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Contents

Foreword

This study fills a lacuna in the history of the fate of the Jews in Bielorussia during the Holocaust. The ghettos of Bielorussia were populated by a vibrant Jewish community, with its own particular traditions, its own unique characteristics justifying our detailed examination of its fate. In general, it may be said that every region, both in Eastern Europe and in other parts of the continent, differed from its neighbors. For Bielorussia that statement is of even greater validity This region of forests and marshes, situated at the edge of the society and economy of the political unit to which it belonged (once Poland and *today Belarus*), contained villages and towns serving as centers for farming and forestry The Bielorussians arrived at their self-awareness late and only partially, and the many Jews who lived there could not but feel themselves as being on a higher level of cultural development than the local society There was, therefore, no assimilation. But the alienation which existed with its origin in a combination of religious and cultural motives on the one hand, and the simple economic fact that the Jews formed a middle stratum of craftsmen and petty traders on the other, was not extreme to the point of murderous hatred as it was in the Ukraine. That is not to say that the Bielorussians were a Jew-loving people or that we could plant a very thick forest of trees in honor of gentiles who went out of their way to help Jews. But there were such gentiles among them, and in a far larger proportion than among the Lithuanians to the northwest or the Ukrainians to the south. In the face of Nazi murderousness, the Jews had greater prospects of survival in the Bielorussian villages than in other regions.

implementation. We do not know of instructions given the *reichskommissar* in the eastern region concerning the establishment of Judenräte in the area under his control, but in a secret document labeled: "Temporary instructions for the treatment of the Jews in the eastern region," of 13 August 1941, we read: " The ghetto inmates shall conduct their internal affairs themselves under the supervision of the district or town commissar or his authorized representative."[3]

In some places in Western Bielorussia, the Jews themselves initiated arrangements with the Germans in order to prevent haphazard kidnappings to forced labor and for a more equitable distribution of the burden of contributions imposed by the Germans upon the Jewish communities. In the main, it was the former public personalities who urged the establishment of "Jewish committees." This happened in Baranowicze, Glubok and Novogrudok.

In Ejszyszky, after Rabbi Shimon Rozovsky was ordered by the German military command to establish a Judenrat, he assembled all the men in the synagogue and informed them of the commander's demand. No candidates volunteered for an election. It was decided, therefore, to choose the twelve persons by lot.[4]

In Zholudok the German authorities demanded in October 1941 that the Jews assemble and elect a Judenrat. A meeting was held, but "actually no one wanted to be a member of the Judenrat. All wanted to escape serving the bloody regime. Despite this, a list of candidates was prepared; the first on the list was Mendel Galai."[5] When Avraham Meir Drewiansky was ordered to join the Judenrat he considered it a great injustice and went to consult his sister-in-law Devorah, an outstanding woman with great moral influence in the town. She supported his joining the Judenrat "because we should thereby be close to the burning events and will be able to watch that they do not cause injustice or make mistakes."[6]

After the heads of the first Lida Judenrat — Kalman Lichtman, Simcha Kotok and the advocates, Israel Kreczner and Benjamin Cederowicz — were murdered, the Germans issued an order for the election of a second Judenrat. No one was found eager to enter the Judenrat There was, however, no choice, and a new Judenrat was somehow established. It was Dr. Charny's lot to be elected chairman of the second Judenrat.[7] In Michaliczky the chairman of the existing council, the *gemina* Ora Bleicher, was ordered to choose the Judenrat. When the matter came to elections it appeared that no one

desired the honor. All were afraid of the responsibility connected with the position."[8]

After the members of the first Judenrat in Slonim were executed, it was not easy to form a second one. People feared to be part of the Judenrat lest they share the fate of the first members. In the great *aktzia* of 14 November 1941, all the members of the second Judenrat were killed. When Jeliszewicz volunteered for the Judenrat, people considered this a very strange act. In Radun "People did not willingly to be members of the Judenrat and to meet the Germans, but they recognized the necessity of leading the town and of representing it before the tyrant "[9]

In Janow near Pinsk the former chairman of the Jewish community, Alter Dubinsky, was called to German headquarters and ordered to establish a Judenrat. Since he had previously always been the community chairman, they asked Dubinsky to accept the role of chairman this time as well. At first he refused, but finally yielded.[10] After the Judenrat appeared in the German headquarters and heard what its members could expect in the event of their not fulfilling orders, the men returned to the general meeting. When Dubinsky completed his remarks, he burst into tears and all the assembly wept with him.

In Drohyczyn, too, Jews refused to be elected to the Judenrat. There were places where members of a candidate's family were opposed to his election and he deferred to their opinion.[11] In many other cases the persons who joined the Judenrat, either by election or appointment, did so with much reluctance and real fears. There were reasons for this: the degree of responsibility; the heavy presentiments concerning the Germans' intentions; the fears of conflict within the Jewish community and personal fear of the Germans, with their demands and the possible consequences of not implementing them.

According to Frank's instructions, as mentioned above, the Judenrat's election required the ratification of the authorities, who could also alter its composition. Actually, in most cases, the authorities made no changes in the list of members submitted to them. The Germans imposed both personal and collective responsibility upon the Jewish representatives.

We may assume that Heydrich wanted respected personalities in the Judenräte for two reasons: one to exploit those with executive ability among the Jews; and secondly to discredit the Jewish leadership in the eyes of their community [12] The Judenräte were established in order to

of a very different kind, who had come to kill. The underground, on the other hand, asked for a solution and provided a daring partial answer.

The underground did not come with an inclusive alternative for all the Jews in the ghetto because it did not have such an alternative. However, in its day-by-day battle in the ghetto to move groups of young people to the forest, to arm them, to establish resistance to the Germans, to rescue Jews or at least some of them, the underground was the alternative force waging a bitter battle against its opponents, showing a way to fight and even opening some prospects, though perhaps only limited ones, for salvation.

The local compositions of the Judenräte and the underground organizations affected the relationships between them in each location. We should also not ignore the accumulating effect of a situation in which two opposing organizations sought the support of the ghetto's Jews.

In not a few ghettos there was cooperation between the Judenrat and the underground, as mentioned previously; in most of these cases this was between individual Judenrat members or group of Judenrat members, and the underground, with the former providing their assistance in some specific field. This cooperation was sometimes accompanied by reservations concerning other underground activities. In more than a few cases, Judenrat members were also active in the underground. In a number of places Judenrat members led the revolt and escape from the ghetto.

On the issue of escaping there was strong opposition on the part of some of the Judenräte, but also agreement on the part of others. Some of the latter looked aside, some provided active assistance, on condition only that it be controlled and carried out in small groups. A large section of the Judenräte reacted very vigorously against bringing arms into the ghetto either for fighting in the forest or combat within the ghetto itself. The sharpest confrontation between the large majority of the Judenräte and the underground was on the subject of the revolt in the ghetto.

The composition of the Judenrat generally influenced the ability of the underground to act in this area. Judenräte which opposed the underground's activities worked against escape and acts of revolt. The Judenräte for the most part did not interpret the situation correctly They either did not grasp its unique nature, attempted to ignore what they understood, or refused to face it. They thereby came into essential conflict with the underground, which had very clearly seen the aims of the Germans' annihilation policies, warned against them and mobilized Jews in the ghettos to fight and save themselves.

Notes

1. Nuremberg Documents (IMT) PS-3363.
2. Yad Vashem (YV), *Verordnunqsblatt G-G, Polen* (Official Gazette, Generalgouvernment of Poland), Verordnug veber die Einsetzung von Judenraeten vom. 28 (translation), (November 1939).
3. Isaiah trunk, *Judenrat* (New York, 1972), p. 6.
4. Ribak Ben-Shemesh (Shalom Sonnensohn), testimony in *Eishishok, Koroteha Vechurbana* (Eiszyszky, Its History and Its Destruction) (Jerusalem, 1950), p. 61.
5. Moshe Beirach, testimony in *Sefer Zholudok ve Orlova* (Memorial Book of the Communities of Zhulodok and Orlova) (Tel Aviv, 1967), p. 243.
6. YV 3458/311 (Moshe Beirach).
7 Leizer Engelshtern, testimony in *Sefer Lida* (Lida Memorial Book) (Tel Aviv, 1970), p. 325.
8. YV E/286 (Ore Bloicher).
9. YV 03/508 (Avraham Aviel).
10. Symposium of Yanov Survivors at Yad Vashem, 7 June 1964, YV 2622/67-N.
11. Yaffa Plotnik, testimony in *Sefer Zikaron likehillat Kamin-Koshirsk Vahasvivah* (Memorial Book for the Community of Kamin-Koshirsk and Its Environs) (loc. date), p. 743.
12. Aharon Weiss, *The Jewish Police in the General Government and Upper Silesia during the Holocaust*, PhD Thesis (Hebrew University, 1973).
13. Elizer Lidovsky, testimony in *Sefer Zikaron Baranowicz* (Baranowicze Memorial Book) (loc. date), p. 467
14. YV M-1/E 2338/2387 (David Baksht); YV 1772/96 (Elimelech Melamed); Moshe Kaganowicz, testimony in *Sefer Zikaron likehillat Iwje* (Memorial Book of the Iwje Community) (loc. date), p. 530.
15. Shraga Faiwushewicz, testimony in *Sefer Oszmiane* (Osmiane Memorial Book) (Tel Aviv, 1969), p. 335.
16. Lidovksy, loc. cit.
17 Michael Z. Rayak, testimony in *Churban Glubok, etc* (The Destruction of Glubok, etc .) (Buenos Aires, 1956), p. 155.
18. YV 03/3483 (Avraham Klorin).
19. Yossef Pecker & Zalman Rabinowicz, testimonies in *Sefer Zikaron Lachowicze* (Lachowicz Memorial Book) (Tel Aviv, 1969), p. 315.
20. Yisrael Kochalski, in *Undzer Weg* (Our Path) (Munich, 4 January 1946).
21. Nachum Boneh, testimony in *Sefer Zikaron Pinsk* (Pinsk Memorial Book) (Tel Aviv, 1969), p. 328. Judenrat members went out into the streets and declared: "all those above the age of 16 have to present themselves"