

# Religiousness of Warsaw Jews after the outbreak of war

**We hereby provide an article by rabbi David Berman from the Science and Research Department of WGM, published in the *Słowo Żydowskie* monthly to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the closure of the Warsaw Ghetto borders.**

It is often forgotten or underestimated that the Jews described as “religious” or “traditional”, in a broad sense, were not a group cut off from the rest of the Warsaw Jewish community, but rather an important, integral part of it. Daily prayer, study and kosher food were for many Jews as ordinary as working and sleeping – just a part of their daily routine. This was Yiddishkeit, the Jewish way of life, its essence. The calendar was dominated by Shabbats and Jewish holidays, regardless of whether someone strictly followed Jewish law or not. The language of everyday conversations of Warsaw Jews was Yiddish. The Jewish political initiatives that appeared from time to time, as well as cultural and social movements and their importance can only be fully understood in the context of the traditional way of life that preceded them for centuries.

The establishment of the Warsaw Ghetto was therefore an exceptional challenge for the religious Jews who ended up there. As the occupation deepened and the situation in the city deteriorated, it was more and more difficult to openly follow the Jewish traditions. However, this does not change the fact that until the deportation in 1942 there was some semblance of normal religious life and activity, as confirmed by historical materials describing issues related to religious rituals and the challenges of their observance and organisation.

A significant percentage of the ghetto’s population respected Jewish religious rights and traditions in one way or another. One of the main problems was obtaining kosher meat, prepared according to the Halacha rules, the Jewish religious law. In the years preceding the

war, there were twenty-six poultry slaughterhouses in Warsaw, among others on ul. Zamenhofska 44 and Twarda 1 and in other places. Additionally, kosher butcheries existed in Praga, Wola and other suburban locations. Nevertheless, with the outbreak of the war and the bombing of Warsaw, the production of kosher food decreased dramatically.

On 6 October 1939, the German occupier officially banned Jewish ritual slaughter. Initially, the ban referred only to cattle, but poultry farmers (butchers) had serious concerns about continuing their activities. However, they were not afraid of Nazis, who did not know the location of the slaughterhouse or the identity of the traders, but the local police, who could report these activities to the authorities. Thus, an organised bribery system was created, under which bribes were given to the heads of police districts. These bribes absorbed a huge part of the slaughterhouse's income, sometimes as much as seventy or eighty percent. The butchers also hid their activities by putting "non-ritual" signs on the walls of the slaughterhouse and hanging various tools used in non-kosher plants in visible places in case of inspection by the authorities. This situation lasted throughout the winter of 1939-40, but in summer 1940 production dropped to about one percent of pre-war levels.

With the closure of the ghetto it became impossible to bring in live birds, so production was completely stopped. According to rabbi Shimon Huberband's notes, the most orthodox inhabitants refrained from eating poultry, the only exception being meat smuggled in from peripheral areas.

As in the case of poultry, the production of kosher beef was also seriously disrupted by warfare. With the entry of German troops, such activities were resumed at various locations. After the ban on ritual slaughter was announced in the German rag "Nowy Kurier Warszawski" on October 6, 1939, many of the shochets officially stopped working. These works were therefore carried out secretly by younger workers in the ruins on Niska, Miła and Stawka streets, as well as on Grzybowska, Waliców and Krochmalna streets, and in Praga, Wola and some other places. The sellers hid meat for sale, e.g. among vegetables, and took it out only at the express request of the customer. However, the certification and rigorous rabbinical supervision that was used before the war was abandoned, as a result of which strictly religious people refrained from eating meat

unless it was obtained from a reliable source. The local police found out that ritual slaughter was still taking place in Warsaw, but it was soon bribed. The policemen moved the shochet knives from place to place and escorted the workers home after curfew, explaining that these people are being led to the police station, if there were some suspicions. Jewish tanners worked hand in hand with those of non-Jewish origin. Every week about fifty to sixty large and similar numbers of small cattle were slaughtered. For safety reasons, this work was performed mainly in the evenings.

Nevertheless, after the ghetto was established, it became impossible to slaughter cattle. During the first weeks, there were still some cattle inside the ghetto, and over time several people managed to bribe some of the guards to enable its smuggling. However, the amount was small, which prompted butchers to organise ritual slaughter outside the ghetto and then smuggle the prepared beef to sell it to the people inside. However, in order to achieve this, the shochets had to be transported out of the ghetto secretly, which required them to shave their beards and dress up in a non-Jewish outfits. However, it was not so easy. In general, a shochet stayed outside the ghetto for about two weeks, living at that time in the premises of a person of non-Jewish origin where the slaughter took place.

Such activities were carried out in Pelcowizna, Ochota, Bródno, Malichy and other towns. The meat was then smuggled into the ghetto in trucks of e.g. gas, medical or sanitary services. As in the case of policemen, the guards were also bribed, which allowed activities to continue freely.

Nevertheless, the standard of ritual slaughter offered by these shochets did not satisfy strictly orthodox Jews for various reasons. They therefore stopped buying meat from such sources, which led the organisers of this kind of trade to abandon the idea of using shochets and started selling meat that was kosher in name only.

On the other hand, kosher meat from Otwock, which was considered a product of a higher standard and thus acceptable to everyone, was a serious competition to Warsaw sellers. Local sellers responded to this competition by smuggling live cattle into the ghetto, which were then killed and prepared especially for strictly orthodox people several times a week. A shochet, who

was caught at practising his craft could even be sentenced to death.

Another foundation of the traditional Jewish ritual is regular washing in a ritual bath called mikvah. The Warsaw mikvahs were forcibly closed as early as December 1939, under the false pretext that they were unhygienic. For the religious Jews it was a huge problem, because the Jewish law requires ablutions in the mikvah before conducting many activities.

According to Rabbi Huberband, women started to travel to towns near Warsaw such as Otwock, Falenica, Rembertów and Pruszków to take advantage of the baths still available in those places. Since 1940 travelling by train was forbidden for Jews, which made it difficult for women to observe this ritual. So they would travel in groups to Rembertów, Pruszków and Piaseczno on horse-drawn carriages. Such a trip took a lot of time, sometimes they returned just before the evening curfew. Despite these difficulties, hundreds of them came to these places every day. In summer 1940 Rabbi Icchak Szapiro and Meszulam Kaminer rented the bath beaches by the Vistula river and hired women to supervise them. However, this project lasted quite shortly, because low water temperature adversely affected the health.

Eventually, in November this year, the ghetto was completely closed, which in practice made any departure impossible. Nevertheless, the owners of the mikvahs on Grzybowska 1 and 14, Dzielna 38 and Smocza 22 streets managed to bribe the officials and open their premises. To reduce the risk, hidden entrances from neighboring buildings were used. The mikvahs were used by a lot of people and this situation lasted until summer 1941. Finally, in August 1941, the owners obtained the authorities' consent to officially open their mikvahs, and what is more, an additional one was opened on Franciszkańska 26 street. It is not clear how long they remained in use, but less than a year later the deportations of Warsaw Jews to the Treblinka death camp began.

To sum up, despite enormous difficulties and obstacles resulting from the creation of the ghetto, the Warsaw Jews put a lot of effort into preserving traditions that most people would consider unnecessary. It was the great importance of these deeply rooted practices for their Jewish identity and their Yiddishkeit that prompted them to maintain their religious activity despite the risk of penalties, including the death sentence, resulting from the oppressive decrees of the Nazi

occupier.

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