

“Bloody Friday”, 17/18 April, 1942

In the early spring of 1942, the Warsaw ghetto could be perceived by some as an island (of relative security) surrounded by a turbulent sea (war unrest in eastern Europe). Proportionally to shrinking, and then disappearing of Jewish centres in the area of the General Government, the number of Jews in the ghetto was growing. Its stability or even “development” was witnessed by subsequent transports of Jews from around-Warsaw centres, from Western Europe and Germany.

The Jewish population – by coercion – quickly adapted to the conditions created by the occupant. Those who initially considered them inhumane were soon to treat them as everyday. Life forced humbleness. And it made one realise that it could always be worse. The largest community of Jews in Europe was to be deemed as a permanent element. It was supposed to give them a guarantee of being and become a testimony that would deny the anti-Jewish actions of Hitler’s total power.

How deceptive and elusive were these beliefs, hopes, and faith in the near and distant future, was indicated by the actions taken until then by the Germans: from 22 June, 1941, mass murders carried out in the Soviet Union and from 17 March, 1942, the implementation of the so-called Operation Reinhardt in the territory of the GG. That is what “Bloody Friday” proved: a drama that was taking place in a closed time frame (evening of 17 April, 1942 – early morning of 18 April, 1942), in a space isolated from the rest of the world (in the so-called Jewish district in Warsaw). The scenario was carried out – from the issuing and the order of the occupying power – by German officers and non-commissioned officers from the police, SS, Gestapo and Jewish employees of the Jewish Ghetto Police. The Germans had a supervisory and executive role, while the others acted as translators, but also as witnesses of the crimes committed on their confreres that night. This first “hunt” organised on such a scale had a dual function: a bridge connecting the existing crimes with the action planned for the near future – the beginning of the end of the Warsaw ghetto under the so-called Grossaktion. This first “sample” had a very specific extent: 52 people

were killed.

The first, very vague, information about the restrictive activities planned by the occupant against Warsaw Jews began started to be broadcast in the early afternoon. They were an offshoot of the meeting held by the ghetto's SS Head, Karl Brandt, with the commanders of the Jewish Ghetto Police (also referred to as the Jewish police), Jakub Lejkin and Marcel Czapliński. The latter received an order to prepare a group of a dozen or so Jews serving at the Jewish Ghetto Police for the evening. They only had to fulfil one condition – demonstrate their knowledge of German. Around 9 p.m., “the chosen ones” had to report at the Pawiak prison. Brandt did not say a word about the actions planned for the night. Adam Czerniaków, President of the Warsaw Judenrat, noted down on April 17: “There is panic in the district. The shops are being closed. The population is gathering in the street in front of the houses. I went out onto the street and walked through several streets to calm the people down.”

The actions of the Germans were systematised, which made the course of most of the actions similar. There were cars getting around the designated areas of the ghetto, and inside them were the “hunters” – an armed German crew – whom the chauffeur and a Jew from the Jewish Ghetto Police subordinated to. On the basis of the top-down findings: the surnames of those who were sentenced to death to death along with their addresses, the Germans set off on their “hunts”. In the Home Army's reports from that period, it was reported that the future murderers were (in most cases) exceptionally “polite” towards the Jews. So, they asked completely unaware people to take only some necessary things along with them: their documents, a towel, and a toothbrush. They lied saying that they do not know the reason nor the purpose of such a late visit. They took them to the car. They drove away. Not much more than two or three blocks away they would order the people to leave the car. In the street, in a square, in front of a building, against the wall or in the stairwell. They would fire a shot at close range – in the head, eye, heart, or back. They were killing them. Afterwards, they ordered the Jewish Ghetto Police to remove the corpses from the public place.

The cases of killing the janitors of buildings, where the killers expected to find victims “included” on the list, were not planned beforehand. In part probably “experimentally”, “on trial”, so that the

executioner would feel his advantage over the defenceless Jew. He gained bravery and self-confidence in the art of killing. And he would passively get involved in this experiment: the first mass murder. The wives of people from the list of the ones sentenced to death died, too. Perhaps they had been envisaging that this was their last path, so they wanted to accompany their husbands. Persist until the very end. When a listed person was not present at the indicated address, a random person would lose their life: a guest, neighbour, acquaintance, or a total stranger to the would-be victim. Because – as it can be inferred – the effectiveness of the murderers counted, and so did the number of the victims. “Quality” or the implementation of the tasks in accordance with the guidelines was rather a secondary thing.

Indisputable, however, is that the atrocities committed at night from 17 to 18 April 1942 were not accidental. In the memories of those who survived, special names were given to them. Certainly, it was the “bakers’ night”: Daniel Blajman (chairman of the Bakers’ Association – had been giving financial support for children, underground press, illegal social and political movements) was shot, together with his wife Felicja. Lejzota Tekel was killed the same way (he supported the underground movements). It was also the “printers’ night”: Ludwik Lindenfeld (caricaturist, graphic artist) was shot at the Britania Hotel. Mojżesz Szklar (typesetter), fell victim to a chase that very night. The executioners directed him to Pawiak. He was murdered following two weeks of torture. The chairman of the Printer’s Trade Union, Lozer Klog, escaped arrest that night and acted in the underground in the following months. He was captured together with his wife in July, but managed to escape from a transport to the Treblinka death camp. They both died in Płudy. Poles had denounced them. All of the above were unionists, members of the Bund, co-creators of the underground press... The night of 17/18 April 1942 was also called “social workers’ night” because of the name of Menachem Lejzer (scientist, economist, statistician, in the underground press he wrote under the pseudonym of “A. Korew”), appearing on the list or Sonia Nowogródzka (pedagogue, teacher, caregiver for orphaned children). These people co-created the illegal JIKOR (Jewish Cultural Organization), they founded schools (“Without school textbooks and help, with barefoot and hungry children, in bereft classes, the Jewish school is taking again its first steps”), organised illegal cultural events with the so-called Home Committees. Lejzer, hearing about the unrest in the ghetto, cancelled the lecture that had been planned for that day: “Dedication to the holy faith – formerly and today.” Full of anxiety, he went

to his apartment for the first time in several weeks. He did not manage to arrive there. He died in front of the entrance to the building. Nowogródzka managed to hide for several weeks, and help the children. At the turn of July and August, she was caught as a result of a blockade in Warsaw's Nowolipie. She died in Treblinka.

The death sentence hung over every Jew. It was irrefutable and irreversible. So those who, on the eve of the Friday-Saturday pogrom, seemed to be closer to the Germans than other Jews, had to die as well. Not infrequently were they called collaborators or shmaltsowniks. They were under a common denominator – they originated from Group 13 (a centre called the “Jewish Gestapo”, based at 13 Leszno Street, commonly known as the so-called “Thirteen”), which was liquidated in August 1941. This was the case with Abram Szept (co-owner of the Britania Hotel), who – when people who were “suspected” of anti-German activities had been arrested in the hotel – offered help to a German officer. First, he witnessed the shooting of four of the arrested people (including Michael Wolf Folman and Chil Miński, his companions from the “Thirteen”), to become a victim himself a while later. That night, other people from the “Thirteen” were also murdered: Jakub Gurwicz and Szlamka Kuwman (vel Szmul Rohman). A few weeks later, Lejb Jehuda Mandel, Wolf Szymonowicz, and many others perished.

Only the “chosen ones”, the most important people in the “Thirteen’s” hierarchy, had a deferred sentence. Like Moryc Kohn and Zelig Heller. Protégés of the Gestapo (they came from the “Thirteen”, since 1941 they had been considered leaders of the Warsaw ghetto’s underworld), they probably believed that their position in the ghetto structure was untouchable. That is why – when at the end of July 1942, the “Grossaktion” was launched – they had the courage to “intervene” at the Umschlagplatz and “free” (for horrendous sums of money) some of the people sentenced to Treblinka. At the beginning of August 1942, when they were to die, they were no longer “omnipotent”: “Brandt saw them in fury, screams echoed throughout the building; after a few minutes, two pistoleros came out dragging Kohn and Heller behind them. Kohn resisted, shouted, pleaded; his executioner was dragging him by force. Heller walked calmly, pale as a corpse, with his perpetual smirk in the corner of his mouth. They dragged them to the wall in the courtyard, threw them on the ground and shot them to death.” Abraham Gancwajch, the founder of the “Thirteen”, made it out alive. When, in the beginning of April 1942, a rumour about

the prosecution of people associated with the “Thirteen” had begun to spread, he left the ghetto. His later fate is not known... He was most probably buried in the rubble.

On Saturday morning the “hunt” was finally over: 52 people – both women and men – lost their lives. The authorities also allowed relatives to make a burial in the Jewish cemetery. How unconventional were the words of Emanuel Ringelblum, the ghetto chronicler, who said a few days after “Bloody Friday”: “The mood in the street has somewhat improved. People calmed down and started to be a little more optimistic.” Perhaps he was influenced by a message that the German authorities ordered Adam Czerniaków to announce, which read as follows: “The action of the night of 17 to 18 April, 1942 was sporadic in its nature in order to punish those, who do not mind their own business. It is recommended to the population to calmly deal with their normal affairs and then such action will not happen again.” It remains an open question whether the President of the Warsaw ghetto believed in the words under which he placed his signature. After all, the majority of the ghetto’s inhabitants were fully aware that the murders of 17/18 April were a prelude to the Holocaust. “Open”, although illegal actions of the Jewish underground had to become truly conspiratorial.

The Germans probably assumed that any pretext to initiate anti-Jewish activities would be good, if it brought the expected results. And that is exactly what happened: “Bloody Friday” caused panic, and following it, fear and uncertainty of the next day entered the minds and souls. At the same time, in the following weeks, terror grew in the ghetto and next bloody days followed and the corpses of subsequent victims were more and more often found lying in the streets. Two versions generally circulated, explaining the source of the April murders. And so, the first one, repeated after the Germans by the representatives of the Judenrat, was about preventing the illegal activity of Jewish political organisations and the need to fight against the underground press. In the second one, there was talk about a conflict of interests: the struggle was between people who came from the “Thirteen” and the employees of the Jewish Ghetto Police. It is worth quoting Ringelblum’s apt insight here: “The Gestapo beast devours its own children. Gancwajch, Kohn, and Heller are already trembling for their lives.” For the German authorities, the benefits were twofold: it was easier to control the Jewish underworld, if necessary, support the parties dependent on this power, and eventually (not distant as it turned out), should the need arise,

liquidate it.

However, such an interpretation of April events is not sufficient enough. It does not reflect their full dimension. By the same token, it does not allow for answering the principal question: against whom did the Germans direct their forces? Well, above all, against those who had not obeyed the rules dictated by the occupant. Against those, who demonstrated more than just the will to survive and opposed dying passively. Therefore – in the opinion of the Germans – they had to die. Because they had been helping people in need. They supported and developed Jewish culture. They were able to preserve – to the extent of the existing conditions – a minimum of sovereignty. Most importantly, however, they co-created history...

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