book of the *Judenrat*, Vol. III, pp. 317, 319 and 324. [TN: This footnote, which is placed between footnotes 71 and 72, is numbered 56 in the original; we have therefore reproduced here the same entry from footnote 56.]

⁷² Statistics Book of the *Judenrat*, Vol. II, p.225.

The Economics Department of the *Stadthauptmannschaft*, which was directed by the *Volksdeutsch* Zawada and the SA man Schleecht*, already found their servants within the city itself, in partnership with whom they already “saw to it” that the confiscated Jewish businesses be liquidated as quickly as possible. Among the large Polish mercantile firms, which took advantage of the German Economics Department’s “good-heartedness” with a broad hand, were first and foremost the firms belonging to Trawiński, Majewski and Miskiewicz. A former adjutant of Wendler, Laksi [sic Laski], was granted the right to clear out all the Jewish shoe shops, as well as the shops of leather and leather haberdashery. Wendler’s mistress, Mrs Moszewicz, received the broadest rights to clear out all the Jewish shops that were to her liking, and even craftsmen’s workshops. With the robbed merchandise she opened herself a “*Warenhaus*” [Ger., Emporium], for which Jewish craftsmen were forced to prepare everything she demanded. In order for her to set up the “*Warenhaus*” for herself, Wendler allotted to her the entire building of the former Jewish Bank of Industrialists and Merchants [Bank Przemysłowców i Kupców] at II Aleja 22.

One may form a concept of the need that was reigning in the ghetto from what the *Judenrat’s* Statistics Bureau issued in the Statistical Yearbook (*Rocznik Statystyczny*, Vol. III, published in 1941), regarding the number of Jews, who applied to the *Judenrat’s* social aid for support. According to the number given there, in the card index, 14,960 people were registered who had applied for aid. These were 4,058 families. Among them were 651 families who were not from Częstochowa and numbered 2,169 souls.

Due to the fact that only a couple of streets in the ghetto had sewers, due to the crowdedness in the dwellings, and due to the hunger, contagious diseases began spreading in the ghetto at a rapid pace. Spotted typhus, abdominal typhus and dysentery had their fat share, principally among the mass of refugees. The epidemic of spotted typhus first broke out in the “shelter” for refugees from Łódź, which was at the Crafts School at ul. Garncarska 6.

Necessity led to a steady increase in the plague of robberies. Most of all, there were robberies of linen and food. The informers also played a significant part in impoverishing the Jews. Of these informers, who told the German organs of power what someone owned and in what he was employed, were known: Elias Szeftel who, as a result, was granted a concession to run a *knajpa* [pub], which was visited by Germans and particularly by the German officials of the foreign exchange office, whom he served with information on Jewish property; Juda-Majer Besser from Zawiercie and Jakub Rozenberg from Łódź, who also engaged in denunciations similar to Szeftel’s and, therefore, had special certificates from the *Sicherheitspolizei* to move about freely outside the ghetto without the Star of David bands⁷³. These informants made a fortune, both from the share they received from the Germans after they had seized, on their tip-offs, [property] from Jews, and also from what Jews would give them to rescue, from the German hands, those whom they had earlier delivered to them.

From day to day, the poverty steadily became deeper and deeper and the misery ever more bitter. This strongly affected the overall state of affairs in the ghetto, in general, and the population’s natural growth in particular.

* [TN: שלענעכט in the original Yiddish; we have found no other mention of this individual or of this surname in other sources.]

⁷³ Official letter from foreign exchange office in Kraków to the *Schutzpolizei* in Częstochowa.