

Deportation to death. Grossaktion in the Warsaw Ghetto on 22 July 1942

“I am helpless, my heart is breaking with grief and pity, I cannot bear it any longer”

(Adam Czerniaków, Journal)

Adam Czerniaków, chairman of the Judenrat in the Warsaw Ghetto, was devastated. The expulsion of Jews from Warsaw had just begun and the occupier was making increasingly cruel demands. A few hours earlier a group of Germans entered his office and the SS Obersturmführer Hermann Worthoff, who headed it, demanded that a contingent of 6-8 thousand people – to be sent, as he said, for resettlement to an unspecified location in the east. Children were also to be included in this group. That was too much for Czerniaków. He knew perfectly well what the German really meant. This deportation to an unknown destination was, in fact, a road to death. The diabolical nature of the whole plan appeared to him clearly. Here he was, a man who had been trying to protect his compatriots from repression by the German occupier over the past years, was now about to sign a death warrant against them. The day before, on 22 July 1942, he had refused to sign an announcement of forced deportation of Jews from Warsaw, and now they demanded that he sent children for their deaths. He felt that there was nothing more he could do, that all his actions had lost their meaning. He had potassium cyanide hidden in his office...he did not hesitate. It was 23 July 1942. In a brief suicide note that he left for his colleagues, he wrote:

“Do not take this as an act of cowardice or running away. I am helpless, my heart is breaking with grief and pity, I cannot bear it any longer. My deed will show everyone the truth and perhaps guide them to the right course of action. I realize that I am leaving you a heavy legacy.”

The death of Adam Czerniaków is a tragic symbol of the “Grossaktion”, the operation of

deporting Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to the Treblinka death camp. The event was part of the so-called "Operation Reinhardt", that is coordinated mass murder of Polish Jews, taking place since March 1942. The entire operation was led by SS-Gruppenführer Odilo Globocnik, commander of the police and SS in Lublin. His chief of staff and person responsible for the deportation of individual ghettos was SS-Sturmbannführer Hermann Höfle. He was the who supervised the deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto.

During the two months of the Grossaktion, about 270,000 Jews were deported from Warsaw to Treblinka, where they were murdered. Several thousand were killed during the deportations. It is estimated that approx. 8,000 people managed to get through to the so-called "Aryan" side of the city.

The Germans were aware that rumours of mass murders had already reached Warsaw and, in order to neutralise possible signs of resistance among the displaced Jewish population, they launched a propaganda campaign that was supposed to confuse the Jews in the ghetto about the occupier's real intentions. Marek Edelman described its mechanism in detail:

"And the Germans are using a new propaganda tools, by hook or by crook. They promise and give each person who volunteers to leave 3 kg of bread and 1 kg of marmalade. That is enough. Propaganda and hunger do the trick. The first one gives an irrefutable argument against any "fairy tales" about gas chambers ("because why would they give people bread if they wanted to murder them"), hunger – an even stronger one, it obscures everything else with the image of three brown, baked loaves. Their taste, almost palpable already, because all that stands between you and the bread is a short distance from your home to the Umschlagplatz from which the wagons depart, makes you stop seeing what awaits at the end of the road; their smell, so familiar, so good, intoxicates, disturbs the thought, making you cease to understand what is seemingly so obvious. There are days when hundreds of people leave the Umschlag and wait for days for their time to leave. So many are eager to receive 3 kg of bread that the transports, already leaving twice a day with 12,000 people, cannot accommodate them."

(Marek Edelman, *The Ghetto Fights*)

However, not all Jews listened to the German propaganda. Volunteers to leave only came forward at the beginning of the Grossaktion and in most cases expulsion was carried out by force. Apart from the SS, formations consisting of Ukrainians and Latvians, as well as officers of the Jewish Order Service, known as the Jewish police, were involved in carrying out these actions. They were also the direct executors of the German plan – they entered the tenement houses included in the deportation operation and led people to the Umschlagplatz. Marek Edelman reported:

“In unison, gendarmes, Ukrainians and Jewish police take part in it [the deportation operation]. The roles are divided, efficiently, orderly: the gendarmes surround the street, the Ukrainians tightly ring the houses in front, the Jewish police enter the backyards and summon all the inhabitants – “All the Jews are to go downstairs. 15 kg of luggage. Whoever does not come down will be shot...” And again. One by one, people run down from all the staircases. Nervously, on the run, they put on whatever they can grab. Some are coming out as they were, sometimes straight from their beds, others are wearing and carrying everything they could possibly grab, backpacks, bundles, pots. [...] Shivering, they line up in groups in front of the house. They try to endear themselves to police officers. Speaking is not allowed. The same groups of shivering, desperate people come out of the next houses and join the first group. A gendarme waves his rifle at a random passerby who, warned too late, failed to run away from the unfortunate street. A Jewish policeman, pulling at his sleeve or taking him by the neck, forces him into the line formed in front of the house. If the policeman is decent, he picks up the hastily written note with the family’s address with his other hand. [...]”

(Marek Edelman, *The Ghetto Fights*)

Finally, in August 1942, Jewish policemen were given a quota. Each of them was supposed to bring five people a day for the transport. Failure to meet the “workload” would result in getting shot or deported from the ghetto together with the family. Most of the officers of the Jewish Order Service were deported to Treblinka in the final phase of the Grossaktion.

After the end of the entire operation in the Warsaw Ghetto, which was henceforth limited to the

so-called remnant ghetto, covering the area north of Leszno Street and the so-called large Toebbens' shop at 14 Prosta Street, there were approx. 60-70 thousand people left, of which only 35 thousand officially resided in the ghetto. They received the so-called life numbers, i.e. white cards with a stamp which, for various reasons, entitled them to stay in the ghetto. Most of those who received them were employed in what is known as shops, that is people who worked at production workshops for the Reich. Their owners were German businessmen.

Among those who remained in the ghetto, there were few who still had illusions about the Germans' intentions. Therefore, when the occupiers began another deportation operation in January 1943, they were met with armed resistance. Surprised, the Germans retreated, but it was obvious that another deportation attempt would come. Those who called for the armed resistance of the ghetto, Mordechai Anielewicz and Paweł Frenkel, understood perfectly well that they had little time left for preparations...

dr Jacek Konik

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