

The Last Session



of the Arbeiterrat

Cwi Rozenwajn

The desperate and tragic moments, through which I lived at the last session of the *Arbeiterrat* [Workers Council], stand before my eyes as if still alive.

On Yom Kippur 1942, before nightfall, everyone was seized by a feeling of panic, in view of the impending catastrophe and the downfall of Częstochowa Jewry. The ghetto was enveloped in a black sorrow, due to the news that the "black" extermination commando had arrived. It was clear to all, that the fate of the Częstochowa Jews was sealed - they [would] share the same fate of the entire European Jewry.

Isolated from the surrounding world and encircled by enemies from the outside, and also with degenerates on the inside - [that] was the factual situation of Częstochowa Jewry.

The cries for help of the fighting youth, organised in the *Arbeiterrat*, were stifled from all sides, that not even an echo could be heard. The planned purchases of weaponry by Polish workers, for the ghetto, were not carried out. The *Judenrat*, with all the repressions and threats, paralysed the viability of a general uprising. It not only rejected the proposals of purchasing weapons, but also rejected the proposals of a passive resistance, that the population should not leave their dwellings during the *akcje*.

On the other hand, the *Judenrat*, through the Jewish ghetto police, arrested the Executive members of the *Arbeiterrat* at every opportunity, whenever there was talk of carrying out certain operations. Besides that, there were Jewish provocateurs and traitors who, without any shame or qualm, delivered Jews into the hands of the Gestapo to be shot.

It was under these conditions and in this atmosphere that the

last session of the *Arbeiterrat* took place at the home of the Chairman, Mojsze Lubling, at ul Katedralna 11.

Those who took part in the meeting were Mojsze Lubling, Mojsze Lewenhof, Izrael Szyldhaus, Icchok Rozenfeld, Mendel Willinger, Mordche Openhajm, Lajzer Szmulewicz ("Malay"), Rywka Glanc, Cwi Rozenwajn and the poet Ch. L. Żytnicki, who had fled from Lemberg [Lwów] and was in Częstochowa during the whole time, actively participating in the activity of the *Arbeiterrat*.

The session was opened by the Chairman of the *Arbeiterrat*, Mojsze Lubling, with the following words:

"The hopes that Częstochowa would avoid the tragic fate of the annihilation of the Polish Jewry have deceived us. Our dear Zeligfeld hit the mark when, yesterday - Yom Kippur Eve, he said to Jews that were going to *Kol Nidrei*¹ that in every '*klaf*', there is a '*prat*'². The term '*prat*' can be interpreted as P.R.T, which stands for Piotrków, Radomsko and Częstochowa³. We believed these three towns would be spared the tragic annihilation and destruction. This illusion turned out to be false - just as waiting for help from the outside, for a miracle, and that the world of 'conscience' would come to our aid, turned out to be false. On the contrary, the world, by being passive to our fate, is thereby aiding our extermination.

"The Jewish people, in the course of its history, has been steeped in messianic ideas and dreamt of the brotherhood of mankind, for ethics and morals would rule the world.

"It has turned out the complete opposite. The world has been turned into a slaughterhouse, and the people into wild beasts.

¹ [TN: Heb., "All Vows"; opening prayer of Yom Kippur.]

² [TN: Heb., "general/whole" and "individual/particular" respectively, meaning that every community is made up of individuals.]

³ [TN: In Yiddish, "Cz" is written as צ (Tsh), starting with a T.]

"The Jewish people has remained with its spiritual baggage, and the world has become like a raging volcano, whose goal is to obliterate and destroy. If we must perish and be annihilated, then let everything perish and be destroyed along with us. What we can manage to do, and in which direction we must take certain steps - is what needs to be decided today."

An oppressed mood and a wordless silence reigned after the speech, which characterised the tragic reality. The ever-raging, combative revolutionary Izrael-Awigdor Szyldhaus took the floor. He called on us not to allow ourselves to be governed by desperation and hopelessness. If it was not possible to procure any weapons, then let the ghetto be set on fire and everything go up in flames - and he went on to delineate a concrete plan as to who would carry this out, and how the operation was to be conducted.

Then it was the turn of the deep-minded Mojsze Lewenhof to speak, and his words became deeply etched in my memory. Among other things, he declared:

"Now, in view of the demise and downfall of Jewish life, I am already able to make that sober self-examination, which I have hitherto dreaded to make. Now I am able to ponder to the end, upon that which, during the whole time, I have endeavoured to dispel from myself. Now that I am already above inner disquiet, above inner fear, when I am already standing above every human concept of desperation and above every concept of emotions and moods - now, I am able, as never before, to tranquilly let myself down into these endless, deep, dizzying abysses that have been opened before me. Now I can glimpse the most elevated, dazzling heights, which no one has ever reached before. Now I am able, from the endless train of thought, that is and above any concept of to be or not to be, to gaze into the horizon of the great emptiness all around.

"I perceive the worthlessness of all the values hitherto created, and those which will arise in the future. All the religious, moral and ethical foundations, by which humanity brought to expression its ideas and beliefs, have been swept away. Along with them, all the scientific theories regarding the social necessity of evolutionary progress have also been swept away.

"I gaze now at the almightiest and above man. Chaos reigns in the world and cosmos. Those, who possess the skill to gaze into the deep abyss of the great giant called chaos, will perceive how

all that has been hitherto created by generations of the past, and [is to be created] by the generations to come, is no more than piddling, insignificant dust, which bedazzles the such short-sighted, mortal man. Only a few individuals are sometimes, in their madness, able to perceive that the dust of human life and creation are an insignificant component of the huge whirlwind of chaos.

"All the religious, ethical and spiritual ideals, national, social or moral goals and endeavours, progress, messianic dreams and ideals of self-perfection, in view of the current reality, seem riddled with holes and banal.

"On the ruins of the world that is now going under, new morals and ethics will arise - or a mysterious, higher ethic, built upon the seas of tears and seas of blood, which the earth soaked up from millions of lives. The new ethics and morals will be built upon and grow out from the soil of Treblinka, Auschwitz and other burial places of millions.

"I glimpse into the new emptiness that will arise, and will be minuscule and paltry, in comparison with the tempestuous events experienced. This new, everyday, monotonous life will, in the future, sadly be called a creative one."

It was already late at night when he completed his speech. All sat as if riveted to their seats. The silent weeping of the once carefree, cheerful, bubbling with Jewish humour Icchok Rozenfeld was heard. The poet Ch. L. Żytnicki sat frozen, looking at the window, and, through his eyeglasses, we saw his moist, tear-filled eyes. His lips murmured, "We are lost, there is no salvation."

Today, when I look back to that tragic, unforgettable meeting on that stormy Yom Kippur at dusk, on the eve of the liquidation of the great and spiritually wealthy Częstochowa Jewish community, I realise how far we have departed from that historic era, how far we have been dragged into this petty, everyday life, with its contradictory ideals and life aspirations.

When I look back now to that unforgettable, historic moment, it seems to me that, once again, I hear the words Mojsze Lewenhof shouted out from the deepest agony:

"I gaze now at the almightiest and above man. Chaos reigns in the world and cosmos..."

The Way to Freedom is Active Struggle!