

# Forms of resistance, shapes of testimonies

**Discussions on the contribution of the Jewish population and their allies to the fight against German policy of the Holocaust and seeking answers to the question of how the resistance of Jews differed from other models of active fight against the occupant – an international conference entitled: Jews in the fight against Nazi Germany during World War II, took place in the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews on September 19 and 20, 2019**

The conference, which was attended by the Director of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum, Albert Stankowski and an employee of the Scientific and Research Department, Grzegorz Michalak, began with a special lecture by Marian Turski. Based on his own memories, he presented examples of civil resistance of the Lodz ghetto Jews. Recreating their thinking – *„is it worth acting, since fate is already sealed”* – he noted the clash of radical ideology with pragmatism, which ordered the directing of Jewish prisoners to forced labour for the German occupant. Then, openly asking why no armed uprising, such as the one in Warsaw, was organised in the Lodz ghetto, he pointed to many premises that influenced the Jews' attitude at that time. First of all, one has to note the impact of the long-term hunger disease on the body and mind, especially indifference to one's fate. Isolation of the ghetto also had a great impact, especially since, in the case of Lodz, there was no contact of the Jews with the Polish population, including the independence underground.

All kinds of activities opposing the occupant's plans were a resistance movement. Referring to the issue of work for the German industry, it was pointed out that although it would strengthen the Third Reich's economy, it was also an opportunity to survive. Therefore, the solution was work, however not very efficient and showing signs of sabotage. The Slow Work Action consisted of deliberate lowering of standards, deliberate damage to products, hoping for faster fatigue damage and strike actions (even including hunger protests), which despite potential repression (one of the penalties was working on fecal matter disposal) increased solidarity among the

prisoners.

*„Singing was the only thing that enabled us to survive”* – in parallel to the resistance to the basic interests of the occupant, there was resistance consisting in giving hope to the Jewish people locked up in the ghetto. Singing classes were very popular, as were activity clubs and partly boycotted theatre and revue performances. Marian Turski, giving examples of many songs, also mentioned that in those times he had the opportunity to read a huge number of books.

The increasingly widespread awareness of the forthcoming Holocaust forced Jewish community leaders to think about the survival of only a small group, which was also supposed to be considered the best and picked to perform important tasks, including protect memory and bring up future generations. Staff with earlier facilities were prepared for the post-war period. In the case of the Zionist faction, readiness to build a Jewish state in the Middle East was pointed out. The communists, however, considered the possibility of post-war reconstruction of the country in accordance with the Soviet model. However, physical protection of the people also came down to raising awareness of what a departure from the ghetto that the occupant offered would really be like. It was feared that this was a straight path to death. Finally, Marian Turski raised the issue of the role of the Judenrat in the policy of resistance against the occupant and summed up this train-of-thinking with his own thought: *„people who survived the Lodz ghetto, were able to fulfil themselves”* and those of Marek Edelman: *„life is the most important thing of it,,*. During the discussion, the speaker also added that resistance during imprisonment in the ghetto was not to involve revenge on the tormentors in the post-war period.

The main deliberations began on the following day, and many guests spoke at the opening of the panel, and it is certainly worth mentioning of the speech made by the German ambassador Rolf Nikel, who pointed out that for a long time only the passive attitude of Jews towards the Holocaust had been pointed out. He was followed by Jarosław Sellin, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, highlighting the participation of Jews in the fighting of Władysław Anders' army and the need for a synthesising scientific publication.

The first speech was important for researchers of the history of the Warsaw community.

Laurence Weinbaum in the paper *History of the Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto: Deconstruction and Reconstruction in the Light of Research Post-1989* drew attention to the role of the Jewish Combat Organization and the Jewish Military Union and its cooperation with the Home Army. Particularly important was their operation during the Grossaktion, i.e. the gradual liquidation of the ghetto combined with the deportation of its inhabitants to the Treblinka extermination camp. The figures of Mordechai Anielewicz and Dawid Moryc Apfelbaum were also shown, recalling how these characters are remembered today. The next two speeches were devoted to the fighting of Jews in the territory of the Soviet Republic of Belarus and in France. Andrei Zamoiski talked about the territorial distribution of partisan units, especially during the German occupation in 1941-1943, and about the resistance movement in the Minsk ghetto. Renee Poznański presented Franco-German-Jewish relations under the occupation and in Vichy France. The last speaker was journalist Michał Wójcik, who used the plan of the Treblinka camp as an introduction to his speech. He not only pointed to the weak security of the camp against external attack, but also recalled a popular opinion about the resistance of Jews during World War II and the lack of public awareness of this fact. It was possible to learn from the lecture that resistance in Treblinka was focused around the conspiracy in which only 60 persons were involved, including former servicemen. The plan assumed the prisoners' escape and informing the world about the functioning of the camp. Activities which started on 2 August, 1943 at 3:57 p.m. brought freedom to several hundred prisoners, however at the cost of many killed. The escape from Treblinka was also connected with the escape of prisoners from the Sobibór camp which is known to many people. Treblinka prisoners getting to the second place managed to inform others. In the latter case, it was not only about the prisoners' escape, but also murdering the German crew. The Soviet guerrilla was also involved in these activities. Finally, the speaker placed the escape from Treblinka in historical awareness and propaganda. The manipulation action carried out in the Polish People's Republic had, among others to attribute a greater share of the Home Army, which was "cemented" after 1989. People related to this were: Jan Gozdawa-Gołębiowski and Władysław Rażmowski.

This speech was also an opportunity for discussion, which also raised the issue of anti-Semitism in Belarus and the issue of inhabitants of the Białystok and Vilnius ghettos as well.

The second panel presented the fight of Jews in the armed forces of the allied countries. The persons mentioned below gave their speeches in the following order: Jacek Pietrzak (Jews in regular Polish military formations during World War II), Leah Garret (Jewish soldiers in the British and American armies), Arkadi Zeltser (Jews in the Red Army), and Yoav Gelber (Historical significance of the Jewish Brigade in the British army).

The third and final panel was devoted to the issue of the Jews' civil courage. Natalia Aleksion, speaking about testimonies of the heroic attitudes of Jews in the face of the Holocaust in the territories occupied by the Third Reich, mentioned the cases of physical and mental abuse of German soldiers over the conquered population, e.g. shaving older people's beards and side curls or killing on the spot, and the behaviour of the Germans before and during mass executions. A lecture given by Barbara Engelking (Jews helping Jews to hide on the „Aryan side„) mentioned the situation of survivors after the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto and those who came to the city at that time. The researcher devoted a lot of attention to showing social ties between hiding people, threats that particularly affected them (e.g. the *shmaltsowniks*) and the need for forged documents or money. The starting point was not only the family and friends of the person in hiding, but also announcements published in the *Nowy Kurier Warszawski*. Worth mentioning were also self-help acts organised by children, for example the so-called cigarette sellers from the Three Crosses Square. Finally, Barbara Engelking mentioned the figure of Wilhelm Bachner, named the Jewish Schindler, who managed to get a well-paid job related to investments and help many friends and his family. The subject of Anna Bikont's speech was, in turn, the *Żegota* aid organization, and the researcher clearly indicated the participation of Polish and Jewish people in her works, as well as the person of Herling Grudziński. By maintaining documentation in the form of mainly receipts, he contributed to preserving the memory of this initiative, also providing researchers with many authentic sources about the dark times of the occupation.

Andrea Löw dealt more extensively with the archival documentation from the Lodz and Warsaw ghettos, pointing to the explicit work of the Lodz Statistical Department. Apart from collecting materials, this institution also kept a daily chronicle and developed a specific Ghetto Encyclopaedia to explain different concepts to its inhabitants. What is more, many photographs

were taken in the Lodz ghetto showing deportations and other German crimes. In Warsaw, work was carried out to document much broader aspects of the ghetto's life, and even the extermination of the inhabitants of Chełmno and the Treblinka camp. Finally, the speaker talked about the post-war discovery of part of it and the need for further work to find the part that is missing.

During the final discussion there was talk about hiding of Jews in the country (there were no Aryan zones designated there), and the answer was examples of the aid networks in Mińsk Mazowiecki and Kałuszyn. Jews in Lviv were also mentioned and attempts were made to answer whether this city was the one which had been most dangerous for them. Referring to Żegota, it was pointed out that in underground times funds transferred from London were not always able to reach their addressees.

The conference's summary pointed out the need for further research in this field since Polish historiography is still imprecise and it is necessary to fight the stereotypical view that not all Jews had taken up the fight against the German occupant.

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