

# **„Grossaktion” (22 July 1942 – 21 September 1942)**

**The Nazi authorities started to carry out the plans for annihilating European Jews from the second half of 1941, when German troops marched into the USSR. If we deem the activities of the Einsatzgruppen as phase one of the extermination and the ones commenced nine months later (“Operation Reinhardt”) as its escalation, the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto – conducted between 22 July and 21 September 1942 under the codename “Grossaktion” – should be regarded as a supplement of the genocide plan. All of them were parts of the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question”.**

Announcements. In the afternoon of July 20th, cars with SS officers start appearing in the Ghetto. Guard posts at the exits leading to the “Aryan District” have been reinforced. A security cordon was established along the walls, comprised of uniformed Lithuanian, Latvian, and Ukrainian troops. Stefan Ernest, working at the Ghetto Employment Office, noted at that time, his feeling of impending cataclysm to erupt in Warsaw, the largest conglomeration of Jews in German-occupied Europe: “It was clear that some invisible hand was orchestrating a spectacle that is yet to begin. The current goings on are just a tuning of instruments getting ready to play some dreadful symphony. Some sort of »La danse macabre«” . On the same day, when many Judenrat representatives were arrested in the afternoon and transported to the Pawiak prison, Ernest wrote: “The Game has begun”. The city was gripped in fear. Everything indicated that the future of the Jews was already settled. The screenplay, methods and manner of its execution remained unknown. At least seemingly. In reality, the Germans began to “tune their instruments” much earlier, similar to how the powerless, atomised Jewish population were sensing the upcoming “game”.

The day before – 19 July 1942 – Marek Stok wrote in his journal about the arrival of Lublin-based SS troops to Warsaw. They were commanded by Hermann Hoefle, an associate of Odilo

Globocnik. At the same time, news about the future of Warsaw Jews started to circulate around the district. Hoefle – as the rumours spread by people of the so-called “Group Thirteen” (Jews collaborating with the Gestapo) indicated – clearly explained his purpose in Warsaw: “Parasites need to be eradicated. Their [the Jews] fates are sealed”.

Before midday on July 22nd the commanders of the Lublin SS detachment arrived at the seat of the Judenrat. The secretary was dictated a new announcement, with the main theme being the planned displacement of the Ghetto population to the east. Citizens of the “closed-off district” were encouraged to take part in the imposed endeavour by a promise that all those who willingly report to the Umschlagplatz will receive free food, that their families will not be separated, and that they will receive work after arriving at their destination. The promise also included improved living conditions. By way of explanation, Hoefel told Adam Czerniaków – head of the Judenrat: “Today we begin relocation of the Warsaw Jews. You of course realise that there are too many Jews here”. Czerniaków did not sign the document sentencing hundreds of thousands of people to death. In the afternoon, posters with the announcement signed by the Jewish Council in Warsaw were hanged along the Ghetto walls. On the next day, the president of the council committed suicide.

The first victims of the “Grossaktion” were children. Can we, in our assessment of the miseries of all the individuals and groups trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto, grade the suffering and try to answer the question who suffered the most? Since everyone – men and women, young and old, sick and healthy, regardless of their origin, social standing, education, scale of poverty, religion, or political convictions – were equally doomed? This mass of people included children. Their fate was the most tragic of all. Often having no one to take care of them – because their parents were either murdered or on route to Treblinka. Abandoned, forced to beg, left on their own. Either realising the situation in the closed-off Ghetto reality, or remaining in the dark. Sensing the omnipresent evil, or, in their child-like naiveté, believing that this is how it has to be. Constantly terrorised. Either numb to or fearful of the threats surrounding them. They suffered on many levels. They were the first – alongside the Jewish poor and refugees from nearby ghettos – to be directed to the Umschlagplatz. It was commonplace for stray children to find their way on their own. They asked to be sent to their parents. Herded to railcars along with countless others, they

embarked on what was to be their final journey. Oftentimes, they did not make it all the way to Treblinka and died in transit.

Help. Parents tried everything to keep their children safe. During the constant round-ups, blockades, herding people from one place to the next, they put their kids in a drug-induced sleep and hid them in backpacks. Stefania Staszewska (Szochur) recalls: "We were anxiously eyeing the biggest backpacks. Whips were falling on them, and oh how the father who was carrying it suffered. Many kids never woke up. The drugs killed them". Jewish activists were also doing everything in their power to save those children. Since the Warsaw Ghetto was first established, they created a network of boarding houses, hostels, children's homes, and child-care institutions. For children, these were places full of hope that gave them a semblance of security. So when "their" centres were raided by the Jewish Ghetto Police supported by ethnical troops (Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Latvians), the children – with scarred minds, with memories of hunger and fear still fresh – reacted differently than the Warsaw poor or the so-called "refugees" (Jews sent to the Warsaw Ghetto from other centres in the General Government since the beginning of "Operation Reinhardt"). The latter were homeless for a long time, did not offer any resistance, when pressed – meekly agreed to another displacement. Adolf Berman estimated that, in general, around 30 orphanages and boarding houses of all types were liquidated: "The entire branched out childcare system covering over 100 facilities caring for around 25 thousand kids was crushed". The personnel were killed alongside the children.

Sacrifice. Some, like Janusz Korczak, along with Stefania Wilczyńska, Broniatowska, and Szternfeld, held to their ideals, selflessly caring for children, until the very end. And they remained with them until the very end. Of all their lives. Nachum Remba wrote the following about the day in August when the caregivers and their wards had to go to the Umschlagplatz: "It wasn't a march to the railcars, it was an organised, silent protest against thuggery. Unlike the masses hugged together and passively going to its demise, a Human Being rose up, one that you rarely see. The children were assembled in fours. Korczak, with his eyes fixed upon high, took the children's hands and walked in front. These were the first Jews to go to their deaths with honour". Another person, another example. And further questions which always lacked unambiguous answers. Adina Blady-Szwajger was a paediatrician. During the "Grossaktion" she

was working at a branch of the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital in Warsaw (the future location of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum permanent exhibition). She did everything she could to ease the kids' suffering: "And so, [after years] of real work at a hospital, I was leaning over children's beds, and now in the same way, I poured the last medicine in their mouths". Marek Edelman, an eyewitness to such acts, said: "Someone's merciful hand pours in the feverish mouths of other peoples' children, water with cyanide. Cyanide is now a most precious treasure, unredeemed. Cyanide means a silent death; it saves them from suffering". Were people who brought this sort of aid committing an atrocity, or did they prove that even in such inhuman conditions pity and compassion prevailed? Or was it the other way around – by administering morphine or cyanide to their little patients, putting them to sleep forever – they committed acts that could never be justified?

Extremes. Throughout the Ghetto, without pause – at the squares and in the streets, in buildings, sheds, at the Umschlagplatz – selections were conducted. Sometimes, unique situations could be observed: the Germans presented the parents with perhaps the most difficult choice in their lives – to remain (for a time) alive, or to die with their kids. One of those is recalled by Ms Staszewska. She witnessed how during one of the blockades, a German took a child from a young mother: "She hesitated for a moment, extended her arms towards the child, she could stay with it. A second's thought, the whip hangs in the air – she turns around and leaves her child behind. We could all feel her pain and despair". Antoni Szymanowski gave an example of a young father during a mass round-up (so-called "Grand Cauldron"): "Huge crowd, stupefied, dazed, and at the same time simmering with fear and anxiety, slowly moved towards reinforced gates where selection took place", he wrote in his memoirs, "I've seen horrible, dreadful things. The wife [of that man] was deported a long time ago. He had the option to live, but without his kids. He left them in the middle of the street and went through that gate. You should've heard the elder daughter calling out: »Daddy«". No one who witnessed a child calling their parents will ever forget that voice. And there were many parents like that. So were those who refused to meekly hand their children over. A lot of the survivors wrote about hundreds of such cases.

Barbarism. Hermann Hoefle – commander of the "Grossaktion" – had a habit of visiting the Umschlagplatz. He used to calmly and nonchalantly watch people scheduled "for displacement".

He was particularly fond of objectifying children. "His genial face didn't change when he entered into a room where little kids taken away from their parents were lying around on a dirty floor dotted with flies". However, among the German officers, it was not Hoefle who was the model war criminal; that title belonged to his subordinate, Ernst Geipel, the commander of the Warsaw SS – Werterfassung (an institution controlling and redistributing property confiscated from Jews sent to Treblinka). He was often present at the Umschlagplatz, especially relishing his cruel treatment of women. Many of his deeds were witnessed by Samuel Puterman (Jewish Ghetto Police officer). He talked about how Geipel would call his selected victim from the crowd scheduled for transport: "One time, it was a woman with a newborn in her arms. He asked her a few questions, including if she's glad that she's going away to work. He ordered she'd be given a loaf of bread and she thanked him. He let her go and she walked away slowly. Her child's head was peering over her shoulder. Geipel drew his revolver, he took a long time to savour the hopeless silence that fell over the area. He was setting up the shot by slowly lowering the gun... A crimson stain appeared on the mother's shoulder." Another time, he propositioned a little girl to become his lover: "The answer he got was a baffled expression of her blue eyes. She stood there for the longest time, hypnotized with fear [staring] at the drawn revolver. She didn't speak a single word. He shot her right in those big blue eyes. She fell at his feet without making a sound".

Overzealousness and madness. Most, if not all who witnessed these "hunts" gave such an assessment to behaviours and deeds of the people serving with the Jewish Ghetto Police. The means and methods of operation did not matter. What mattered was their effectiveness. Meeting the quota – leading a set number of people to the Umschlagplatz – was the most important, and in reality, the only conditions the Germans gave to the Jewish Ghetto Police. Thanks to that, they at least had a chance to survive, even it was just a day longer than their victims. The officers remained deaf to the cries and screams. Jehoszua Perle saw how "mothers kissed the boots of the bandits, wanting to save their children". They were merciless: "They pull out the sick from their beds and kids from their cribs". The victims – elderly and kids who cannot walk on their own – were often transported to the square by rickshaws and were put straight into the railcars. Another witness (a woman) saw and heard how a Jewish Ghetto Police officer treated a little girl: "She was tearfully asking him »I know you're good, please don't take me away, mommy just went out for a minute. She'll be back soon and I won't be here«". He was ruthless,

he did what was ordered in cold blood: "Two hours later I saw a dazed woman running in the middle of the street towards the square. She was crying desperately: »My baby – where's my baby«".

Afterwards, almost anyone could become a victim. Which meant the majority. Warsaw Jews received – if only partial – information on the actual purpose of the occupants' activities. Whether as a defence mechanism...?, they tried not to think that they've just been – in absentia – sentenced to extermination. On the eve of the impending tragedy, the Germans tried to keep their victims in a sense of uncertainty. So, they alternated between demonstrating their strength: organising round-ups and murdering representatives of selected Jewish groups, and – seeming – goodwill towards the Jews, allowing schools to work, giving positive opinions about the work of Jewish labourers, and assuring the Judenrat that the Ghetto will not be liquidated.

The more unsure they were of the future, the easier it was for the occupier to manipulate this closed-off, isolated community. Voices that said that an only alternative should be to openly oppose the occupier were interlaced with counterarguments by those who rejected the news about mass murders. The swaying moods allowed the tension, fear, and disorientation to fester, which in turn enabled control over the enslaved society. Only a few postulated that active resistance be organised: an attack on the Jewish Ghetto Police forces, storming the gateways and breaking through to the "Aryan side". People from the Hashomer Hatzair disseminated leaflets calling the Jews to not believe the Germans and oppose the Jewish Ghetto Police. They called for sabotaging the occupiers' activities. They explained: "The way to the Umschlagplatz leads to your deaths". Their voice however, lacked the same impetus as the will to live and faith that this is actually possible".

However, in the first ten days of August, people in the Ghetto started to understand the true purpose behind the displacements. Dawid Nowodworski managed to escape from Treblinka: "His words reinforce what we already know – one witness stated – People from all the transports were put to death and none of them could be saved. Both the ones who were captured and those who turned themselves in. That's the unembellished truth". Despite the fact that the Ghetto residents had a more and more clear image of the near future, many of them refused to

accept the thought of impending death. Maybe, on a subconscious level, or because they were certain it was impossible for something like that to happen to them. They justified it that it was only rumours, a provocation on part of the occupier. Emanuel Ringelblum wrote about it as follows: "Normal, sane people found it hard to acknowledge the thought that a government could be found on this Earth that painted itself as European, and yet murdered millions of innocents". Jan Górnicki (Ber Oszer Weisbaum) echoed the sentiment: "No one wanted to acknowledge that the Germans would have the gall to commit such a crime. After all, it's a historical responsibility – to kill a nation".

Some of the underground political activists (such as Zysze Frydman of Agudas Israel or Icchak Szyper of Poalej Syjon) expressed faith that the Jewish nation will prevail and active opposition will lead to the Ghetto being liquidated. Public opinion – as noted by Jan Mawulta (Stanisław Gombiński) in his diary – was firmly of the mind that: "There will be no consent to this". Inaction under such extreme conditions – he wrote – was supposedly proof not of helplessness, but of – deceitful – calculation: "If you can save a whole by sacrificing a part, even if it is significant, you should not, cannot hesitate! The fates of hundreds of thousands of people are at stake. Even if the sombre voices of the worst pessimists could turn out to be true, even if A HUNDRED THOUSAND PEOPLE were to die, a quarter of a million will remain, mutilated, but still!". Mawulta tried to understand and justify this attitude: "This mass of people, assembled completely by accident, wasn't ready for any sort of heroic action. Some got used to being submissive towards the Germans, others didn't realise the real scope of the threat, still others – and those were the most numerous – believed that they will be able to save some of the Warsaw Jews, and mainly themselves and their families". They were probably the ones referred to by an unknown diary author, who at the end of July wrote: "So long as the constables were roaming the shantytowns, so long as all the activity is confined to areas away from the centre, the assessments are as different, as are the opinions".

Trials. They varied. Even those who initially refused to acknowledge that the Ghetto, meaning also themselves, was scheduled for liquidation, searched for ways to reinforce their faith and change their lot. Initially, the Germans claimed that a condition to remain in the Ghetto was to go to work. "Employment became a matter of life and death – wrote Ernest – the point of gravity

shifted to buildings where the Arbeitsamt resided". The sheds started growing on an unprecedented scale, quickly becoming the size of combines. For entrepreneurs, the needs of those seeking employment were a perfect opportunity. The basis for employment was neither competence, nor skill, but money. "They demanded an »entry fee« of several or even several dozen thousand zlotys »a head«, noted Henryk Bryskier, Supposedly [it] was needed for the necessary investments in order to expand existing production departments or establish new ones". Those, who were lucky (and wealthy enough) received a certificate confirming their employment. Those garrisoned at the shop were called »live-ins« (pol. »placówkarze«). It also quickly became obvious that the chances of survival thanks to work (oftentimes fictional) and documents confirming it is (as everything in the Ghetto) temporary and superficial. A Ghetto chronicler, Ringelblum, wrote about the make-believe work of the shops during blockades: "They were created hastily, they didn't have any orders or resources, so they turn the machines on only when the Germans come".

The shops turned out to be traps. Selections were conducted, just like in the rest of the Ghetto. So first, the Germans raided a shop. Everybody were rounded up at a square for an assembly often lasting many hours. Afterwards, the workers were split up into those who (at least temporarily) could be useful and those who were – literally – useless. They looked at peoples' hands. Former office workers were to leave the »facility«. They were ordered: "Show off your muscles". The weak and ill were all directed to the Umschlagplatz. "An air of death", Bryskier noted, was present throughout the shop: "[The event] paralysed work in all the workshops on that day. The echo of the pain had just subsided when a second raid happened. And again, the thinned rows swayed and returned to their posts. Everyone was in a daze. Even someone who wasn't directly affected by the misfortune, was bewildered and broken by the ordeal, fear, uncertainty about their own lives and those of their loved ones when they stood across from the henchmen". The assurances of the German officer given to the shop owner, unwritten and unofficial SS business with the shop manager – a Jew were of no consequence: "A German officer's word and honour were binding to him, except [when dealing with] Jews". There were often cases when those who trusted the Germans were taken away, and those who hid were never looked for.

Between July and August, employment at the shops was treated as a condition for survival. Many of the workers believed that the "Grossaktion" was nearing its end. It was then that the belief was spread that the Germans will limit their activities to the poor and that it will end there: "They don't touch the centre, operating only in the shantytowns. They'll drive out the beggars, paupers, refugees. The elderly and children won't survive the trip, the toil of building a new life somewhere far away" (Jan Mawulta). People who gave faith to the rumours were also aware that they too could be displaced. When thinking about their fates, they emphasised: "The rest will be sent to labour camps in Russia to build roads and regulate rivers". These views did not last for long, due to a radical change in the occupiers' tactics beginning from the second half of August. The areas located within the Ghetto, were "freed from the Jews". However, the Grossaktion was underway without interruption. It was dynamically getting closer to the centre. Along with selections, the process of internal displacements was also ongoing: "A line of people approaches the SS soldier, an unknown woman wrote, one look at the documents, at the face, a touch of the whip. To the left – freedom, to the right – Umschlagplatz. Selection over". Soon after, there was another: "The German politely directs the parents to the Umschlagplatz, and their daughter to her freedom, the daughter comes up to him and politely asks to be given permission to go with her parents, and he, very politely, agrees. Politely, calmly, quietly, no moaning, screaming, nor spasms" (Mawulta).

Many individuals from the mass of people became victims even before they were brought to the Umschlagplatz – because they couldn't walk on their own, because they tried to rebel, because they resisted, because they could not pay their overseers to supposedly be set free (Samuel Zylbersztajn). Or when they were shot while being pushed into railcars: "When there was no place left, the soldiers sometimes shot into the crowd. The people moved back instinctively and several dozen more people were shoved in" (memories of an unknown woman). The reason was that these types of "incidents" could not disturb the liquidation action.

The circumstances forced people to look for or create hiding places. A popular catchphrase in the Ghetto was "HW" – "To hide well". People tried everywhere: in rooms, cellars, attics, among the rubble. They quickly built double walls, walled-in alcoves, masked spaces under roofs. Wardrobes were moved against the walls to mask the last room in the house. Stores were locked

from the inside. First shelters were being built underground: "Experiences from the province taught us that we should hide". Some contemplated escaping to the "Aryan side": "We considered it a pure fantasy – wrote Stok about his neighbour's proposition – Where would we go? What will we live off of? How long can a person keep hiding?". Others however – deliberately – decided to take this risk. They knew that the danger is twofold. The Home Army bulletin informed: "More and more cases of escapees from the Ghetto in the Aryan district. Aside from professional informants (blackmail) working for money, many amateurs appear". We don't know how many, probably very few, actually succeeded in escaping. Most – the ones escaping through the holes in the wall, sewers, rooftops adjacent to the "Aryan side", or by drilling through walls, paid the highest price for a failed attempt: death by firing squad. People also tried in other ways – with the help of family, friends, or comrades. Edelman remembered people being freed disguised as doctors or nurses: "Hospital overalls saved hundreds [of people]". There were those, who hid inside transformers. Sources also mention another method: "There were, albeit rare, cases of people who survived thanks to hearses. A living person was put under dead bodies and was transported out of the square" (memories of an unknown woman).

One other form of escaping became quite common, a form of passive resistance: suicide. At the turn of July and August 1942, when the purpose of the Grossaktion became public knowledge, the mood prevalent in the Ghetto was presented by Adolf Berman:

"A state of strain and nervous agitation reached its climax. You could see the effect of the physical and mental strain on every face. It was said that everyone had »a deathly look about them«. The number of people frantically asking for poison started to grow quickly". Only a few were lucky enough to obtain it. These were the people a witness to the events at the beginning of August spoke about: "Those who hoped for being exempt and weren't, took cyanide sometimes at the last moment before being herded into rail cars". In their memories, people often mention last ditch efforts by medics to bring last aid to people being transported out: "Nurses were looking for their fathers and mothers in the crowd, and with a wild gleam in their eyes would give them a good death in the form of a morphine injection".

Destroyed and helpless, they simply marched on. They did as ordered: stop, squat, faster, slower. With a last chance to be saved by a friend in the Jewish Ghetto Police: "They save their families,

friends, neighbours. They save them for sport, they save them for money" (Mawulta). As the Ghetto got smaller, documents confirming that the holder is or was employed lost all their value. The person was treated as "disposable". Not because they were inefficient, but because of "the need for more Jewish lives" (Ringelblum). The escorted columns marched peacefully. After all, some were able to evade being displaced on multiple occasions: "Everyone, documents in hand, awaited selection that was often conducted couple hundred metres away from the Umschlagplatz, then they looked for selection at the entrance, then it could happen at any time when they reached the square, then right before they were marched into the railcars, right before they were herded inside. They entered the cars still unconsciously clutching the precious document. Even once already inside, they were frantically listening for someone to maybe call the name of their company". After the car doors were shut, they realised all chance of that was gone. The train departed towards Treblinka.

At the end of August, the blockades and round-ups were suspended. Many survivors hoped the Grossaktion was finally over. During the first days of September however, it turned out that it was only a "shuffling" of the forces before the last stage. The Germans decided to give out a small amount of "numbers to live" to people required by the shops to continue production. In only six days (6-11 September), the so-called: "Grand Cauldron" was organised. The remaining Ghetto inhabitants were rounded up between the four closed off streets (Smocza, Gęsia, Zamenhofa, Szczęśliwa). Whether you stay and endure, or be deported to certain death was decided by shop owners. From among the Jews who were still in the Ghetto, such acts of kindness were bestowed on about 35 thousand people. Everyone else were herded to the Umschlagplatz. Hundreds of people were murdered and left on the streets. A participant of these events, SS officer Witossek summed it up: "Look what a cauldron we created".

The last – symbolic – victims were the Jewish policemen. At the time when the Grossaktion was initiated, four groups of Jews – rickshaw and wagon drivers, gravediggers, and police officers – were thought to be untouchable. For practical reasons: being directly involved. All of them were required to perform all duties imposed by the German authorities. Many in their overzealousness did more than was required. The Jewish Police officers were the most active. Almost all of those who then served with the Jewish Ghetto Police (ca. 1.5 thousand people) were sent directly to

carry out German plans. Accused of servility, they quickly became similar to the Germans in their actions. They were ruthless, both towards strangers and the people they knew. Desensitised to the sight of murders committed right in front of them. Maybe they believed they were special. Was the ruthlessness, not uncommon greed, and the corruptibility inherently related to their role a result of wickedness, determination, or hope? No one can tell. One thing was certain: they believed and expected, until the very end, that in exchange for their service, they themselves and their loved ones will be able to survive. Survive, but for an immense price: the life of others.

Those who gained experience during roundups of people to be sent to labour camps or during sanitary blockades were particularly active. For the first week (22-28 July) they were conducting the blockades by themselves, and afterwards, they escorted the victims, their brothers and sisters in faith, to the Umschlagplatz. Due to low efficiency, the SS command – that supervised the liquidation – decided to take over. A division of roles in this new “turn” was directly opposite to the number of engaged people. Since the end of July – as noted in the “Jewish Warsaw Liquidation” document – each action was commanded by the smallest (between ten and twenty), yet the most powerful SS squads. Below them in the hierarchy, were ethnic troops comprised of 50 to 100 soldiers (Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians). The lowest tier was the group of 250-350 Jewish police officers. Because they were originally from this community, they were better able to search out hiding spots. A “Ghetto opinion” that they were omnipresent was prevalent. On the other side, there were these “Jewish masses” of almost half a million: “The Ghetto streets were the hunting grounds – claimed on of the rickshaw drivers – and the people were the game”. Abraham Lewin claimed the people serving with the Jewish Ghetto Police were deemed as the biggest threat: „I hear the whistles of Jewish Police officers and hear Jews running and looking for cover”. At the time, Szymon Huberband was in his hideout: “We were safe here from Polish and German police officers, but not from the Jewish ones”.

Several weeks after the Grossaktion concluded, Members of the Oneg Szabat underground organisation described the blockades. The selected building, street fragment, quarter was surrounded by armed ethnical troops. Jewish Ghetto Police officers forcibly entered the building and every room. Using rubber nightsticks, they herded everyone to the courtyard: “There were collection points near houses – wagons surrounded by wooden planks. Both the people who

resisted and those who didn't were loaded onto these". Often, Jewish police officers would "walk along the middle of the street in a wide "V" formation opened towards the direction they were marching. Individual parts of the letter were connected with nightsticks, so that no one would be able to get out." (Henryk Makower).

From August 6th – the day of forced relocation of Jewish police officers and their next of kin – a so-called "police block" was created as a place of assembly for the "chosen ones". Although the former were aware of their cooperation in a war crime, the latter could function in an alternate reality, if only for a brief time. One of those was Janina David: "The blockades were still in place and I firmly separated myself mentally from all that happened outside". Halina Birenbaum regarded this contrived "safety zone" in a similar manner, when she spoke about the self-defence mechanism: "We stopped caring about what was happening beyond the police block. The fates of tens of thousands of people were unimportant to us. [Despite the fact that] we were constantly hearing blood-curdling stories from eye-witnesses: Jewish Police officers who did all the dirty work".

Oftentimes, "dirty work" provided quantifiable benefits to the officers. In other words: few of those rounded up at the Umschlagplatz, managed – sometimes on multiple occasions – to buy themselves out. Paying off the Jewish Police officers. In fact, it was not the only – even temporary – form of gaining wealth. Although the obligations of the Jewish Ghetto Police included guarding the "property" left behind by the Jews deported to Treblinka, and stealing was punishable by death, many took that risk regardless. Geipel who commanded the police officers often liked to ask them ironically: "So, how much did you earn on the round-ups today?". Sometimes, the Jewish Police officers paid the highest price. Either because of greed, or because they spared someone's life, they would be punished. Józef Szmierling the Jewish Ghetto Police Chief was in the habit of firing those who released Jews from the Umschlagplatz. Not much time later, they themselves – now, former police officers – would return to the Umschlagplatz, albeit in a completely different role.

On the turn of September 5th and 6th, Warsaw Ghetto liquidation was nearing its end and therefore, the continued existence of the Jewish Ghetto Police lost its *raison d'être*. On that night

the police district suffered the same “cauldron” as all the rest of the Jewish population. The Germans awarded the Jewish Ghetto Police with five hundred “numbers to live”, half of which was intended for the officers themselves, and the other half, for their relatives. Puterman remembered: “Some voice was constantly calling out officers who received the numbers. Lejkin was walking along the middle of the street and was accosted by policemen begging for numbers for their wives and children. Lejkin had to fend them off with his nightstick like he would a pack of dogs. They received the beatings, but never stopped asking”. Ringelbaum summed up the former “hunter” roundup: “There were three hundred of them left, the worse bribe-takers”. Some ex-police officers managed to survive – they became labourers in Warsaw. Some were sent to Majdanek. The vast majority however, had no such “luck”. They were deported to Treblinka.

Was the price the Jewish Ghetto Police officers paid for their cooperation with the Germans high? By mid-1942, the Jewish community treated them with aversion, which, during the Grossaktion turned into hate. Witnesses of the September round-up felt satisfaction at their misfortune: “[It] was payback for their awful treatment of Warsaw Jews” (Abraham Lewin). Another person was even more contemptuous and emotional when he spoke about the ultimate end of the Jewish Ghetto Police: “You should’ve seen those »heroes« being herded along with the other wretches. They were like scared dogs, pitiful, filthy – not even dogs come to think of it, but lice, crawling on all fours, hiding in the attics and basements – in flats they ransacked not so long ago” (Jehoszua Perle). And the Germans? They despised their former co-workers – initially, because they weren’t being displaced, and then – because they were only Jews and as such, should be immediately deported and disposed of.

After the Grossaktion, the Jewish quarter stopped functioning as a (very contrived) place to live and work. It ceased to exist. After the Grossaktion, the Ghetto became an empty ruin. For those left, it was a place they survived at and worked like slaves. “All that was left were houses, dead or dying, streets blocked with barbed wire, wooden fences separating individual blocks of flats, pavement spattered with blood, smoke rising from fires dying out, pungent burnt smell – all create a proper colour for this city of death” (Oneg Szabat). However, first and foremost – as it was emphasised – the most characteristic feature of this part of Warsaw was... the lack of people.

Natan Żelichower wrote about such impressions: "I walk out onto the street. It's an unforgettable moment and an unforgettable sight that will never fade. Scared, gaunt, massacred faces of the dead – and equally quiet, equally scared faces of the living, skulking along the walls".

The Jews who lived in the Warsaw Ghetto and survived all of it, constantly asked a single question: why? Without raising any sort of resistance from the Jews, a small band of Germans, actively supported by Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Latvians, so easily and without a single casualty, managed to send more than 300 thousand Jews to their deaths like lambs to the slaughter. Why? "No help from the outside was forthcoming, no one protested. No voice of indignation made its way across the soundwaves to those eagerly listening within the Warsaw Ghetto; not from London, not from Washington D.C., not from the Vatican?" The answers are as numerous as the questions. Because we were – said those who survived – too weak, totally unprepared, taken by surprise, overly submissive, so cheated, too sick, too old, too young, we had children, we had women... All of them – powerless. All of them – condemned: "Because we were Jews".

The Poles, especially those living in Warsaw, were fully aware of what was happening behind the wall in the Ghetto during the summer of 1942. After the Grossaktion was concluded, the Home Army bulletin informed: "Next to the tragedy endured by the Polish citizens, decimated by the enemy, our land has for almost a year witnessed a horrible, planned slaughter of the Jews. This mass murder is unparalleled in human history, all the known atrocities pale in comparison". The Front for the Rebirth of Poland was very negative in its assessment of the indifference – often expressed by many Poles – deeming them "Pilates who washed their hands". Such wording proved that at least some Poles realised the tragedy that befell their fellow countrymen – the Polish Jews.

Supporters of German anti-Jewish activities often disputed this topic. Some right-wing Polish underground writings accused the occupier of being too lenient with the Jews. One example of such sentiments is an article prepared by activists of the "Anti-Communist Agency" (an intelligence agency connected with the Government Delegation for Poland). They indignantly claimed that Poles should not save the »Jewish bastards« and »shaggy favoured children«. It was

openly justified that liquidating the Ghetto is in the vital interest for the future of Poland: it requires Jewish communism, Jewish resistance, and the Jewish proletariat to be physically destroyed. That is why the extermination of the Jews was treated as a »positive occurrence«. Therefore, the question – with vastly different views and attitudes of Poles – remains open: why...?

**Paweł Wieczorek** – Doctor of humanities. Specialty: contemporary history. Cooperation: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, the Jewish Historical Institute, and the Social and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland. Winner of Jewish Historical Institute's Majer Bałaban contest for the best doctoral dissertation (2014). Participant of international research programme "Pogroms of Jews in the Polish lands in the 19th and 20th centuries" (2013-2016). Author of books and articles. Research interests: Polish-Jewish relations after 1945, Jewish social and political movements, national and ethnic minorities in Poland, cold war, and totalitarianism.

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