

Kurek - Jewish Ghettos from 4

During the early months of the war, the Polish Jews acted in the same way that they acted in all Polish wars during the previous 1000 years, and considered that this war "as not a Jewish problem or business." The Jews started to create a new quality of a political-national Jewish life under the German occupation. At the beginning of WWII Polish Jews acted as if the invasion of Poland was solely a "Polish problem," and did not concern the Jews. This fact is well confirmed by the notes of Emanuel Ringelblum, the words of Mark Edelman, and other Jewish historical sources.

During 1939 - 1942 the position, decisions, and activities of the Polish Jews were not the cause of the coming Holocaust. During that time the forthcoming Holocaust was only known to a small group of Germans in the top hierarchy of the German State.

From the beginning of WWII, with no regard to the differences in political views or religious faith, the common belief of all Polish Jews was a conviction that:

1. The Polish-German and the Polish-Soviet wars are a "Polish issue," towards which the Jews have to keep their separate indifferent position.

2. Based on the above facts, the Jews had to get autonomy for themselves from the Germans - the new governors of Poland - because to get autonomy on Polish land from the Poles was impossible.

During September 1939, "within the structure of the Polish Army, about 120,000 Jewish Polish citizens took part in the struggle against the Germans. Over 32,000 Jews - soldiers and officers - were killed, and 61,000 were taken prisoner." Among the Jewish soldiers only a small group (who took their example from the Poles), founded a Jewish anti-German and anti-Russian organization called "Świt." This organization later changed its name to the "Jewish Military Union" (Żydowski Związek Wojskowy, or ŻZW), an organization which is comparable with the Polish Home Army in its aims and activities. The head of the ŻZW was Lieutenant David Apfelbaum. The soldiers of the ŻZW had contacts with the Polish Underground State and about 150-400 well-armed ŻZW soldiers struggled during the Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943.

The rest of the Jews in late 1939 had chosen their own political means in an attempt to gain national autonomy. The key person who helps us understand the chronology, logic, and facts of the Jewish choice was a pre-war Senator of the Polish State, Adam Czerniaków, the "Head of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw," under the German occupation he was the "Head of the Warsaw Judenrat" and "Mayor of the Warsaw Jews," an autonomy commonly known as the "Warsaw Ghetto."

Remember, Warsaw was the capital of Poland, a nation which had the biggest concentration of Jews in all of Poland. What prompted the decisions in Warsaw and steps taken by Adam Czerniaków, was the example of the positions and behavior of Jews in other places where there were large concentrations of Jewish population.

From the beginning of the war until his death, Czerniaków kept a diary, most of which has been saved. It is a historical resource and treasure which permits one to see the developing chronology and problems of the Jewish-German and Jewish-Polish relationships during 1939-1942. This is a very important source for an understanding of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations in those years.

Adam Czerniaków was a Senator in Poland. In any democratic state in the world the position of a parliament member obliges the Senator with the power to represent the interest of the electorate within the state and to be loyal to the state. The obligations of the Polish Parliament members were the same for

all: for those who represented the Poles as well for those who represented the ethnic minorities, including the Jewish minority. So it was in the Polish State, as it is most other multinational states. For example, in the United States of America, whose American Senator, elected by the votes of the Americans of Polish origin, has the same obligations towards the United States as a Senator elected by the votes of Americans of Jewish, Chinese or Thai origin.

In September, 1939, Adam Czerniaków, as the "Head of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw," represented more than 300,000 Jewish inhabitants in the capital city. He made no contacts with the Polish authorities ruling the capital during their defense against the Germans, nor with the authorities of the Polish Underground State who ruled later. It can be seen from the notes in his diary that almost all of the days after the Germans entered Warsaw he had spent his time with the Germans negotiating the conditions of co-operation, and immediately implementing those conditions. In light of his later notes (and other historical facts from 1939-1942), the Jewish Senator it becomes obvious that the negotiations with the Germans about the "conditions of co-operation" had to do with negotiations of administrative and legal matters and the creation of Jewish autonomy in Warsaw.

Notes from Czerniaków's diary written in 1939, indicate that he and other Warsaw Jews were still living in Poland, and in addition to "Jewish problems" in Warsaw, there were also "Polish problems." During the first ten days of October 1939 Czerniaków had received from the Germans the position of the "Head of the Warsaw Judenrat." At the same time, in Łódź, the Germans named a Jewish representative as "The Leader of the Oldest Jews, M. Chaim Rumkowski."

The rest of the centers of Jewish life in Poland also followed the example of Warsaw and Łódź. I do not know of any city or town in Poland "occupied by Hitler's troops where a Jewish community had rejected the Germans' wide co-operation." Because of that "wide co-operation" the Jews had accepted the Germans as the new power in Poland.

In such a way the Judenrats (the future Jewish autonomous powers) co-operating with the Germans during the first months of the war had covered all the territories of Poland under the German occupation. The Judenrats, except in the spheres of religion and education, were involved in such activities as: employment, directing of the Jews to work for Germans; supply; health care system; organizing of the Jewish police and prisons; transport systems and the postal service. It very soon appeared that the Judenrats had played a very important double role in the life of the Polish Jews:

1. For the Germans they were a continuation of German power in the ghettos and "the Jewish Gendarmerie," which was responsible for the implementation of German orders;
2. For the Jewish people it was the only power which coordinated all aspects of Jewish life.

In Autumn of 1939 the Polish Jews broke off communications with the last representatives of Polish State power and did not make contact with the emerging Polish Underground State. They, however, had started an active and organized contact with the German occupation authorities, under German stewardship they also started to transform the existing Jewish ghettos into territorial autonomies, on Polish lands.

The Jewish autonomy negotiated by the Warsaw Jews with the Germans occupying the Polish lands, and the chronology of the creation of this autonomy is evident by a reading of Adam Czerniaków's diary:

January 1940 - Their attempts to create a Jewish administration.

May 1940 - Their self-government, with a right of execution [like taxes from the Jewish population].

June 1940 - "In the morning I had a meeting with Braun. He said that in 3-4 weeks there will be self-government for Jews."

5 September 1940 - "In the Jewish Community I was visited by Rumkowski [from Łódź] accompanied by an SS-man. He announced that he had already created the Ministries and that his budget is about 1500 000 Mk."

20 September 1940 - "In the Conference the Germans introduced me to the highest authority of the district. We have to get independent autonomy."

5 May 1941 - "Judenrat have to be only a self-government power, and Obmann have to be a mayor."

11 May 1941 - "I had visited Auerswald. I wanted the position of a Mayor."

14 May 1941 - "The Germans informed me that the governor had nominated me to the position of Mayor of the Jewish district."

19 May 1941 "The day full of impressions [...] The Germans declared that I had been nominated on the Mayor position."¹⁴

A deep analysis of Adam Czerniaków's notes leaves not even a shadow of doubt that in 1939-1941 the Jewish ghettos were transformed by the Jews into Jewish autonomies. Independent autonomy had appeared for the first time in the diary, entry for 20th of September 1940. The fact that two weeks earlier the Warsaw Judenrat was visited by Chaim Rumkowski the head of Łódź Jews was not accidental. Emanuel Ringelblum had written about Rumkowski:

"Today, on the 6th of September [1940] Rumkowski "the King Chaim" came from Łódź. He told us miracles about the ghetto. There was a Jewish State with 400 policemen and 3 prisons. He had a Ministry of Foreign Affairs and all the other Ministries. During his visit to Warsaw Rumkowski had swaggered: "You will see, in a year or two I will have the best ghetto in Poland."¹⁵

From the sources noted here it is evident, that except for the agreements from the first weeks of the war, in autumn 1940, intensive German-Jewish talks were held regarding the final form of Jewish territorial autonomy in Warsaw. It is evident also that these talks took part not only for the future mayor of the Jewish territorial autonomy in Warsaw, Adam Czerniaków, but also the leaders of Jewish autonomies from other cities.

In May, 1941, it was decided that a Judenrat will only be a self-government power, and a head of a Judenrat would be a mayor. That meant that a Judenrat got back a position as a pre-war manager of the Jewish communities, practically the same as the traditional self-government function. At the same time, the Jewish mayors had become state authorities representing the power of the German State towards the inhabitants of the different Jewish autonomies.

Adam Czerniaków, on the 19th of May 1941, got from the Germans a nomination to the position of the Jewish Autonomy Mayor. In a formal and legal sense, the Warsaw Jewish territorial autonomy and all the others Jewish territorial autonomies had become independent from the rest of the Polish General Government areas, and had become an element of the Third Reich!

The former senator of the Second Polish Republic and the other mayors of the Jewish autonomies had become state authorities representing inhabitants of the Jewish autonomies (the Polish Jews) under the power of the German State. For persons creating the Jewish autonomies it was very important that these autonomies now had a self-government character, and that the authorities of the autonomies (Czerniaków, Rumkowski, and the others) were, at the same time, the state authorities of the Third German Reich. The Germans proposed the final version of the budget for the Jews in Warsaw on

the 19th of August 1941. That was the end of the many months of creating the Jewish territorial autonomy in the capital.

The structure of the Jewish autonomies, commonly called the "ghettos," created under the protectorate of the Germans on the Polish territories, was the same everywhere. The power of the Jewish Warsaw Autonomy, by the end of 1941, was enormous with more than 2,000 employer institutions, including all their subordinated units. It was the same in Łódź, Cracow, Silesia and other centers of Jewish life. It is not generally known that in other Jewish autonomies (ghettos) the heads of the Judenrats also took on the title of mayors. Chaim Rumkowski from Łódź used the title, "Head of the Oldest Jews," but the Jewish inhabitants had called him "the king" or "the prince." The same nickname was given to Meryn in Silesia, The mayors, heads or leaders of all the Jewish territorial autonomies (ghettos) on Polish territory had unlimited power over the Jewish people. For example, life in Łódź "reminded one of the feudal system from medieval times as in the case of a rich Russian noble person. Everything around a manor was covered by darkness and swamps. The farmers, a personal property of the prince [Rumkowski] were only the working machines. They were born and lived for the prince, to bring him profits and satisfaction."

Jewish sources show that Jewish power in the ghettos was copying the style of the German power. The Jewish historian Lucjan Dobroszycki from the YIVO Institute in New York wrote: "The system of ruling in the Łódź ghetto was built similarly like Hitler's Germany."

So-called "Historians of the Holocaust" write of factual information such as: "the ghettos were only a result of an extermination policy of the Germans towards the Jewish people. The ghettos were built with no participation of the Jews and against their will. Not so! The Jewish sources show that neither in the process of creating the Jewish autonomies (ghettos) nor in the process of surrounding them by walls and barbed wire were Jews actively participating in the powers of Jewish autonomies." However, factual and documented accounting shows that the separation of Jewish autonomies from the external world (construction of the walls with barbed wire) was actually financed from the budget of the Jewish community and some social funds! It means that the isolation of the Jewish territorial population in Warsaw, the Poles living behind the walls, commonly called a ghetto, was really a part of the Jewish idea.

To be continued in the September issue

Emanuel Ringelblum adds: Today [March 1940] there were rumors that walls will replace the fences around the ghetto.

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