

The Underground Movement in the Ghetto

Częstochowa was one of the few cities in Poland, where a significant number of political activists, of all tendencies, remained following the outbreak of the War. It was not long before worker activists embarked upon organising underground activity, which drew in, not just party members, but also many unaffiliated persons - and above all, youngsters.

In the first period, the political parties carried out their work separately. The activity of the communists was particularly difficult, due to the net which the agents of the former Polish secret police had spread over the communist activists, whom they had already kept an eye on back in the time of the *Sanacja*. Their first communist victim was Lajzer Silman. In Jewish workers' circles, Silman was known under the name "Gandhi". Over many years, for his communist activity, Silman had been blackened in the *Sanacja* prisons and, afterwards, in the Bereza camp. After he was released from Kartuz-Bereza, he again became active. Already in the first days of September 1939, he was arrested and sent away to a German concentration camp.

Many communist activists, due to the net that had been spread out around them, were forced to hide for a time and then leave Częstochowa. Among others, the well-known communist, the engineer Lajbisz Frank, was compelled to do the same.

Nonetheless, despite the horrific terror, the communists organised themselves. The pioneers of the renewed communist underground activity were: the old SDKPiL* member Maks Opatowski, former secretary of the Częstochowa Tailoring Workers' Union, then the tailoring worker Srul Dreksler, the painting worker Jankel Wajnryb and A. Sztajnbrecher - all of them old communists. Alongside them, many others joined in. At the start of 1942, through the Polish communist Imiołek, they were put in contact with the newly-established Polish Workers' Party (PPR) and they took part in spreading the PPR bonds - the "Dar Narodowy" [National Gift] - to raise funds for the purpose of engaging in active warfare against the occupier.

The Bundists also embarked on activity early on. The first task was to burn the archive. While burning it, a fire broke out on the premises at ul. Piłsudskiego 17. It was not long before the place was in flames. Firemen and Germans appeared and overcame the blaze - but there was no longer any trace left of the archives.

In November 1939, a group of Bundists, Tsukunft** and SKIF members gathered at the Jewish cemetery, split up into smaller groups and decided that the underground work should be managed by a party committee. A member of the party committee was put at the head of each separate group. The second, and already last large gathering of Bundists, was held at the same location in February 1940. (The first meeting took place after burying the tragically killed member of Tsukunft, Michał Szymkowicz, and the second upon bringing to burial the old Bundist, the tailoring worker Mojsze-Lajb Szymkowicz, who died of natural causes.) At the

* [TN: Socjaldemokracja Królestwa Polskiego i Litwy (Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania); a Marxist political party.]

** [TN: Yid./Germ. "Future"; the Bundist youth organisation. The SKIF (Socjalistischer Kinder-Farband) was the Socialist Children's Union.]

second meeting, among other things, it was decided to smuggle the Culture League's large library from Aleja 20 to ul. Nadrzeczna 24, to the librarian Rajze'le Berkensztadt and to begin running the library illegally there. This plan was carried out over the course of two days, and the library started serving hundreds of readers and, later, also the drama circles.

In June 1940, the Gestapo intensified its searches for Labour activists, using a list that the Gestapo had received, by its orders, from the *Judenrat*. On the night of 30th April 1941, the Gestapo and gendarmerie went out onto the ghetto's streets, with a precise list of communist activists, and carried out a large number of arrests. Dozens of communists, along with their family members, were then arrested. Wherever those wanted were not found, they took away their family members. On the following morning, all the detainees were sent away to Oświęcim, from whence none of them ever returned.

Among others who perished then were:

- some members of the well-known Działowski family;
- the father of Majer Tenenbaum (Majer Tenenbaum sat for years [in prison] for communist activity. In Częstochowa, he was known by the name "Majorek". He perished in Warsaw, where he had been hiding with "Aryan papers");
- the communist youth activist and active co-worker of MOPR*, Polia Tenenbaum (also her father and step-mother who, during the arrest, "dared" to plead for her, were likewise taken and never returned);
- the democratic activist Icek Rząsiński;
- Grojnem Frank (an uncle of the communist activist Lajbisz Frank), in whose house Lajbisz Frank was hiding;
- the Labour activist Icek Opoczyński (he had just been released from prison before the War, after serving a sentence for communist activity);
- an array of other communists with their close family members, and also the former Left-wing Poalei Zion councillor, Żarnowiecki.

In order to coordinate the underground activity, inter-party conferences were held from time to time. Two such conferences were held in 1940 - one at the Machzikei Ha'Das building on ul. Nadrzeczna, and the other on the TOZ premises at ul. Berka Joselewicza 3. In August 1941, in the garden of the former I.L. Peretz School at ul. Krótka 22, yet another inter-party conference was held, at which the question of forming a joint organisation, bearing a military character, was discussed. No agreement was reached about this.

For a certain time in July 1941, the Bund's activity was interrupted due to the failure of the courier of the Bundist Central Committee in Warsaw, Maria Szczęsna, who supplied the Bundist organisations in the entire Radom district with instructions and literature. In the first half of July 1941, Szczęsna was arrested at the Piotrków railway station. A large number of arrests ensued in connection with this. Among the detainees was Motek Kusznir, but he managed to escape. Five young people were arrested on the spot as hostages, until Motek turned himself in or the *Judenrat* handed him over.

* [TN: Russian acronym of the International Red Aid, an organisation providing material and moral aid to radical "class war" political prisoners around the world.]



Icek Rzsinski



Rajze'le Berkensztadt

Icek Opoczyński



Polia Tenenbaum



Among these detainees were well-known TOZ activists:

- Awiw Roziner (the son of Jakub Roziner - an active co-worker in the day-care centres of the TOZ and in the "Small Ghetto", and an active member of the Nadrzeczna 66 combat unit);
- Dzunia Rozen (active co-worker in the TOZ's department for the care of children, a daughter of the renowned Dr Rozen in Częstochowa);
- Marian Kongrecki (the son of the infants' prams manufacturer in Częstochowa, Kongrecki)
- Lajbel Kuznir and Chaja Kuznir (Motek's brother and mother) were also apprehended as hostages.

On that same day, Motek puts himself at the disposal of the party committee> They order him to leave Częstochowa as soon as possible. At the same time, the *Judenrat* makes it known that the Gestapo is demanding of them to hand over Motek - otherwise, all the hostages will be shot. A second meeting of the Bund's party committee is held at the house of the Roziner family at ul. Warszawska 8. Motek himself also takes part in this deliberation. His wife Rywka waits outside for the verdict, which will decide whether her closest one is to live or die. At the deliberation, it is discussed whether an involved activist should be handed over in order to save the lives of others. There is also the question of whether the committee has the right to have the life of a comrade at its disposal [and] whether the Gestapo will then keep its word – even once it already has the demanded victim. Everyone is tense and nobody dares to voice his opinion so quickly. They feel somewhat obligated both to the one who is now sitting here, and also to those who find themselves in the hands of the Gestapo. Motek declares that he is prepared to turn himself over to the Gestapo in order to save the lives of the hostages. Everyone, participating in this deliberation, assures him that all will be done in order to rescue him from the murderous hands. They feel that a grave error is being committed - that this ruling is wrong and shameful.

Motek leaves the meeting. His wife and comrades follow him at a distance. Motek walks slowly. He stops for a second, as if deliberating with himself, looks around him, takes several quick steps, as if he was stumbling and, once again, begins walking slowly in the direction of ul. Kilińskiego. This is where the Gestapo is - seldom does anyone return from there.

Already, on that same day, the Gestapo transferred Motek to the prison at Zawodzie. On the following day, the hostages were set free. In the morning, in a Gestapo vehicle, Motek and the couple Mojsze and Rajze'le Berkensztadt are all taken from the prison to the Gestapo for an "interrogation", which takes all day, In the evening, they are taken back to the prison.

Meanwhile, the *Judenrat* announces the Gestapo's new demand - that the old Alebarde, a Bundist, the grandfather of a communist activist, must be turned in. Should this demand not be met, ten other Jews will be shot. The Bundist party committee holds a deliberation in a room at *Machzikei Ha'Das*. Alebarde, himself, also participates in the meeting. Everyone is silent, including Alebarde. A heavy burden weighs upon them. What to do? Who can know how long the Gestapo will stretch the chain of victims by blackmail? Who knows how long the Gestapo will blackmail them with collective answerability? The discussion draws on for hours. Everyone understands that, having earlier agreed that Motek should turn himself in, was a grave error and it is decided never again to make such a tragic mistake again. Alebarde is sent

away to Radomsko and, from there, he makes his way on foot to Piotrków, from where comrades send him over to Warsaw, where he is set up as a worker in a public kitchen. Also, Fensterblau, for whom the Radom Gestapo was searching in Częstochowa, relinquished his hideout in Częstochowa and fled to Warsaw.

Every day, at the Gestapo, the Berkensztadt couple and Motek would be flogged with clubs and whips until they lost consciousness. Then, they were revived with buckets of water and the "investigation" began once more. For the men, the day of pain would end with them being placed, with their heads under a water pipeline, tied up in such a manner so that every couple of seconds a drop of water would drip onto the middle of their heads. As for Rajze'le, the torturers would finish the "interrogation" by crushing her breasts in the door of a cupboard. After several such "questionings", all three already lay in their prison cells broken, sick and unmoving for about a fortnight. Over the course of that fortnight, they were tended to by Polish teachers, who had already been through the same thing earlier and were now awaiting their turn to be sent to Oświęcim. These teachers did everything in their power, as arrestees, to bring these three battered people back to their strengths.

In the meantime, two Gestapo officers from the political department, Otto and Seier, who were looking for Herszl Prozer, were successfully bought off. Both of them had received a new pair of boots, two suits each and clothes for their children. Herszl was taken to the Gestapo, where he only received a beating, whereupon they threw him out as a "*dummer Jude*" [stupid Jew].

Lajb Kuszniur, on his part, bought off the *Gestapowiec* [named] Willi Krebs, through whom in a certain manner (by sending in food parcels) contact was maintained with the detainees and they were given encouragement. After nine weeks, they managed to buy off the Gestapo's then advisor on political affairs with 35,000 *gilden* [złoty] in cash and with valuables, and Motek was released from prison. (The Birencwajg brothers helped raise the first sum of money.) According to the Gestapo, Motek now appeared as having been shot according to its verdict - he lived in Częstochowa under the [assumed] name Pułkowski. Following this instance, they set out to rescue the Berkensztadts in the same manner. But they only managed to save Rajze'le. Mojsze Berkensztadt, who had already been horribly tortured, was sent away, all swollen and with ruined kidneys, to Oświęcim, from where his children received a telegram to the effect that he had died, and the Gestapo informed them that, for a certain fee, the ashes of his body could be delivered to them.

From the start of 1942, the underground work of all the factions began to be conducted in a more joint manner. The situation in the ghetto, however, was increasingly becoming worse. New decrees kept arriving, one harsher than the other. Sorrowful news from other ghettos crept in. People sensed that, clearly, Częstochowa, too, would not avoid the horrific misfortune with which many Jewish communities had already met.

Contact with Warsaw became rare. It was still possible to maintain contact with Warsaw through a young Pole of the Polish underground movement in Warsaw, which had ordered detonators for grenades. The detonators had been ordered from the Słomnicki brothers, who had set up a well-concealed mechanical workshop at ul. Garibaldiego 11. On one of his visits to us, this envoy only brought with him a little note written in Yiddish, to the effect that we

were to listen closely to him and see that we adapted ourselves to his instructions. He met with us at the TOZ premises at New Market [Nowy Rynek] 2. In detail, he described to us the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto and concluded [by saying] that the ghetto there looked as if after a terrible plague. He made us aware that Częstochowa would also not avoid this and advised us to prepare for open warfare. The same [man] also gave us addresses of specific locations in Warsaw, to which we were to report should we need to flee Częstochowa.

Meanwhile, a decree was issued that all Jews had, until 16th September, to pay the taxes that had already been due for years. Jews began interpreting [this to mean] that the Germans were hastening to collect the taxes before the deportation began. The fairy tale, that Częstochowa would avoid the misfortune, evaporated. From the small *shtetls* around Częstochowa, the local Jews began to be sent to Radomsko and also to Częstochowa. This was, for everyone, clear proof that the Germans were purposely concentrating the Jews in a few specific points. The unease and anxiety were spreading more and more. The underground activists increased their attentiveness and began seeking ways and means prepare for any eventuality.

At the beginning of September 1942, we become aware that the *Stadthauptmann* has demanded, of the *Judenrat*, an accurate map of the ghetto according to the blocks of houses. A few days later, we find out about some secret deliberation of General Böttcher from Radom, with prominent Germans in Częstochowa, who deal in Jewish affairs. It is clear to us that the map of the ghetto has been demanded in connection with Böttcher's visit. It is already evident to us that Böttcher, Bornemann, Einrich [sic Weinrich] and Blume*, who are holding the discussion, are already preparing a deportation plan according to the instructions that Böttcher is giving them.

The liaison people of the underground groups decided to call a joint conference, in order to form a combat organisation. This conference was set for Yom Kippur, 21st September and was to be held at the TOZ premises at New Market [Nowy Rynek] 2. Those who were to participate in this conference were Sumek Abramowicz with two other comrades (communists) whose names had not been given; Brener and Kuszniur (Bundists); Izrael Szymonowicz (Left-wing Poalei Zion); Rywka Glanc (*kibbutzim***); Jakub Roziner, Dr Wolberg, Dr Mering and Ojzer-Berisz Blechsztajn. We were also expecting a representative of the Warsaw ŻOB [*Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa* (Jewish Combat Organisation)]. On Yom Kippur, at ten in the morning, the first delegates who were to open the premises, Brener and Roziner, were stopped in the courtyard, in front of the premises, by the *Schutzpolizei*. They were beaten. After about two hours, thanks to the intervention of Jewish carters who conducted business deals with these German policemen, they were released.

The conference, even if it had already been set too late, sadly did not come about - and the deportation *akcja*, which had already begun that same night from 21st to 22nd September 1942, continued on for five whole weeks and was conducted with unimaginable cruelty, without meeting with any organised resistance. That intensive underground activity, which

* [TN: According to the book "Sefer Częstochowa", Vol. II, in the chapter "Tearful Dates" (col. 44), Bornemann, Weinrich and Blume were Böttcher's aides in Radom.]

** [TN: Viz. training farms to prepare youth for emigration to Palestine; Rywka Glanc belonged to the Socialist Zionist group "Freiheit" (aka "Dror").]

was just about to turn into an active resistance movement, did not manage to set up its squads. The vast majority of those who had been part of this work perished in Treblinka, along with most of the Jews of the great Częstochowa community. Only a number of individuals among them had the fortune to participate in the Treblinka uprising, such as Wilinger, Lubling and others. Among the most important organisers of the Treblinka uprising was Mojsze Langner [from Częstochowa], whom the German murderers hanged there, upside down, as punishment, and he - while already hanging - still called for revenge, and thus gave up his soul.

While the deportation *akcje* were underway, a few individual surviving activists and the tragically, small number of surviving youths, set out to organise combat units, which later grew to become a force in the "Small Ghetto". These groups led activities there until the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto", and later in the HASAG camps also.