The Jews of Bialystok during World War II and the Holocaust
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To my parents, Batya (née Burdman) and Zvi-Hersh Lipsitz,
of blessed memory
“If it had to be like this, history will judge. . . . With these lines, I wanted to establish a memorial, however inadequate, for those dearest to me, who are no longer with us. . . . Do not forget them.”

Mordecai Tenenbaum-Tamaroff
Białystok, April 1943
In a letter to friends in Eretz Israel
The Secretariat of United Kibbutz Movement
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Acknowledgments

At Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz, I light candles in memory of my father’s family. Over time, I have learned that the Germans took them to one of these camps, although I will never know which one. The circumstances of my life led me to become a teacher in Israel, and when I chose to expand my knowledge of Jewish history, I turned to the study of the Holocaust period. This book is an adaptation of my doctoral dissertation, written at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, under the direction of Professor Yehuda Bauer and Professor Israel Gutman.

I dedicate it to my parents, who are no longer alive. To my mother Batya, whose dignity, broad knowledge, and spirituality so strongly influenced me from my earliest days and still inspire me to this very day. And to my father, Zvi-Hersh, the sole survivor of a large family, whose sons were students at the Beit Yosef yeshiva of Novardok, who lived with his family before the war in the city of Grajewo in northeastern Poland. During the German occupation, my father was interned in the Grodno and Vilna ghettos, and in the summer of 1943, after his entire family perished, he fled to the forests of Narotch, where he was a partisan until the liberation. In November 1945 he immigrated to Israel, where he married and raised a family, in the shadow of loss and pain, which never left him. The events of his past made a strong imprint on me from my youth, and it is not mere chance that has led me to engage in the study and teaching of the Holocaust period.

Among the institutions that assisted me in the course of my research, I am particularly grateful to the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. This book was published in Hebrew in 1997, and its translation into English was made possible through the financing of Yad Vashem.

Although the historian does have numerous sources at his disposal, his work, as someone who did not live in the period he has chosen to study, is far more difficult when some of those who lived in that period are still alive.
Since each of the survivors remembers the events as they affected him, I began to fear that I might present some details inaccurately or omit some events that are meaningful to one or another survivor and really ought to be noted. To overcome this difficulty, at least to some extent, I interviewed numerous people throughout the course of my research, most of whom were survivors who had been interned in the Białystok ghetto during the German occupation. They spent long hours with me, and their stories drew me close to them for a while and enabled me to better understand one of the most horrendous periods in the history of the Jewish people.

During my research, I spent long hours searching through archives in Israel and abroad. My thanks go to the staffs of the archives in Poland and Germany, who kindly responded to my requests and treated me so graciously. I owe a special debt of gratitude to the staff of the archives and the library at Yad Vashem, who provided me with every document and paper that I needed and handled every request of mine with so much patience.

I was greatly impressed with the effectiveness and dedication of the staffs of the University Press of New England and the Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry. I would like to thank Ann Hofstra Grogg for her extraordinarily thoughtful and painstaking editing of the manuscript. Robert Grogg prepared the manuscript and an index for publication for which I am grateful. Amaryah Orenstein’s thorough research of names and Polish sites, meticulous attention to every bibliographic detail, and review of proofs are very much appreciated. Monika Rice and Caroline Friedman were most helpful in the final stages of editing and carefully corrected proofs. Sylvia Fuks Fried, associate editor of the Tauber Institute series, and Miriam Hoffman, senior program administrator in the Tauber Institute, graciously shepherded my book through its various stages of translation, editing, and production. A special word of thanks is due Dr. Jehuda Reinharz, president of Brandeis University and general editor of the Tauber Institute series, who showed great interest in my work and welcomed my book into the series.

And, finally, my three children—Merav, Michael, and Irad—from whom I draw my strength.
1. Room of Mordecai Tenenbaum, Zvi Mersik and others on Jurowiecka Street #3, on the border of the ghetto near the gate. After the first *aktion* in February 1943, the apartment was vacated, and for several months it was used for weapons repair and target practice.

2. Dror Kibbutz (Chata) headquarters near Wazka Street, evacuated after the first *aktion*.

3. Home of Dror Kibbutz, Ciepła Street #14, which served as headquarters for the uprising.

4. Another apartment of Dror Kibbutz at Chmielna Street #7. Underneath, a large bunker was built with an additional exit to the backyard where there was a storeroom for arms and a radio. When the ghetto was destroyed in August 1943, 72 of the last fighters were hauled out of this bunker.

5. Site of the execution of 71 fighters, at the corner of Jurowiecka and Kupiecka.

6. Site where Yitzhak Melamed killed a German during the *aktion* of February 1943, at Kupiecka Street #92.

7. Chemistry lab of Mordecai Tenenbaum used to build grenades on Smolna Street, near the ghetto's gate.

8. Mordecai Tenenbaum's room on Polna Street #9, the site of the last meeting of the ghetto fighters.

9. The site of fighting in the ghetto.

The Jews of Bialystock during World War II
and the Holocaust
The village of Białystok was founded in 1320, on the banks of the Biała River, in northeastern Poland. In 1659 the Polish king Jan Kazimierz bequeathed the village to Stefan Czarniecki, a Polish nobleman who had distinguished himself in the war against the Swedes. The village, which evolved into a small town under the jurisdiction of Tykocin (Tiktin) province, was subsequently handed down to Count Jan Klemens Branicki (1689–1771). In 1703 Branicki chose Białystok as his permanent abode, converted the castle into a royal palace, and invited the Jews to settle there.¹ (The renovated palace, one of the most beautiful in Poland, was noted for its resemblance to the palace of Versailles.) Białystok was granted town rights in 1729. However, it was only after 1749, when the Polish king August III awarded it town status, that Białystok came into its own as a commercial center, although even then it did not succeed in completely weaning itself from Tiktin. By 1772 the city had a population of 3,400. Members of the Potocki family, who inherited Białystok from Branicki, sold it and five neighboring villages to the king of Prussia.²

According to Tiktin community records, Jews first settled in Białystok in 1658. At the time, Tiktin (some 30 kilometers from Białystok) represented the entire province in the Council of the Four Lands. As a token of Białystok’s subsidiary status, it was referred to in the community registers as “Białystok-upon-Tiktin,” that is, subordinate to Tiktin as well as near it. References to the Jewish community of Białystok in the historical sources date back to the early eighteenth century, when permission was granted for the construction of a *beit midrash* (house of study), in the Jewish Shulhojf neighborhood. Inscribed on the *bimah* (pulpit) of the *beit midrash* was the date 1718.

By 1765, the Jewish population of Białystok numbered 761. Branicki granted the Jews equal rights—equal to those of other inhabitants of the
town—and allowed Jewish community leaders to participate in municipal elections. Although in 1759 Jews were ordered to help provision the armies traveling through the city, they were exempt from paying church taxes. Jews were also permitted to join the first professional guild, established in Białystok, on condition that they pay membership fees.³

The period of Prussian rule (1796–1807) was characterized by constant economic, social, and political change. The Prussians created a new province, which they called New East Prussia, comprising two administrative districts, one of which was Białystok. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Tiktin lost ascendancy to Białystok, which subsequently became the district capital. The Prussian authorities, anxious to limit the number of Jews, passed special legislation restricting the number of professions open to Jews. This discriminatory legislation, which was binding on all Polish Jews, was endorsed by the tsar of Russia when he took over from the Prussians in 1807. Jews were forbidden to change jobs or residence, or to marry, without a permit from the administrative authorities, and all Jews were required to adopt surnames. In 1804 Rabbi Aaron Halevi Horowitz set up the town’s first Jewish printing press. By 1808 the Jews constituted 4,000 of the town’s 6,000 inhabitants.⁴

Following Napoleon’s victory over Prussia and the treaties of Tilsit, Białystok District was annexed to Russia. The second half of 1807 marked the beginning of Russian rule. The Russians upheld the rights granted local citizens in the past. Tsarist Russia, rather than formulating an administrative policy for the areas under its control, concentrated mainly on exploiting them to its own advantage. For example, although the Russians promised to protect the urban Christians from Jewish competition, they permitted Jews to practice commerce as a means of boosting state revenues through taxation and unofficial “contributions.” In the villages, on the other hand, the Russians tried to keep the peasants in their place through oppressive economic measures. The number of urban Jews in Białystok District almost equaled the number of rural Jews. The latter were simple folk who made a living from brewing and selling beer, brandy, and other intoxicating liquors.⁵ Jewish migration from the countryside to the cities began when some of the rich local landowners and farmers began expelling Jews from the villages. According to the population census of 1800, the Jews of Białystok District constituted some 36 percent of the general population, and some 34 percent of the total urban population.⁶ The relationship between Jews and Christians in the towns became increasingly fraught with tension, and antisemitism, inspired mainly by economic factors, intensified.

At the beginning of Russian rule, Białystok’s town council comprised a
Christian mayor, two deputy mayors (a Christian and a Jew), and four town councilors (two Christians and two Jews). This autonomous body conducted the town’s affairs. From 1812 (the year of Napoleon’s invasion of Russia) until 1815, Białystok came under French rule, and the town’s affairs were governed by a specially appointed committee, which had one Jewish member, Hirsch Miodownik. Białystok was restored to Russian rule in 1815, after the Congress of Vienna.

Białystok’s geographical situation as a border town encouraged the development of commercial ties in the Russian Empire. The local Jewish community, in particular, thrived by also trading with Prussian and other foreign markets. As early as 1793, Jews from Białystok could be seen at trade fairs in Frankfurt. By the early nineteenth century, most of eastern Poland’s foreign trade was controlled by the Jews of Białystok.7

Economic Life: The Rise of Białystok’s Textile Industry

Białystok’s Jewish population was augmented by the influx of Jews from the neighboring villages in 1825–1835 and again in 1845. In due course, as the legal status of the urban Jews improved, they began playing a more dominant role in the thriving textile industry. The town’s first textile mills had been set up by Saxon soldiers—expert weavers and spinners by profession—who stayed behind in Białystok after the Napoleonic wars. Most of the town’s first factories, with their large contingents of Jewish workers, were run by foreign (mostly German) entrepreneurs. In 1828 the first German craftsmen settled in the town, and in 1833 a German industrialist from Łódź established the first large weaving factory, followed in 1840 by another large German factory. Białystok’s weavers began traveling to fairs in Lithuania, where they met textile merchants from Poland and Moscow.8

The Jews, particularly those who had recently arrived from neighboring villages, sought employment in the new factories, undeterred by the fact that the working class was looked down upon by the city dwellers. In taking factory jobs, they were driven not only by economic necessity but also by a spirit of adventure. Their knowledge of German stood them in good stead. In due course, small Jewish-owned textile mills, specializing in spinning, weaving, knitting, and dyeing, challenged the German monopoly of the textile trade. In 1831 after new customs regulations were introduced for trade between the Polish kingdom and Russia, German capital began flowing into the area. Textile merchants and industrialists who had moved to Russia began returning to Białystok, and many Jews who had moved
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to Bialystok District because of its industrial opportunities found work, mainly with Jewish employers who understood the constraints of Jewish tradition.

The number of Jewish-owned factories in the Białystok area tripled between 1836 and 1846. In the early 1840s Bezalel Novik, a Białystok Jew, set up a small weaving workshop that later developed into a modern factory. By 1846 Białystok had three Jewish-owned weaving workshops with about 100 looms among them. As the number of textile workshops grew, competition became more fierce, and weavers and spinners had to struggle for a living. The situation eased somewhat when in 1850 two Jewish industrialists, Nahum Mintz and Sender Bloch, began employing Jews in their factories as spinners, tailors, weavers, cobblers, blacksmiths, and tobacco manufacturers. As these industries developed, workers’ movements sprang up in Białystok, with active Jewish participation.

The abolition of customs restrictions in 1851 lowered local manufacturers’ profits, and capitalists outside Białystok were less eager to invest in the town. Soon only local (mostly Jewish) entrepreneurs were left, including the prestigious Amdursky and Kronenberg families, the founders of Białystok’s Jewish textile industry. The Amdursky family was famous for introducing the first steam engine into Białystok in 1860. Although local Jewish interest in the textile industry resurfaced only in the second half of the 1860s, by 1867 approximately half of the textile factories in and around Białystok were in Jewish hands. Of the town’s 16,544 inhabitants that year, 11,288 (68.2 percent) were Jewish. The town also boasted a number of small Jewish factories specializing in soap, leather, oil, and beer.

In 1832 the Russians passed a law stating that Jews could qualify for honorary citizenship through a special contribution or excellence in studies, crafts, commerce, or industry. This law, and a similar one passed in 1835, strengthened the Russian orientation of the Jews and decreased their affinity for the Poles. Nevertheless during the Poles’ January 1863 uprising against the Russians, some Jews provided the Poles with weapons and ammunition, and some even took part in the uprising. Unlike Warsaw and other towns, in Białystok this support for the Poles was rare enough not to warrant punitive action. After the abortive Polish uprising and the intensification of Russification, the Jews of Białystok strengthened their business and administrative ties with the Germans and Russians.

The Crimean War brought economic prosperity to Białystok as well as to other industrial centers in the kingdom. Although the Pale of Settlement was redefined in May 1882, and the number of Jews permitted to dwell in towns curtailed, the Jews flourished professionally. Production and profits
rose, and new export routes and commercial ties contributed to the city’s prosperity. In 1878, Białystok had a Jewish population of 20,365. By 1897, this number had doubled to 42,000 (64 percent of the general population). At the time, about half the Jews of Białystok were employed in industry or trade, while 20 percent were businessmen. By the late nineteenth century, 89 percent of Białystok’s businessmen and 65 percent of its industrialists were Jews.12

Jewish Communal Institutions

The Jewish community, benefiting from Białystok’s economic prosperity, began developing all the institutions essential to Jewish community life. In 1826, it set up a Bikur Holim (Sick Fund), followed two years later by a Gemilut Hasadim (Philanthropic Fund). In 1830, a hekdesh (poorhouse) was set up, and in 1840 a local Jewish hospital was established. By the late 1860s, the city had two synagogues and sixteen small prayer houses that also served as study houses.13

As Białystok’s Jewish population rose, additional communal institutions were required. In 1872 the Jewish hospital, located in a rented apartment in the synagogue courtyard, moved to new premises, with six large wards and forty-eight beds, an operating room, and a pharmacy. In 1893, a two-story extension was added. In 1869 a large philanthropic organization called Komitet was established to help the needy and eradicate poverty. It drew up a list of all the city’s poor and allocated them a weekly allowance. In 1881 the cornerstone of the Jewish old-age home was laid. Money for this three-story building came from the legacies of several wealthy Jews. Situated on Kupiecka Street, the building also housed the offices of the community leaders, thereby serving as the center of Jewish communal life in Białystok.

The Bikur Holim and Gemilut Hesed societies that were set up in the 1820s emerged in 1885 into the Linat Hazedek (Hospice for the Poor) society which originally provided night care for the sick. Later the society also provided doctors, medicines, and medical equipment for the poorer hospitals, and food and medical treatment for the needy. In time the hekdesh, which adjoined the cemetery, became a shelter for the sick. The dilapidated building, which accommodated fifty people, was renovated in 1908 at the initiative of a number of community activists, and a new wing was built. In 1933, a two-story wooden extension was added, and electricity, plumbing, and bathrooms were installed, for the benefit of its 106 residents.

The Białystok Jewish community had a Hevra Kaddisha (burial society)
even before it had its own cemetery. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there were three Jewish cemeteries. The first was situated on Surazar Street, the second on Bema Street, and the third—the new cemetery established in 1892—was situated in the village of Bagnówka, near Białystok. The Bema cemetery had opened in 1830, following a cholera epidemic, and for the next fifty years or so, only victims of epidemics were buried there.\textsuperscript{14}

**Religious Life**

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the lives of Białystok’s Jewish inhabitants were governed by religious precepts and norms. Most still lived in small wooden houses. The first stone 
\textit{beit midrash} (house of study) later known as the “Old Beit Hamidrash,” was built in 1715 on the site of the former wooden 
\textit{beit hamidrash} and was run by an organization known as the Ner Tamid (Eternal Light). Clustered around it were societies of Torah students, known as Tik\-\-kun Soferim, Shomerim Laboker, Maggidei Tehillim (Reciters of Psalms), and others, each of which had its own admission criteria and regulations. The first \textit{maggid} (preacher) of the Old Beit Hamidrash, Reuven Segal Halevi, was known as the \textit{maggid meisharim} (minister) since at the time Białystok, because of its proximity to Tik\-\-tin, had no official rabbi or \textit{av bet din}. Halevi served in this capacity until 1766, when his son took over. By 1760, Białystok had its own rabbi, Joshua Shapira, who also served as rabbi of neighboring Choroszcz and Zabludów. Author of the book \textit{Panim Masbirot Arba Shitot}, Shapira was first of a long line of rabbis that continued without interruption throughout the century. The investiture of Rabbi Moses Zeev of Tik\-\-tin as Białystok’s fourth rabbi signaled the city’s transformation into the regional center for Jewish affairs. Rabbi Moses Zeev (d. 1830) was succeeded by Rabbi Elyakum Getzel (d. 1854) and Rabbi Raphael Yom Tov Lipman Heilpern (Rabbi Lippele, d. 1879), author of \textit{Oneg Yom Tov}, and finally by Rabbi Samuel Mohilever (d. 1898). From Mohilever’s death until after the First World War, the office of chief rabbi of Białystok remained vacant.\textsuperscript{15}

Białystok’s first synagogue—the Old Synagogue—modeled on the Tik\-\-tin synagogue, underwent a complete restoration from 1909 to 1913, earning it the title of the Great Synagogue. It was redesigned by the architect S. G. Rabinowitz at a cost of 50,000 rubles. A square, stone building, the synagogue had a pointed domed roof, 10 meters in diameter. Small, decorative metal-plated domes graced the synagogue’s facade. The domed roof
had eight small apertures, through which light entered the synagogue. This upper story of stained glass windows was visible from almost all over the city. The dome itself rested on reinforced concrete pillars, which encircled the *bimah* (pulpit). The main entrance, about 2.5 meters wide, led into the assembly and reception halls. Opposite the main entrance was a large standing area for worshipers, behind which were pews for regular congregants. On either side, stairs led up to the women’s gallery. Restoration work was initially slow due to lack of funds, until several rich local industrialists made contributions. The finished building, with its mix of neo-Gothic and neo-Byzantine styles, was extremely impressive.

The city had one other important synagogue—the Khorshul (Choir Synagogue)—Bialystok’s first modern synagogue. The Khorshul—whose foundations were laid in 1834—was built at the initiative of Ludwik Zamenhof’s father and was financed by the Zabludowsky family. Founded by a group of *maskilim* (proponents of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment) upon their return from western Europe, it emulated the western European style of synagogue architecture in true Haskalah fashion. By the late 1850s, the synagogue had a choir and a famous cantor from Kiev. The Khorshul was a two-story brick building with a metal-plated gabled roof. Arched windows were built into the ground floor. In contrast to its magnificent interior, its facade was fairly modest. Despite the fact that it was considered the synagogue of the *apikorsim* (heretics), many local Jews attended its services in order to hear the cantor and choir.

The local *hasidim* (followers of Hasidism) were violently opposed to the Khorshul, as reflected in the following account of its dedication in September 1867, from Abraham Samuel Hershberg’s *Bialystok Recordbook*:

On Simhat Torah, after the dedication ceremony, when the synagogue was packed with people and the choir had already begun to sing, shouts suddenly rang out and stones began flying through the windows. There was a huge hubbub, and one of the stones almost hit the chief of police. The whole area was swarming with *hasidim* streaming out of the *batei midrash* [houses of study], and a hail of stones shattered all the windows. The police were alerted, and the instigators of the disturbance were arrested. However, they were released at 11:00 p.m., due to the women’s unrelenting screams. At prayer time next day, a commotion once again erupted. Stones were thrown, and blows fell indiscriminately in all directions, injuring the *gabbai* [sexton], Getzel Zabludowsky, in the process. Once again the perpetrators were arrested . . . but were released again when the women’s shouts and screams became unbearable.
By the end of the century, some of the city’s many batei midrash had been abandoned. Contemporary memoirs sometimes speak of synagogues that could barely muster a minyan (quorum of ten) for weekday services.

Altogether, Białystok experienced less assimilation than did other places in Poland, no doubt due to the preponderance of Jews—two-thirds of the city’s inhabitants. Since most of the local Christians were employed by Jews, and the influence of Russian culture was minimal, the Jews were not really exposed to an alien culture. Nevertheless, a group of wealthy assimilationists formed in Białystok before the First World War. Opposed to the Zionist movement, these assimilationists founded their own Russian-language paper. Although they operated outside the religious Jewish framework, they still donated money to the community’s charitable and cultural institutions.

The Rise of the Haskalah Movement

Jewish businessmen who, under Prussian rule, had established commercial ties with Jews in Prussian cities—especially Leipzig, Königsberg, Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, and Berlin—were exposed to the winds of change ushered in by the Haskalah. Among the early maskilim of Białystok was Eliezer Halberstam, whose arrival in the city in 1833, led to a minor revolution, as young Torah scholars left the yeshivas (rabbinical academies) in droves to become his devoted disciples. Affluent Jewish businessmen gave Halberstam thousands of rubles to provide these youngsters with a secular education. It was not long until Białystok acquired a reputation as an apikorsish (heretical) city, a title it held until the 1880s. In due time, the Haskalah movement in Białystok began to lean toward the revival of Hebrew and the Hovevei Zion (Hibbat Zion, Love of Zion movement). Other maskilim were Abraham Shapiro, author of Toledot Yisrael ve-Sifru (Jewish History and Literature, 1792), Yehiel Michal Zabludowsky, a contributor to Hakarmel and author of Ruah Hayyim (Living Spirit, 1869), the poet Menahem Mendel Dolitzki, and the mathematician and astronomer Chaim Zelig Slonimski. In 1833, Slonimski’s Mosedei Hokhmah (Fundaments of Wisdom), the first mathematics book to be written in Hebrew, was published in Vilna. Other works by him were translated into German and English. In 1862, he established and was the editor of the Hebrew journal Hazefirah.

The circle of Jewish maskilim in Białystok expanded in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Among the advocates of a universal Judaism was a native of the city, Dr. Ludwik Zamenhof (1859–1917), one of
the early members of Hovevei Zion. Zamenhof proposed reforms to the Yiddish language, compiled a Yiddish grammar, and invented and disseminated a new international language—Esperanto. Several private Jewish libraries were founded in the city, frequented mainly by young people, and the number of subscribers to Hazefirah rose.22

The Rise of Zionism

Białyostok has a place of honor in the history of the Zionist movement, largely thanks to the activities of Rabbi Samuel Mohilever. In 1883, at the end of the Shavuot festival, Mohilever called a conference of Jewish community representatives in Białystok to elect a central committee for the Hovevei Zion organization, of which he was a leader. Mohilever believed that Hovevei Zion would grow into a national movement that would save traditional Judaism in Russia. The Białystok conference was unique in that it united both the traditional and nontraditional streams of Judaism in an attempt to enlist support for the Zionist idea in general and Jewish settlement in Palestine in particular. It was not long before the Hovevei Zion organization in Białystok recruited hundreds of members, most of them weavers by profession. With their backing, Rabbi Mohilever was elected rabbi of Białystok, a position he filled until his death in 1898. It was he who persuaded the Jews of Białystok to buy land in Petah Tikvah, near Tel Aviv, that had been abandoned by the original settlers, and to move there. He set up a fund for the renewal of the Yishuv (Jewish community in prestate Israel) in Palestine and donated money to the early moshavot (settlements) through the local Hovevei Zion organization. In 1885, this organization founded a synagogue named Ohel Moshe after Sir Moses Montefiore, which also served as its meeting place.23 For many years, Białystok served as center of Hovevei Zion activity.

Rabbi Samuel Mohilever, Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz, and Isaac Ben-Tovim represented Białystok at the historic Hovevei Zion Odessa Conference in 1890. In 1896, Chazanowicz, a physician by profession, donated his collection of about 8,800 books to the National Library in Jerusalem, which consequently became known as the National Jewish Library of Jerusalem, the Abarbanel Institute and Joseph Archives. In 1899, Chazanowicz published circular requesting donations for a building to house the Jerusalem library. He devoted his whole life to the realization of this dream, which was fulfilled in 1920, when the National Jewish Library opened.24

Rabbi Mohilever was the main force behind the establishment, in late
1893, of the Mizrahi movement in Białystok. Among its tenets was the importance of Jewish observance as an integral part of the resurgent national movement and the preservation of the traditional character of the Yishuv in Palestine. Rabbi Mohilever tried to bring up his grandchild, Dr. Joseph Mohilever, as a “new Jew,” that is, as someone with a broad Jewish and secular education who was both Torah observant and a committed Zionist. Unable to attend the First Zionist Congress in Basel due to poor health, Rabbi Mohilever dispatched his grandson to represent Białystok in his stead. Even after the Congress, Białystok continued to serve as the spiritual center of both the Odessa Committee and the Zionist Organization as a whole. It was also responsible for Zionist activities in Lithuania and White Russia (Belorussia), two new important focuses of Zionist awakening, representing a huge potential membership.

Mohilever’s Weltanschauung, a mixture of Jewish tradition and the “return to Palestine” ethos, led to the establishment of the Zionist organizations that were to prove so attractive to Białystok’s youth. As cultural activity flourished, Russian and Hebrew were spoken as well as Yiddish, and Zionist ideology and strategy became a constant source of debate. Some Zionist activists found their way to Palestine as early as the turn of the century.25

For the Zionist circles in Białystok, Poalei Zion represented the political framework that matched their Weltanschauung. Founded in Russia in 1900, Poalei Zion combined a Marxist-Socialist ideology with the Zionist aspiration of Jewish settlement in Palestine. In 1905, shortly after the party’s founding conference in Poltava, a small Poalei Zion branch was set up in Białystok. Shortly, however, its members became involved in clashes with the police. In October 1905, the police opened fire on Poalei Zion members protesting to secure the release of political prisoners, and several dozen were injured. Although Białystok served as the setting for a Poalei Zion regional conference in April 1906, after the 1906 pogrom the movement began to decline, and in 1908 it virtually expired following the arrest of all its activists.26

The Rise of the Workers’ Movement

In the early 1880s a small group of Jewish workers emerged in Białystok who were influenced by Proletariat, a Polish radical Socialist organization that affiliated with the Russian revolutionary movement, Narodnaya Volya, which advocated an agrarian Socialist regime. When Felix Kahn, a leader
of the Polish radical left of Jewish extraction, arrived in Białystok in the second half of 1882 to organize the local workers. He established contact with the Jewish workers’ society. That November was a milestone in the local workers’ movement, as seventy weavers from Aaron Suraski’s textile mill struck for higher wages. Although all of Białystok’s workers identified with the strike, it had the greatest impact on the textile workers, who began striking almost daily for a shorter workday, better working conditions, and higher wages. In 1887 there were seventy-nine textile mills in Białystok employing 2,077 workers, of whom 1,268 (over 60 percent) were Jewish.

Strikes continued through the 1890s to protest the degrading conditions in the factories following the introduction of the steam engine. Beginning on August 20, 1895, all of Białystok’s textile workers struck for more than three weeks to protest the authorities’ insistence that proper accounting procedures be introduced into the factories. At the time, there were 5,000 workers employed in 230 factories and workshops. Besides working in the textile mills and tobacco plants, the Jews of Białystok also worked as tanners, bakers, tailors, locksmiths, blacksmiths, and carpenters. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Białystok had approximately 3,000 Jewish workers.27

During the period of economic prosperity, when Białystok’s fame as an important industrial and commercial center spread far and wide, the city’s Jewish population grew accordingly. By 1895, out of a total population of 62,993, 47,783 (76 percent) were Jews. This high percentage—a record in the city’s history—was an indication not only of the socioeconomic integration of the Jews of Białystok but also of Białystok’s centrality for the Jews of eastern Poland at the turn of the century. In his commercial history of Polish Jewry, the Jewish historian Ignacy (Yitzhak) Schiper describes the role played by Białystok’s Jews in the local textile industry. He cites data showing that, from 1898 on, 80 percent of the textile factories in the province of Białystok, accounting for 47.3 percent of the province’s gross product, were owned by Jews. Of 1,654 Jewish-owned factories in Białystok that year, 684 were affiliated with the garment industry and 371 with the textile industry. In other words, about two-thirds of the Jewish-owned factories were textile mills or clothing factories. In the early 1900s, the proportion of Jews in these industries rose even further. Of 66 weaving mills in Białystok in 1912, 58 (87.9 percent) were owned by Jews, accounting for 55–60 percent of Białystok’s gross product.28

In 1897, the year the Bund (Jewish Workers Union) was founded, a branch of the Bund was set up in Białystok. The Bund in Białystok had several aims: to raise the social consciousness of the local Jews, to set up a strike fund, and
to disseminate Jewish culture. According to data it published, by 1901 the Bialystok branch had 700 members, including former yeshiva students, high school pupils and university students. The Bund’s local journal, Der Bia-
lystoker Arbeter (The Białystok Worker), was first published in 1899. By late 1902, seven more issues had been published.

In 1900 a general economic downturn slowed Białystok’s industrial development. About 70 percent of the factories closed, producing widespread unemployment. One of the consequences of the downturn was that support for the Bund grew—so much so that, from 1900 to 1902, Białystok served as the headquarters of the Bund’s central committee and, in May 1901, as the site of the Bund’s Fourth Conference. In 1902, as Białystok’s economy began to recover, the number of Jewish workers rose. By 1905 the local Bund counted tanners, weavers, tailors, cobblers, and tobacco workers among its members.29

Between 1905 and 1915, Białystok’s economy soared, with almost 15,000 Jewish factory workers and an annual gross product of 12 million meters in the textile industry. At the outbreak of the First World War, Białystok had 160 printing presses and 120 distaffs, as well as about 2,300 mechanical spindles and looms.30

**Cultural and Educational Activities**

Jewish education in Białystok dates back to 1867, when Katriel Kaplan set up a Jewish-Russian elementary school that functioned until the outbreak of the First World War. This school was followed in 1888 by the establishment of four elementary schools, albeit more Russian in character. In the 1880s, a number of small yeshivas sprang up around Białystok. Among the yeshiva principals of note was Rabbi Pinhas Moses Gordon, who moved to Vilna on the eve of the First World War, to serve as mashghiah (overseer) of the Vilna community. The yeshivas were constantly moving from one building to another, and there was a high turnover of staff until a two-story building was erected in 1901 with a legacy left by Rabbi Elijahu Malach. Just a year later the yeshiva had four classes catering to 200 students and another two advanced Talmud Torah classes, catering to 60 students. However, its distance from the city center and constant harassment by the local Poles, led to the yeshiva’s closure after only four years. After the 1906 pogrom, the students refused to attend the yeshiva, and the building remained empty until 1912, when the Hevrat Meftizei Haskalah (Society for the Dissemination of Enlightenment) took it over as a modern kindergarten for working-class
children. This society, founded in St. Petersburg in 1863, had opened a branch in Białystok in 1909. Its goals were to provide a modern Jewish education (including Hebrew), run teacher-training courses, and support needy students. At the outbreak of the First World War, the kindergarten was turned into a children’s home, accommodating 150 children.31

In the early twentieth century, most Jewish children were enrolled in state schools. Meanwhile, the traditional heders (elementary schools) were undergoing fundamental changes and several modern heders were opened, which also taught secular subjects. The modern heders were anathema to the traditionalists, and a bitter feud broke out between the two groups. In 1905 the Hantverker Shule was established, offering both a regular academic program, with an emphasis on Judaism and Hebrew, and a vocational track. When the vocational track failed to draw a sufficient number of students, hot meals and stipends were offered as incentives. The school, whose modern outlook attracted a young and dynamic staff, subsequently became famous throughout Bialystok province. Another successful school was the vocational school for girls, also established in 1905 under the Bund’s aegis. The school’s handiwork and needlework courses were extremely popular among the lower classes. Two years later, another girls’ school, “imbued with a nationalist spirit,” was set up by L. Kh. Bogdanovsky. This private school, which taught in Polish, catered to about 100 students. In 1907 S. Feinsilber founded yet another private school for girls, which also taught in Polish; it became famous for its high standards and progressive teaching methods. The Tahkemoni school, established in 1910, was something of an innovation in the Orthodox education system, evolving out of the Lomdei Shas (Talmud Society) network of heders. Białystok also had two large Jewish secondary schools that taught in Russian: the first was founded by Gurewicz in 1908, and the second by Druskin in 1911.

Nahum Zemach, a prominent member of the Agudat Hovevei Sefat Ever (Society of Friends of the Hebrew Language), which opened a branch in Białystok in 1909 founded Białystok’s first Jewish theater, the Habimah. In the climate of prosperity and growth, Białystok launched its first Jewish Russian-language newspaper in 1909, and its first Zionist Yiddish-language paper, Bialystoker Togblat, in 1913.32

Community Leadership

Until the First World War, the Jewish community conducted its own affairs. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the commu-
nity was led by Jehiel Ber Wolkowisky, who for many years enjoyed popular support and was highly thought of by the Russian authorities. Under Wolkowisky, an opponent of Hovevei Zion, communal activities remained unchanged for half a century, despite demographic and economic growth.

In the late 1890s, the community leadership was taken over by young, dynamic officials, who attempted to adapt their activities to the needs of the local Jewish inhabitants. The traditional leadership, composed of Torah scholars, was replaced by political activists.

The vicissitudes of Jewish life in eastern Europe at the turn of the century—pogroms, migrations, workers’ unions, the emergence of Jewish parties, revolutions, and the rise of Zionism—all left their mark on Białystok’s Jewish population.

The 1906 Pogrom

The turn of the century was a period of tragedy for the Jews of Białystok, as the city was overtaken by riots. The riots were triggered by the murder, in April 1905, of the chief of police—a staunch opponent of revolutionary propaganda—by the antitsarist Black Hundreds. The government blamed the Jews for the murder and spread rumors that on May 1 anarchists were planning to blow up the city’s churches. The city’s governor, anxious to avoid a public disturbance, brought soldiers in to keep order. The presence of the soldiers, however, only made matters worse. On the last day of Passover, Bundist activists called a meeting in the city’s Great Synagogue to warn the Jews that the Russian government was about to unleash a pogrom against them as a diversionary tactic, in an attempt to maintain its hold on the area. In answer to their call for the Jews to defend themselves, Bundists and others began taking up arms and patrolling the streets. Due to mounting tension, the Bund canceled its May 1 demonstration, holding a strike instead.

About three months later, on July 30, 1905 (on Shabbat Nahamu, the Sabbath after the fast of Av), anarchists threw a bomb at a military patrol passing through Surazar Street. The army immediately opened fire and continued shooting indiscriminately until evening, killing dozens of people, including twenty-six Jews, and wounding many others. Two months later, on October 18, revolutionaries who stormed the local prison, after ignoring warnings to stop, were shot. Although the ensuing riots were not directed specifically against Jews, they cost twenty-two Jews their lives.

Less than a year later, on May 28, 1906, the Białystok chief of police,
known for his sympathy toward the Jews, was shot and killed by a local Pole, who was subsequently arrested in the town of Bielsk. The deputy chief of police, a Jew-hater, not only refused to allow the Jews to lay a wreath on the coffin, on the grounds that they were responsible for his superior’s death, but warned them that one day they would pay for their crime. Following this episode, rumors spread throughout the city that the Jews were planning to throw a bomb at a Pravoslav procession, a religious procession, planned for June 1, 1906. Once again the army was brought in to prevent the Jews from carrying out their revolutionary designs against Mother Russia. The local Jews, fearful of an outbreak of violence, sent representatives to the governor of Grodno, seeking his protection. Despite the governor’s assurances that the Jews had nothing to fear, a bomb was thrown as an act of provocation, injuring two of the participants. All hell broke loose as the soldiers fired shots signaling the onset of the pogrom. To their credit, most Poles refused to join in the riots, despite the army’s efforts to enlist their support.

On the first day of the pogrom, armed soldiers provided constant fire cover as the rioters looted and destroyed Jewish property, while Jewish fighters—probably Bundists—threw a bomb at the rioters to prevent them entering Surazar Street. On the second day of the pogrom, hundreds of policemen and soldiers converged on Białystok’s train station to prevent Jews from escaping. On the third night of the pogrom, the Jewish hospital was attacked. During the three days of the pogrom, most of the Jews of Białystok barricaded themselves into their homes.

According to the local press, the Jews threw two bombs at the religious procession, killing a priest. However, this version of events was retracted the following day. It was only the protests of enlightened circles in Russia—including the author Leo Tolstoy—that put an end to the pogrom on June 4. Statistics show that 70–110 Jews lost their lives, more than 100 Jews were wounded, and 120 Jewish stores and 100 Jewish apartments were looted in the course of the pogrom. The casualties included 15 Jewish sawmill workers and 10 Jewish passengers who arrived in Białystok on the second day of the pogrom, who were murdered with the willing help of the railway workers.35

In his memoirs, Apolinary Hartglas, a member of the Polish Sejm and an outstanding leader of Polish Jewry during the interwar period, wrote that when news of the pogrom reached Warsaw, he and Zeev Vladimir Jabotinsky, who at the time worked as a reporter for Strana, determined to go to Białystok to see the disturbance for themselves. As the train pulled into the station before Białystok, they heard Russian soldiers and police-
men shouting “Watch out Jews, we’re coming.” The ticket collector, who realized they were Jewish, drew the curtains of their compartment and warned them not to get off at Białystok. Accordingly, Hartglas and Jabotinsky continued to Grodno, traveling back to Białystok the next day. Upon their arrival, they once again saw Russian Red Shirts on an anti-Jewish rampage. The two withdrew to a hotel in the city center, where they learned that the authorities were blaming the murder and looting of the Jews on the Poles. The truth, however, soon emerged when Jews who had survived the pogrom testified that not only had the Poles refused to participate in the riots, but they had actually sheltered Jews. The Russian authorities, it transpired, were blaming the Poles to divert suspicion from themselves and to stir up hatred between the Poles and the Jews. The truth was further corroborated by a copy of a secret document Hartglas managed to secure. The document, issued by the Russian military commander of Białystok, showed beyond doubt that the Russian authorities had planned the pogrom weeks in advance and had even imported railway workers from the Russian hinterland to help them carry out their design. Hartglas and Jabotinsky began interviewing Jews in the community offices and hospital with a view to writing an article on the Białystok pogrom. However, Jabotinsky, traumatized by the sight of seventy-five mutilated bodies piled in a heap, was unable to complete the project and asked Hartglas to report back to Warsaw in his stead.36

As news of the pogrom filtered into St. Petersburg, forty-two deputies of the Duma submitted a question on June 2 to Minister of the Interior Peter Stolypin, regarding events in Białystok and measures adopted by the government to deal with the crisis. Following a debate in the Duma concerning the Russian government’s role in the pogrom, a parliamentary commission was set up to investigate the matter. The commission of inquiry concluded that the perpetrators of the riots were the Black Hundreds, with the connivance and support of local soldiers and police. The commission also found that the Christian population of Białystok did not hate the Jews. The commission refuted the claim put forward by the municipal police that the revolutionary tendencies of the Jews (witness past attacks on the tsar’s policemen) had triggered the pogrom. On the contrary, it stated, the pogrom had been planned well in advance by the Russian state, for no good reason, and had been carried out with the help of the local police and army.37

The victims of the pogrom were buried in a communal grave in Białystok’s old cemetery. A large black memorial stone stands over the grave,
bearing the names of the dead and a funeral dirge written by poet and author Zalman Shneur. The first stanza reads:

Stand firm, pillar of grief, hard as flint
Unmarked by the blood of martyrs below
and the rivers of tears above
And when governments change, do not budge
But startle them at night, hover over them
Like a curse . . .

Conclusion

The collapse of traditional frameworks within the Białystok Jewish community was accelerated by frequent contacts between Jewish businessmen and industrialists from Białystok with the outside world. This collapse culminated in a process of modernization that began toward the end of the nineteenth century. As ties with the Polish kingdom weakened, the influence of Vilna and foreign centers grew. Regional differences gave way to the cult of Jewish universalism. The memoirs of contemporary Poles express great admiration for Białystok's Jews, who are described as industrious, enterprising, intelligent, financially astute, charitable, and open to new ideas.

From the beginning to the end of the nineteenth century, the Jewish population in Białystok increased almost thirteen-fold. At the outbreak of the First World War, the Jews of Białystok numbered 61,500 out of a total population of 89,703. This population growth, although doubtless due to economic factors, was still astronomically high. Despite demographic losses due to pogroms, migration, and emigration to Palestine, Jews continued to constitute a majority in Białystok throughout the century up to the First World War, and they left their indelible imprint on the city.
Chapter 1

The Interwar Period

At the turn of the century Bialystok was a thriving industrial center in which the Jews formed a majority. Then the First World War, followed by the establishment of an independent Poland and the loss of the Russian market, reversed these trends. This chapter reviews the factors that had the greatest impact on the way of life of the Jews during the war and in the interwar period.

Demographic Trends

Between 1914 and 1916, the number of Jews in Bialystok fell from 61,500 to 40,000, in a total population that fell from 89,703 to 54,260. Recruitment to the Russian army, evacuation from the city, the ravages of war, and the decrees following the German onslaught in April 1915 reduced the inhabitants of the city by tens of thousands.

The peace treaties signed at the end of the war incorporated Bialystok into the independent Polish Republic. Then Polish refugees who had fled to the Russian hinterland began returning to the city. To cope with the large influx of Poles, the municipal boundaries were expanded to embrace neighboring villages. At the same time, the Jewish population declined, due to emigration (in 1916 large numbers of Jews began to emigrate to the United States), the drop in the birth rate during the war, and the rise of mortality (5,823 Jews died of hunger between 1915 and 1920). According to the official census of 1921, the Jewish population of Bialystok constituted 39,602 out of a total of 76,792, that is, only 51.6 percent. Despite the decrease, it was still the largest ethnic group in the city.

Most of the non-Jewish residents of Bialystok were farmers, while most of the Jewish residents engaged in industry and commerce. This situation
was no accident, but the result of historical circumstances: Jews in Poland were forbidden to purchase agricultural land and therefore had to seek work in the factories.  

Between 1923 and 1928, the non-Jewish population of Białystok grew three times as fast as the Jewish population. This disproportion was due partly to the continued influx of Polish peasants into the city, with no corresponding new influx of Jews. Moreover, the absence of a local university forced local youths to go to Warsaw, Vilna, and other places to pursue their studies. Most had no desire to return to Poland, especially since work permits for doctors and lawyers were granted only to those who qualified in Poland.

As the non-Jewish population of Białystok grew, the relative proportion of Jews in the city declined. In 1936, for example, the Jews of Białystok numbered 42,482 (42.6 percent) out of total population of 99,722. However, although the Jewish community no longer constituted the city's largest ethnic group in the interwar period, it was still a large, organized community that played an important role in the city's socioeconomic life.

**Economic Trends**

Białystok's economic development came to a standstill at the outbreak of the First World War. Before they left, the Russians destroyed factories, bridges, and power plants. Local industries lost markets, raw materials, machines, and capital that had been deposited in Russian banks. The Germans, who occupied the city in late August 1915, confiscated property, imposed a regime of austerity, deported Poles to Germany as forced laborers, and kept a tight rein on local commerce. More than half the textile factories closed down, epidemics raged, fuel and food were in scarce supply, and inflation was rife. The Germans, with a view to annexing the region, began restoring the factories in the second half of 1916, especially the textile mills, whose products were destined for the German army. The Jews, who had gained the confidence of the authorities, were the first to benefit from this policy. However, Germany's defeat in November 1918, put an end to this short period of stability. The Germans ceased purchasing products, and the factories ceased production. As the workers' situation in the stricken city deteriorated, the prospect of revolution increased.

In February 1919 the Polish army entered Białystok. Industrial production did not begin to recover, however, until the second half of the year, under the direction of new administration. Yet, the factory owners were
constrained by restrictions intended to prevent black marketeering, and, as a result, they lacked the capital needed to purchase the equipment and raw materials that were essential for the economy’s recovery.

The Textile Industry

The city’s first Textile Workers’ Union was set up in November 1918 and officially inaugurated on December 18, 1918, with 100 Jewish and Polish textile workers in attendance. Five Jews and three Poles were elected to the union’s board. One of the union’s first actions was to set up a support fund for the unemployed. Białystok, most of whose industrial product had been channeled to Russia, was particularly hard hit when Poland became independent and lost its Russian markets. Although the factories gradually resumed operation, workers’ rights were not protected. The union called a general strike on March 19, 1919, to protest the situation. The following day, the union and employers signed an agreement stipulating a minimum wage and specifying unemployment conditions.

Meanwhile, the gentile population of Białystok set up a rival union called Praca (in Polish, “Work”), which was openly antisemitic and did its best to destroy the predominantly Jewish union. Through a consistent propaganda campaign, the new union managed to win over the weavers from the Jewish union, effectively crippling it. After a change of management brought about its recovery, the Jewish union immediately reopened its unemployment fund and set up a new medical aid fund. On January 29, 1920, Białystok’s workers again went on strike, demanding a 100 percent wage hike. A strike fund enabled the strike to continue for two weeks, until a compromise agreement was reached whereby the textile workers were to receive a 40–50 percent raise.

The Red Army entered Białystok on July 28, 1920. Many Jews left the city on the eve of the invasion, while others left as the Bolsheviks advanced on the neighboring towns and villages, looting food, goods, property, and money. According to Heschel Farbstein, a member of the Sejm, the Bolsheviks set about destroying all Jewish institutions, dissolved the community leadership and the Zionist committee, and shut down Jewish schools and the Jewish press. The Bolshevik police carried out systematic searches, arresting Jewish businessmen and members of the bourgeoisie whom they suspected of antirevolutionary activities. Some of those arrested were sent to prison camps, while others were sent to local jails. The authorities ordered all Jews to hand over the keys of their shops to the commander of the city. The shops were nationalized, and their wares were confiscated.7
Less than a month later, on August 22, 1920, the Poles recaptured the city, ushering in a period of independent Polish rule, which lasted until the outbreak of the Second World War. The Jewish Textile Workers’ Union, which had been forced to close down during the Russian occupation, resurfaced in January 1921. The newly reconstituted union set up its own sick fund, held lectures on work-related topics, and supported Białystok’s Bundist schools. On May 7, 1921, it became the first union to gain official state recognition. The Polish workers who had defected to Praca abandoned it during the next few months, setting up an independent Polish Textile Workers’ Union that collaborated with the Jewish union.8

As Poland was tossed back and forth between the Russian Bolsheviks and the Poles, the Jews lost out on all counts. The Russians, by nationalizing the factories, destroyed the existing economic infrastructure, while the Poles, upon their return, accused the Jews of pro-Bolshevik tendencies and used this accusation as a pretext for attacking them. Then, in mid-1921, when 89 percent of all factories in Białystok were owned by Jews, Poland was hit by an economic crisis that lasted until mid-1926. The recession, triggered by the loss of foreign markets and an unstable currency, increased unemployment in Białystok and curtailed the role of Jews in its economy. Nevertheless, during the early years of the Polish Republic, from 1918 to 1923, the Jews of Białystok contributed significantly to the city’s development as a textile center.

Jewish businessmen and industrialists ventured as far afield as Asia in search of new markets. The journey usually took about three months, since travel through the new Soviet Union was barred, while the shipments themselves took about five to six months to arrive. But the courage of these Jewish entrepreneurs was rewarded. Soon Białystok’s blankets supplanted British blankets on the Chinese and Japanese markets. Białystok’s industrialists and businessmen also captured the Balkan market, Rumania and Yugoslavia in particular. Despite difficulties in obtaining capital, these Jewish businessmen were unusually flexible and resourceful, and they soon left their German competitors far behind.9

However, with galloping inflation and the high cost of living, the wages of Białystok’s textile workers were barely enough to buy food. Consequently, in January 1923, the local textile workers called a general strike, demanding a 132 percent wage increase and parity of wages with those of Łódź’s textile workers. Amid stormy negotiations, the union’s chairman was arrested by the police. Five weeks of struggle paid off as the workers were granted a 100 percent wage increase.10

In January 1924, after a special office was set up in Białystok to deal with
workers’ wages, the wave of strikes subsided. However, even stability in the factories did not prevent large-scale unemployment, since no new jobs were available. At the time, three months of factory operation were sufficient to provide all of Poland’s needs. For the rest of the year, the workers lived off government allowances. The industrialists, who had been heavily taxed under the economic reforms of 1924, began to move their factories out of Poland, especially to Rumania and Hungary. At the same time, the textile workers, including the union secretary, emigrated in search of better conditions. Following the economic crisis, the union shut down, existing only in skeletal form to help potential emigrants.

With the 1926 revolution, Marshal Józef Piłsudski came to power in Poland, ushering in an authoritarian rule under which parliament and the political parties played only a secondary role in the opposition. From mid-1926 to late 1928, as the city’s economic situation improved, the textile factories resumed operation, and the unemployed found jobs. In 1928, Jews owned 78.3 percent of all Białystok’s businesses. The textile industry’s enormous output compared favorably with that of Łódź. Białystok’s factories not only did well on the domestic front; they also secured additional export markets in countries such as Australia, China, and the Soviet Union, and in the British Commonwealth.

Białystok’s economy continued to thrive as the introduction of sophisticated machinery enabled the production of new goods. However, this period of prosperity was cut short by the worldwide economic crisis of 1929. The ensuing depression lasted several years, reducing industrial activity in the city by about 25 percent. The slow recovery that began in 1932 lasted throughout the decade.11

On April 13, 1934, General Ferdinand Zarzycki, Poland’s minister of industry, visited Białystok. In a speech to the Białystok Industrialists’ Association, he praised the industrialists for Białystok’s recovery from the previous years’ crisis and for outproducing other cities. He also complimented them for their lack of ostentation. Unlike the industrialists of Łódź and elsewhere, they had not built themselves mansions but had worked as hard as their own employees. Zarzycki also applauded their policy of setting aside half their products for export—a policy that had greatly assisted the country’s commercial balance. Zarzycki ended his speech by saying that the Polish government considered Białystok an important textile center.12

In 1939, the city had 110 textile industrialists who employed about 7,000 Jewish and gentile workers. These together produced 6,500 tons of wool, silk, and cotton fabrics per year, at an overall value of about 40 million zlotys. More than 20 percent of the fabrics produced were exported.
The city’s metal industry, although hard hit by the war, managed to make a partial recovery in its aftermath. In 1929 its professional journal, *Bialystoker Metal Industri* (Białystok Metal Industry) reported that although there were now more metal factories, their overall product was lower than before the war. The number of metal factories had grown by about 30–40 percent after the war, but the factory owners tried to make do with as few workers as possible. The unemployed were therefore forced to open small workshops of their own. Thus, despite the rise in the number of metal workshops, the industry’s overall profit was smaller than before the war.\(^\text{13}\)

The new Polish regime revolutionized the metal industry, and huge iron factories were set up all over the country. By government order, the metal factories ceased doing business with retailers, selling to wholesalers only. As a result, Białystok lost its supremacy in the iron industry. The number of metal merchants fell, and the manufacturers complained of cutbacks in the credit that was so essential to their survival. Although metals production never regained its prewar level, it managed to make a comeback in the 1920s, specializing in the manufacture of shafts, industrial machines, heating elements, construction iron, wire, and equipment for flour mills and sawmills, among other items. Even after the war, Białystok’s metal industry was mainly (85 percent) in Jewish hands, supplying not only the local market, but all of Poland.\(^\text{14}\)

In 1929 Białystok had 150 metal factories, most of which were owned by Jews, although Jewish metalworkers accounted for only 10 percent of the workforce. This low percentage was due to the extremely low wages the metalworkers received and to the fact that Jews generally shunned unskilled labor. Moreover, the memory of the crisis of the early 1920s, which had paralyzed many of the city’s typically Jewish industries, propelled Jews to seek employment in the safer textile industries.

From advertisements published in *Bialystoker Metal Industri* in 1929, we learn that a Jewish industrialist set up a factory called Ropul, for manufacturing bicycle frames, which had formerly been imported from Germany. Likewise, the Jewish engineer H. Neumark began importing Ford cars to Białystok. He subsequently opened a company and workshop that employed about seventy Jewish car mechanics in and around the city. Joel Gottlieb, a qualified agrarian mechanic, ran a factory that manufactured spare parts for flour mills and sawmills, as well as tanning machines, transformers, radiators, and water and steam boilers. The Ashkenazi & Schwartz iron factory manufactured Viennese-style nickel and copper handles, tool
handles, oven chimneys, roasting plates, work tools, axles, and fences. Joseph Gusinski manufactured cars and wagon parts, while Leon Dolitzki manufactured wires, nails, horse shafts, agricultural equipment, and plow parts. The Sanotechnika factory owned by the Lipshitz family specialized in central heating systems, plumbing, gas pipes, showers and bathrooms, and hospital plumbing. The Eisenschmidt factories manufactured vaporizers and boilers, while the Paris brothers specialized in power plants, electronic machines and equipment, telephone and radio sets, and batteries and accumulators. The following is one of the many advertisements appearing in *Bialystoker Metal Industri*:

I. Kuperberg  
11, Kiliński Street,  
Białyństok  
Tel: 3–58 i 11–78

Plumbing and sanitation  
Specialists in pipes, plumbing and sanitation systems, copper and iron fixtures, boilers, lavatories, sinks and urinals, bolts, screws, nails, rollers, anvils, hammers, drilling machines, American drills, ventilators, saws, door and window fittings, tar sheeting for roofs, and sealants for factory and plant use.

Joseph Kuperberg, who placed this advertisement in the journal in 1929, was later arrested by the Soviets when they annexed the city in 1939 and exiled to the Soviet Union. After the World War II, upon learning that his wife and four children had perished, he remarried and returned with his new wife to Białystok, where their child was born. In 1949, the Kuperberg family moved to Israel and settled in Tel Aviv. Kuperberg subsequently opened a plumber’s store on Tel Aviv’s Ben Yehuda Street, similar to the one he had owned in Białystok.

*Białyństok: A Workers’ Center*  
The workers’ unions that sprang up in Białystok between 1918 and 1931 differed from those in other Polish cities. The concentration of workers in Białystok, the largest in eastern Poland, varied from the average in its professional and ethnic makeup. The city was one of the few centers where the percentage of Jewish factory workers was twice the national average. In 1921, Jews accounted for 32.8 percent of all textile workers in Białystok, most of them weavers (65.9 percent of all weavers). The percentage of Jews in the
food, construction, wood, metal, leather, printing, and clothing industries ranged from 63 percent to 94 percent. Note that, whereas in 1918 most of Białystok's workers were Jewish, by the 1920s only half were. Most of the Jews worked in small factories and workshops, under very difficult conditions, for a pittance. For many, the work was only seasonal. Jewish workers, who suffered severe exploitation and discrimination on ethnic grounds, were the first to join the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century, and later the workers' parties and movements.17

After a hiatus of several months during the transition from Bolshevik to Polish rule, the Jewish workers' parties returned in full force. Their first action was to launch a mass demonstration on May 1, 1920, in which about 12,000 Jewish and non-Jewish workers participated. In Białystok's entire history, never were so many workers involved in so many struggles, with such massive party backing, as Białystok's workers were between 1921 and 1924. At the same time, the number of Jewish members of the Communist Party—which had by then gone underground—was on the rise. The local branches of the Bund, Zukunft (the Bund's youth movement), Poalei Zion, and the national unions began to lose members to the Communist Party. Communist versions of the Bund (the pro-Soviet, pro–Third International Kombund), the Zukunft (Komzukunft) and of the Poalei Zion (Poalei Zion–Left) were also set up.

In 1925, the Białystok police began cracking down on Socialist movements, and most of the unions' official activists were arrested. According to police reports, the majority of those arrested were Jewish Communist members of the Bund. Despite the arrests, the police were unable to destroy Białystok's Communist Party, and some 4,000 workers participated in the May 1 demonstrations of 1925. The authorities, under the assumption that the Jewish members of the left-wing parties had dangerous revolutionary tendencies, targeted the unions' youth branches, 90 percent of whose members were Jewish. The branches were placed under constant surveillance, and meetings were banned.

State discrimination against Jewish workers was clear from an unemployment law that targeted tailors, construction workers, and tanners who worked in shops employing no more than five workers, on a seasonal basis only. These types of shops with such employment arrangements tended to be predominantly Jewish. Attempts to divest the Jews of their livelihood affected the Jewish proletariat in particular. Jewish workers were dismissed from the tobacco, spirit, and match factories, and Jewish railway workers often found themselves out of a job from one day to the next. Of 1,174 political activists arrested between 1918 and 1931, about 61 percent were Jewish.
Approximately 71.8 percent of the 333 people tried were Jewish. Of the 215 activists arrested for disseminating Communist propaganda, about 79 percent were Jewish.18

Bialystok’s first Jewish trade union was set up in February 1918. In 1921–22, it focused its activities on supplying members with basic food supplies and organizing training courses to improve its members’ professional and cultural standing. To circumvent the restrictions of the Polish industrial laws of the 1920s, the union sought to obtain certificates of qualification and official recognition for its members. Other objectives were the incorporation of all Jewish trade unions within its ranks and the establishment of a workers’ bank. In 1933, the union had 1,653 members, including tailors, bakers, metalworkers, carpenters, tanners, barbers, butchers, and weavers.19

The Small Businessmen’s Union grew out of the Association of Businessmen and Industrialists. In the 1930s, with the stabilization of Bialystok’s industry, the organization worked to advance the interests of businessmen and industrialists in and around Bialystok. The organization also ran the local branch of the Polish Businessmen’s Center, whose headquarters were in Warsaw, which in 1938 set up an interest-free loan fund for businessmen in distress. When the Small Businessmen’s Union was set up in late 1927, it had 150 members. By 1939, it had 1,100 members, reflecting the transition from retail to wholesale trade. The Bialystok Industrialists’ Association was part of the Polish Industrialists’ Union and of the Łódź Textile Union and had both Jewish and non-Jewish members. Its Jewish members belonged also to Jewish unions, such as the Textile Workers’ Union and the Artisans’ Union. Bialystok had dozens of Jewish-owned printing presses, employing hundreds of Jewish workers. These joined together as the Bialystok branch of the Warsaw Printers’ Union. In addition to catering to its members’ professional interests, the Printers’ Union offered cultural activities and training. Other labor organizations in Bialystok were the Butchers’ Union, the Tanners’ Union, the Wood and Construction Industrialists’ Union, and the Carpenters’ Cooperative.20

The financial institutions that governed Jewish economic activity in Bialystok in the interwar period also stimulated monetary activity. In 1901, Bialystok’s first credit and savings bank—the Payan bank—had been established and its investments soon hit the 1 million ruble mark. Although the bank virtually ceased operating for a while during the First World War, it then thrived under the temporary German rule. It took until 1924, when the Polish currency stabilized, for the bank to begin operating independently. In 1931, the bank had an estimated annual profit of 3 million zlotys and had 2,800 account-holding customers.
Other banks in Białystok were the Bank of Industry and Commerce, founded in 1910; the Artisans’ Bank; the Homeowners’ Bank, founded in 1928; the Colonial Bank, founded by the Businessmen’s Union; and the Peoples’ Cooperative Bank. In the 1930s, the municipal credit society and charitable funds played an instrumental role in helping impoverished Jewish businessmen combat attempts to oust them from the city’s economic life. The historian Emanuel Ringelblum has observed that “more voters took part in the charity board elections than in the community board elections.”

Community Leadership and Institutions

The Białystok Jewish community council, elected in late 1915, was headed by Abraham Tiktin and included members drawn from the religious public. The council was too conservative to deal with contemporary problems, however, and refused to take on representatives of other parties or social sectors. The community was increasingly beset by internal friction, and the situation proved to be untenable. The council was dissolved and preparations were made for new universal elections.

Community Elections and Jewish Politics

The first universal elections to the Białystok Jewish community council, held on December 15, 1918, were preceded by a stormy election campaign. The postwar euphoria was tempered by rumors of revolution that were heightened by the economic collapse following the war. The Zionists waged a propaganda campaign through their journal Frayhayt (Freedom), the rabbis called on their congregations to support the Orthodox candidates, while the Bund, which had already made inroads in Białystok, held mass rallies to win over the public. With all men and women over age 20 entitled to vote, a total of 13,000 Jews took part in the elections. The council was to have seventy-one members, after the original Sanhedrin, but in the end only seventy were elected. In these elections, the Bund received the largest number of votes (fifteen seats), and, together with the United Socialists (ten seats), they formed a left-wing Socialist majority. The Orthodox list garnered a total of eighteen seats; the various Zionist lists together won nineteen seats, while the remaining eight seats were shared among the Folkists, Democrats, Artisans, and independent lists. Even at the new council’s first session, stormy debates arose over authority on religious
issues. The left-wing members of the board saw it exclusively as a lay body, while the Orthodox members wanted it to focus on religious issues.

In August 1920, for the short period the city was under Bolshevik rule, the community council ceased functioning as many of its members had fled and its funds were confiscated. With the return of Polish rule and the incorporation of Białystok into the Polish Republic, the board was reinstated. However, a crisis that was to dog it for many years was triggered by Białystok Jewish capitalists. Distrustful of a council that was mainly Socialist in composition, they denounced it to the authorities. In the tense and hostile atmosphere that ensued, most parties—including the Bund and Poalei Zion—resigned. In the end, only forty-two members, representing the General Zionists and the Orthodox parties, remained.

This truncated and dysfunctional council was unable to command the confidence of broad sectors of the Jewish public. Moreover, the Joint Distribution Committee, the American-Jewish overseas relief agency that used to aid it financially, lost faith in it and withheld support. As a result, the council’s deficit grew, and its institutions were on the verge of collapse. In 1921, the council ceased to function. Thereafter the system was decentralized with each Jewish institution self-sufficient. All religious and philanthropic activity in the city was coordinated by an umbrella organization, Tzedakah Gedolah (Community Chest), which had resumed activity in the city.

In 1925, elections for a new community council were boycotted by the Socialist parties. Abraham Tiktin was once again elected head of the council, but this time he exercised strict control over community affairs and campaigned against black-marketeering by the ritual slaughterers, subjecting them and the Hevra Kaddisha to close community supervision. In 1928, the Polish authorities announced that elections would be held for all minorities. Since only men were allowed to vote, no more than 7,000 Jews participated in the elections. This time the results were as follows: Hasidim, 4 seats; Bund, 3; General Zionists, 3; Agudah, 3; Artisans, 2; Poalei Zion, 1; Democrats, 1; Small Businessmen, 1; and Mizrahi, 1. Thus, the religious parties became a dominant element in the community council, at least until the next elections.

In time, the Jews came to see elections as a political tool in the hands of the Polish authorities and ceased believing that they had any intrinsic value for the Jewish community. As a result, the percentage of Jewish voters declined, reaching an all-time low under the rule of Marshal Piłsudski and his supporters.

In the December 1932 elections, 3,192 people out of an electorate of 4,712 voted for the twenty-five-member council, as approved by the local Min-
istry of Religious Affairs. Only taxpayers who earned over a certain amount could vote. Since the Jewish public had become impoverished and included only a few taxpayers, the electoral roll in no way reflected the number of Jews in the city in that year. The Bund boycotted the elections, claiming that the Polish government discriminated against organizations that operated outside the state apparatus. The hands of the new council would be tied, it argued. With the Bund out of the running, the Zionists and the Mizrahi formed a leading coalition. 

In the last community council election, held in 1938, only 3,511 out of a Jewish population of 39,165 took part. The Bund won a third of the seats, and its candidate, Saul Goldman, was elected president of the council. However, this appointment did not meet with the approval of the Polish authorities, and Zvi Klementinowsky, the General Zionists’ candidate, was chosen instead. Ephraim Barash, an engineer originally from Wołkowysk, was appointed director of the community (he would later head the Judenrat in the Białystok ghetto).

During the interwar period the character of the community council, which had long been traditional, changed sharply, as the range of Jewish parties in Białystok indicated. The Jewish community embraced a democratic, traditional Zionist-Jewish ethos alongside a proletarian ethos, reflecting the political balance of power within Jewish society as a whole. Of all the Jewish parties and movements in Białystok, the Bund was the largest and best organized. In the 1930s, the Bund sharply criticized the Zionists for misleading the workers with their utopian projects and stripping them of their last pennies for goals that would not further their interests. Although ideologically the Poalei Zion was closest to the Bund, it made hardly any headway in Białystok, registering a membership of only 200 in 1939.

The Bund’s fiercest rivals were the Zionist parties—that is, the General Zionists, the Mizrahi and the Revisionists—all of which enjoyed substantial resources and local and external support. Agudat Israel, which in 1939 had about 500 members, was a moderate party. Even the provincial governor, who was known for his hostility toward the Jews, pointed out that Agudat’s “members’ and leaders’ loyalty to the state and its rulers is exemplary.” Another small but influential group were the Assimilationists, most of whom were not native Białystokers. One of the members of this group, the attorney Zemilsky, was deputy mayor of Białystok. Zemilsky edited a local paper that supported the authorities and was considered somewhat antisemitic by the Jews.

The consolidation of the Bund in the late 1930s was the result of a na-
tionwide crisis occasioned by the riots in Palestine, which militated against the chances of a large-scale aliyah (immigration to Palestine) and created disenchantment with Zionist policy as a solution to the Jewish problem. Other reasons for the rise of the Bund were growing antisemitism as the economic situation in Poland worsened, pogroms against the Jews, and government support for the rising tide of antisemitism. Since the Socialist left alone tried to defend the Jews, Jews felt drawn to the Bund as the only Jewish party with ties to the Socialist Party in Poland. Moreover, the Bund actively defended the Jews in the violent antisemitic riots. All in all, Jews felt it was in their interest to support an antifascist bloc.

The Functions of the Community Council and Community Board

From a report on community activities from 1933 to 1937, we can see that community affairs of the Jews of Bialystok were handled by two bodies: the community council and the community board.25

The council focused on putting the community's financial affairs in order, ending corruption, and establishing charitable funds. One of the serious problems the council had to deal with was the community's debts. In an attempt to solve this problem, the council, through the community board, imposed a direct community tax on the Jewish population. With the proceeds, the council bought an orphanage and its own slaughterhouse from private slaughterers, thereby putting an end to black market slaughtering. The council also borrowed money from wealthy members of the community to help finance the establishment of a soup kitchen in 1933 as well as the distribution of firewood for the poor and food for the needy during Passover.

The council also played an active role on the political front. When the Sejm introduced legislation purporting to limit the scope of businesses open to Jews, the council petitioned the Polish minister of commerce. The council helped small businesses and factories obtain permits from the authorities. In 1934, after anti-Jewish riots in which a local Jew was killed, the council began campaigning against antisemitism. It organized a protest march, called on the authorities to establish order, and set up a special bureau to monitor the legal rights of the Jews in and around Bialystok and to provide legal assistance in case of violation of these rights. Another of the council's projects was to protest, to the minister of religion and education, the "Jewish benches" (seats set apart for the Jewish students) in the universities. The council also set up a committee to denounce the persecutions of Jews in Germany and to help German refugees.
On the religious front, the council set up the Beit Harav (Rabbinic Institute) which served as an umbrella organization for rabbis and a forum for debate on halakhic issues. It took an active stand on the issue of Sabbath desecration and, in sympathy with the majority view, forbade Jewish merchants from opening their shops on the Sabbath. The council also protested emigration quotas to Palestine and operated an emigrants’ fund. The council’s activities were curtailed in the 1930s, both because of a deterioration in the situation of Polish Jewry and because the Poles felt threatened by the Jews, who constituted more than 40 percent of the population in urban centers such as Białystok.

The community board, as the community’s administrative body, was more important than the council. Immediately upon its establishment after the 1933 elections, it was approached by various people and organizations that had been ruined by the economic depression of the early 1930s. To help them, the board had to seek loans from the local authority and from Białystok’s wealthy Jews. In 1933, a resolution was adopted requesting that all Białystok Jews pay a municipal tax to the community board, based on income and property. The eradication of black market slaughtering enabled the authorities to tax the butchers. This tax and taxes levied on burial plots provided an additional source of income. The community set up a central fund and cut off allocations to individuals. During a reorganization of personnel within the community, contracts were drawn up with each of the workers. Finally, the board decided to set up an executive to apply the board’s decisions and to prepare proposals for discussion by community institutions. The function of this supreme body was to coordinate the various departments and streamline their activities. Barash was appointed director of the executive body.

With the improvement in the community’s financial situation, the board began to devote more time to welfare activities. Various relief agencies were streamlined, individual handouts were abolished, and financial assistance was granted according to strict criteria to the impoverished, the unemployed, and the sick. The board maintained the Jewish hospital together with the municipality. Thanks to sound management, the hospital’s budget grew from year to year. Like its predecessor, the board saw to the needs of the homeless and to widows and orphans and distributed goods to the needy for Passover. It also supported the hekdesḥ, the old-age home, and institutions for the handicapped.

In the field of educational and cultural activity, the 1933–37 board achieved more than its predecessors. It opened new schools and funded the Chazanowicz Educational Library, the Sholem Aleichem Library, Hebrew lan-
language courses, and workshops run by the Vocational High School. It also supported the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (founded in 1925 in Vilna to promote Yiddish language and literature and Jewish history), Jewish artisans abroad, and the Yeshiva Committee, among others. It set up new departments, such as the Statistics Department, which conducted surveys on various topics of Jewish interest, including Jewish migration from Białystok, the occupational breakdown of the Jews of Białystok, health statistics, and the like.\textsuperscript{26}

The religious affairs of the local Jews were handled by the Beit Harav and the rabbinical council. Rabbi Dr. Gedalyah Rosenman, who was born in Buczacz, Galicia, in 1877 and received rabbinical ordination in Vienna, served as the rabbi of the Białystok community from 1920 on. As a member of the community council and board, Rabbi Rosenman represented the community before the Polish authorities and dealt with all the city’s religious Jewish affairs. One of the rabbinical council’s main activities was to contest the ban on ritual slaughtering that was imposed by the Poles in 1936. The community petitioned deputies of the Sejm in Białystok and Warsaw. Rabbi Rosenman, leader of the campaign, wrote a manifesto on Jewish ritual slaughter. More than one thousand copies were printed and sent to members of the Sejm and to government officials. The rabbinical council adjudicated financial and personal disputes, arranged divorces and halizah (levirate), handed down halakhic rulings, provided ordination for teachers, supervised kashrut (Jewish dietary laws), the mikveh (ritual bath), and the Hevra Kaddisha, and kept a registry of marriages and births.

One of Białystok’s distinguished orthodox rabbis was Rabbi Hayyim Hertz Heilpern (the son of Rabbi Lippele), who for half a century served as Białystok’s rabbi, until his death in 1919. His grandson, Raphael Yom Tov Lipman Heilpern, studied medicine in Königsberg and emigrated to Palestine in 1935. In 1932, shortly before the graduation of first class of students at the Hebrew University Medical School, Professor Heilpern composed the Jewish physician’s oath, based on the Ten Commandments. He also introduced clinical neurology into Israel and was the first physician to receive the Israel Prize for Medicine. His brother, Professor Israel Halperin, is one of the Hebrew University’s most distinguished historians of East European Jewry.

In addition to dealing with welfare, religious, and educational affairs, the board handled the internal political affairs of the Jews in the entire region as part of the Regional Community Board, which catered to the needs of about one hundred Jewish communities in the province. The regional board also published a journal called \textit{Jewish Community}. In the 1930s, when eco-
nomic pressures and professional restrictions on Polish Jewry increased, the board set up the Hilf Komitet far di Gelitene Yidishe Yishuvim, a committee to help Jewish localities in distress. This committee, which was supported mainly by the Białystok Jewish community board, began functioning in 1935. Together with the help of the municipal legal and economic divisions, it provided legal and material assistance to all localities in the province.27

Social, Educational, and Cultural Institutions

Among Jewish institutions that provided aid and support to the Jewish community in Białystok as a whole, some organizations were outstanding as their activities added significantly to its social and cultural life.

Medical Relief Work

Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia Ludności Żydowskiej (TOZ, Organization for the Promotion of Health for Jewish People) was set up in Białystok in 1921 to provide medical care for children and promote health awareness. TOZ ran a mother and infants care center, a children’s clinic, and a dental clinic, as well as summer camps for children. It had ties with the Red Cross and was funded mostly by Jewish-American organizations and by contributions from local Jews.

Linat Hazedek cared for the city’s sick and poor. Its staff was composed entirely of volunteers, except for the doctors who were paid a nominal fee. During the First World War, many of its volunteers worked as field nurses, helping to transport wounded soldiers to hospitals. After the large influx of Jewish refugees into Białystok, Linat Hazedek also set up a special refugee committee. After the war, its array of services expanded to include a pharmacy and a mobile unit, which served the general public as well as the chronically sick. Linat Hazedek also ran a cultural club, a loan fund, and a philanthropic fund. In 1928, a Gikhe Hilf (first-aid unit) was added to its range of services. Between 1928 and 1933 Linat Hazedek handled more than 9,000 cases.28

Jewish Education

In the interwar period, Białystok boasted a modern Jewish school network that was one of the best in Poland. It is important to note that the schools
were not merely purveyors of knowledge but also of political ideologies. Thus language of instruction was a function of the school’s political orientation as well as an indication of its academic standard. There were considerable controversies throughout the period over the use of Hebrew or Yiddish as the language of instruction. Although in theory, there was supposed to be a uniform curriculum approved by the state education authorities, in practice each political current adapted the curriculum to its own needs. The Tarbut institutions, for example, which were on the whole sponsored by the General Zionists, taught in Hebrew, and centered a large part of the curriculum around Eretz Israel. The Bund, on the other hand, taught in Yiddish and stressed Socialist ideals. In 1915, it set up the Yugent Farein (Youth Fraternity), Białystok’s first Yiddish-language school. This was followed, in 1916, by the Peretz Nursery School (the Peretz Shul, named after I. L. Peretz) and a vocational school, which closed in 1928 due to lack of funds. The Grosser School and the Mendele Mokher Seforim Children’s Home and Orphanage, which after the First World War were run by the Kultur Lige (Cultural Association), were situated in the heart of Białystok’s Jewish slums. In 1921, after the Polish authorities closed down the Kultur Lige, these schools were taken over by the Bund-affiliated Central Yiddish School Organization (CYShO).

Białystok’s largest and most progressive vocational school was the Hantverker Shule. Founded in 1905, it was forced to close its doors temporarily during the First World War. The Hantverker Shule achieved excellence in the late 1920s, due largely to the support of the community board, and it continued to thrive in the 1930s, when it became the city’s foremost vocational school. The school ran a combined general and vocational course for students ages 14 through 17 from Białystok and the environs. On the eve of the Second World War, it had hundreds of students studying to be carpenters, blacksmiths, mechanics, textile workers, and metalworkers, among other occupations. The school’s motto was “Honor to Work and Worker,” and it was known for its emphasis on humanistic and universal values.29

Obshchestvo Rasprostraneyia Truda (ORT, Society for Manual Work among Jews) established a vocational school for boys in Białystok in 1921, followed in 1923 by a vocational school for girls. ORT also ran shoemaking and gardening courses and operated a gardeners’ and farmers’ cooperative, which marketed its products.

In the summer of 1925, the Hevrat Meftzei Haskalah opened a boys’ secondary school and a girls’ secondary school, which later merged into a coeducational school. The new school was soon recognized as being as good
as, if not better than, other secondary schools in the city. A new school board was elected each year, and the parents were involved in the running of the school.30

Bialystok had two other Jewish gymnasias: Druskin’s School, founded in 1911, and Zeligman’s School. Both taught general studies to members of all religious denominations, and the language of instruction was Polish.

Bialystok’s first Hebrew High School was founded in 1919 at the initiative of five affluent philanthropists: Menahem Mendel Kaplan, a magistrate, community board member, and chairman of the Hevra Kaddisha and of the Orphanage Board; Moshe Katzenelson, director of the Gemilut Hasadim fund and city councilor; Eliezer Kahane, a member of the Jewish Hospital Board; Lipa Pat, a founder of Mizrahi in Poland and patron of the Tahkemoni network of schools in the Bialystok area; and the physician Dr. Moses Ziman, a communal worker and director of the Jewish Hospital. The Hebrew High School was set up to fill an educational vacuum. In its founders’ words, its purpose was: “to provide our children with a comprehensive Jewish education . . . and rectify the sorry situation whereby our children are taught everything about everything . . . and yet learn nothing about our own history, or else are taught things it were better they were not.”31

The Hebrew High School aimed at a blend of humanistic values and Jewish content. The language of instruction was Hebrew, as the school’s founders affirmed:

The language of our school should not simply be a function of a shifting political reality. The language of instruction in our school must be our own language, for it is not possible to have two languages of instruction, and how can Hebrew studies be taught in any language other than Hebrew?! From a national point of view, too, it is clear that the language of the new Jewish school, which places such importance on Hebrew, must be the eternal language of Jewish culture, which is also the language of our new life.32

The school, which later changed its name to the Bialystok Hebrew High School, was based on a national–humanistic tradition. Its curriculum combined Jewish and general studies and provided a grounding in Jewish, Polish, and general history. As its reputation grew, children from the provinces began flocking to the school. By 1924, 35 percent of the students in the higher grades were from the provinces. Annexes had to be built onto the school to house the physics and chemistry labs, the geography lab, the natural science lab, and the handicraft lab. The school also had a library with
By 1937, the Białystok Hebrew High School had 646 pupils, and 104 of its graduates had passed the matriculation exam necessary for entry into institutes of higher education in Poland and abroad.\textsuperscript{33}

Dr. Zvi Zemel, who was principal of the school from 1929 to 1933, emigrated to Palestine in 1934, where he became principal of Haifa’s Bialik High School. He was succeeded by David Rakowitzky, who served as principal of the Białystok Hebrew High School from 1933 until 1939, when the Russians entered Białystok. The Rakowitzkys subsequently fled to Vilna and later emigrated to Palestine, where Rakowitzky became the principal of Tel Aviv’s Municipal High School. Some famous individuals who attended Białystok’s Hebrew High School in the 1930s were Professor Menahem Stern, leading researcher into the Second Temple Period; Yitzhak Shamir, Israel’s former prime minister; and Haika Grosman.

Since Białystok had no university, those wishing to pursue a higher education had to move elsewhere in Poland or, after the *numerus clausus*, or Jewish quota, was introduced in the late 1930s, abroad. A number of Jewish students enrolled at Warsaw University and at Vilna’s Stefan Batory University set up Arnonia, a Revisionist Zionist academic organization. Applicants for Arnonia had to pass an exam in Jewish history, especially the history of the Revisionist Zionist movement. By 1939, Arnonia had eighty-five members, of whom twenty-five were students over the age of 18, thirty were teenagers, and the remaining thirty, children. Among Arnonia’s founders were Yitzhak Makow, who emigrated to Israel in 1936 after obtaining an immigration certificate from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the Sokolski brothers. At the outbreak of World War II, some members of Arnonia were recruited by the Red Army, while others managed to escape. The brothers Pinhas and Nathan Adler served as pilots in the Polish air force.\textsuperscript{34}

Białystok’s religious population was served by the Tahkemoni elementary and secondary schools. The elementary school, which was coeducational, taught general and Jewish studies but focused on the latter as befitting a religious institution. The secondary school was more of a college for Jewish studies, somewhat similar to a yeshiva high school nowadays. The religious public was also served by the Boyarsky Elementary School, which was set up in the early century to provide national religious education. In 1929, the Agudat Israel opened a Beit Yaakov school in Białystok accommodating some 150 pupils.

Until the Second World War, Białystok’s Orthodox population was served by a plethora of *batei midrash*, which clustered around the Great Synagogue. Although most Orthodox Jews were affiliated with the Lithuanian
mitnagdim, Białystok also had its fair share of hasidim. Białystok’s large yeshiva had twelve Talmud Torah grades, and four yeshiva grades, with about twenty to thirty students per grade. The majority of its yeshiva students (about 80 percent) came from the provinces, and only affluent students were required to pay a tuition fee. Rabbi David Fajans, head of the Białystok Bet Din (Religious Court) and a leader of Mizrahi in Poland until his death in 1935, founded many of the city’s Orthodox institutions.

The Musar yeshiva Beit Yosef (Novardok) was set up in Białystok in the early 1920s. The Musar yeshivot founded by Rabbi Joseph Josel Horowitz followed an even more rigorous Musar program than that of the founder of the Musar movement, Rabbi Israel Salanter. The head of the Beit Yosef yeshiva in Białystok, Rabbi Abraham Joffin, served both as the yeshiva’s director and as melamed (teacher). Shortly after the yeshiva was set up in Białystok, Rabbi Joffin asked Jacob Kanievsky, who had studied at the Beit Yosef yeshiva during the First World War, to tutor the yeshiva’s gifted students. Rabbi Joffin helped Kanievsky publish his first book Sha’arei Tevunah (Gates of Wisdom) in 1925. The book, which contains references to the author’s days at the Novaredok yeshiva in Białystok, made a deep impression on the Orthodox world and established Kanievsky’s reputation within it. After marrying the sister of Rabbi Yeshayahu Karelitz (the Hazon Ish), Kanievsky emigrated to Palestine where he became known as the Steipler. He subsequently became the most important halakhic authority among nonhasidic Ultraorthodox circles in Bnei Brak.35

Teachers at the Beit Yosef yeshiva were selected from the alumni. In addition to gemarah (Talmud), emphasis was placed on Musar and on devotional prayer.36 Although Białystok’s Jews were initially wary of Beit Yosef’s 200 or so students, who tended toward religious extremism and bizarre behavior, they soon came to accept them. Among the yeshiva’s students was the author Chaim Grade, whose trilogy, Tsemakh Atlas (in English, The Yeshiva), provides an account of his yeshiva days and describes how the Beit Yosef students were perceived by the local Jews: “They walk around with long fringes protruding from their coats, and are a figure of fun. Rumor has it that a musarnik may go out on a hot summer’s day wrapped in fur, a sweater knotted around his neck, and galoshes on his feet. Is such behavior indicative of Fear of Heaven?”37

For the jubilee book published by the Warsaw Haynt (Today) in 1928, the historian Abraham Samuel Hershberg gathered statistical data for Białystok which show that in that year the city had the following Jewish educational institutions: the Hantverker Shule; four Jewish high schools, which taught in Polish (two of these schools also taught Hebrew; the other two
were Assimilationist, even holding classes on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays; the Tahkemoni High School (500 students), the Tarbut High School (600 students), three Jewish elementary schools, several modern heders (786 students of both sexes), a Talmud Torah (700 students), five Bundist elementary schools, and a Bundist high school (650 students, mostly girls). About 300 children studied in Ultraorthodox heders. Only a very small percentage studied in state elementary or secondary schools.38

The Jewish schools were financed exclusively by the proceeds from tuition fees and subsidies provided by the community board, which waged a long and arduous battle to obtain state and municipal funding for the schools. In the 1920s, the Jewish schools suffered when the Jewish community board ran into financial difficulties. In the 1930s, however, as the community board’s finances improved through taxation, the schools flourished. Białystok’s Jewish educational network—one of largest and the best of its kind in the country—catered not only to the children of the wealthy but also to the children of the poor.

Libraries

As Jewish literature evolved and as the political awareness of the Jewish proletariat grew, Jewish public libraries became an increasingly important part of Białystok’s cultural life. The large Sholem Aleichem Library on Sienkiewicza Street, one of Białystok’s most famous cultural institutions, was opened in 1916 by two youth organizations, one Jewish and one Polish. These organizations saw the library as a means of fostering a Polish national consciousness in independent Poland. In 1919 the library was taken over by the municipality, only then becoming known as the Sholem Aleichem Library, after the famous Yiddish writer of that name. In 1921, it acquired a Polish literature section, while the Yiddish and Hebrew sections were expanded with works from schools and private collections. The library also had English, German, French, and Esperanto sections. By 1927, it had a total of 28,869 books and 1,456 members from Białystok and the environs. In 1926, when the municipality opened its own public library, funding for the Sholem Aleichem Library ceased, and it was no longer designated a public library, despite protests in the Jewish—and even Polish—press.39 Anti-Semitic pressure no doubt played a part in this decision.

A 1935 survey of reading habits in the city’s four largest libraries showed that 22 percent of members of the Sholem Aleichem Library were interested in scientific books, as against 3–12 percent of members of the general municipal library. The survey also showed that the members of the Jewish
library came predominantly from the working class and that the most popular books were on Polish history and sociology. The Sholem Aleichem Library also arranged meetings with authors, journalists, and teachers, and ran lecture series for adults and young people. The library was affiliated with the Warsaw Kultur Lige and maintained close ties with Vilna’s YIVO Institute. In 1939, in its twentieth year, the Sholem Aleichem Library, with 50,000 books, was one of the largest of its kind in Poland.

The Chazanowicz Academic Library—Białyostok’s second largest library—was set up by the Jewish community board in 1933. The library housed a collection of 14,000 works on Jewish and other themes left by Dr. Joseph Chazanowicz in his legacy. The library also housed the complete collection of Białyostok’s community archives and was used by scholars, researchers, educators, authors and students.40

Besides these two libraries, there were a number of smaller Jewish libraries usually affiliated with cultural, professional and public organizations.

Theater and the Arts

Białyostok had its own Jewish theater whose actors originated from Warsaw and Łódź as well as a Yiddish company called Artistishe Vinkele (Artists’ Corner), which was comprised of local actors. However, the Poles, who objected to the idea of a Yiddish theater, put obstacles in its path. Consequently, Jewish actors were not much better off than Jewish peddlers or merchants. In 1926, the Gilorina (Gila and Rina) Company was established. Its four performances, which attracted many members of the Jewish intelligentsia (including those who had dissociated themselves from Yiddish), were widely acclaimed. Internal squabbling, however, forced it to close down, and it was replaced by another theater company, called Yung Studye (Young Studio).

Białyostok had two Jewish cultural organizations, the Yidisher Kunst (Jewish Art), which held lectures on cultural topics, and Zamir, a Zionist choir founded in 1915, with a forty-member orchestra. In the interwar period, Białyostok outstripped the rest of Poland in the visual arts. Works by Jewish artists were exhibited throughout the country and abroad.

Among the world famous artists and scholars who came from Białyostok are author and poet Menahem Mendel Dolitzki; Nahum Zemach, founder of Habimah; Professor Eliezer Lipa Sukenik, the famous archaeologist who moved to Palestine and was instrumental in acquiring part of the Dead Sea scrolls; his wife Hasya Feinsod-Sukenik, a founder of the kindergarten system in Jerusalem; Dr. Ludwik Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto; the
author Ossip Dymov (Joseph Perelman); the Yiddish author and poet Zusman Segalowitch; Dr. Solomon Schiller, principal of Jerusalem’s Rehavia High School and editor of Hamaggid; Dr. Joseph Mohilever, son of Rabbi Samuel Mohilever and principal of Jerusalem’s Rehavia High School.

Sports

Organized Jewish sport in Białystok began in 1918, with the establishment of Hashahar. Soon the organization split into two camps: those who favored Hebrew, and those who favored Yiddish. The latter broke away to set up their own group, Rekord. Since, however, both organizations could barely survive on their own, they decided to merge, giving rise to Maccabi, whose official language was Yiddish and later changed its name to Yidisher Sport Klub in Białystok. Not until 1923 did Maccabi receive official recognition. In 1924, it played against Hakoah Vienna, and in 1925 against Maccabi Palestina in a home match. These matches were high points in the life of Białystok’s Jews, who attended them en masse. Although Maccabi specialized in all sports, its true forte was football. Until 1927, Maccabi, with a membership of 300, was Białystok’s only Jewish sports organization. Maccabi also had its own orchestra.

In 1927, the Bund set up its own sports organization, Morgnshtern (Morning Star), whose 100 associates included members of SKIF (Sotsialistisher Kinder Farband)—the Bund’s children’s organization. In 1929, Poalei Zion–Right followed suit with Kraft (Power), which had 180 members. In 1930, members of Morgnshtern set up a splinter group called Morgnroyt (Red Morning), which had 200 members. On the eve of the Second World War, there were only three Jewish sports organizations in Białystok: Maccabi, Hapoel, and Nordia.41

Jewish Youth Movements

Although Jewish youth movements existed in Poland before the First World War, it was during the interwar period that they came into their own. They no doubt owed their existence to the sense of outrage felt by the local youth at the situation of the Jews in general and their own situation in particular. The youth movements were not merely the expression of an ideological yearning; they gave the youth a sense of purpose and solidarity that alleviated their distress.

The youth of Galicia took an unprecedented step in the history of Jewish youth movements when they adopted Zionism as their creed. The
Zionist youth saw the movement not only as a means of injecting new meaning into their lives but as shaping their futures. For those contemplating kibbutz life in Palestine, the youth movement provided an excellent preliminary framework.

Several Jewish youth movements were simply extensions of parties and ideologies. Among these were the Zukunft, the Bund’s youth movement, and the Communist Party’s youth section, which operated clandestinely under various aliases. The Zionist youth movements, on the other hand—Hashomer Hatzair, Hehalutz Hatzair, Hanoar Haziyoni, and Hashomer Hadati—were not aligned with political parties despite their ideological bases. In actual fact, the Zionist youth movements—particularly the pioneering movements—eschewed political activity in the diaspora in favor of preparing for life in Eretz Israel.

When David Ben-Gurion visited Poland on April 14 and 15, 1933, 1,100 people crammed into Białystok’s Jewish theater to hear him speak, and more than 1,000 had to be turned away, for lack of space. Similarly, Białystok’s Palace Theater was filled to capacity when Ze’ev Vladimir Jabotinsky visited Białystok on March 18, 1939.

On the eve of the Second World War, the following youth movements existed in Białystok: the Bund, the Communists, Hashomer Hatzair, Hanoar Haziyoni (General Zionists), Betar (Hatzahar), Hashomer Hadati (Mizrahi), and Hehalutz Hatzair-Dror, which was a merger of the youth division of the Zionist Socialist Workers’ Party SS (Frayhayt), and the Pioneer Youth Association, Hehalutz Hatzair. Although we have no accurate statistics on membership of Jewish youth organizations in Białystok on the eve of the Second World War, we may assume that if the nationwide figures totaled an estimated 60,000, the figures for Białystok must have run into the hundreds.

The Jewish Press

Białystok’s first Jewish periodical, the Assimilationist Russian-language daily, Golos Bialostoka (Voice of Białystok), began publication in 1910. The first Yiddish daily, the national-Zionist Białystoker Togblat (Białystok daily), which was first published in 1913, lasted two years. Relative to the size of the Jewish population in the area (6.8 percent of all Polish Jewry in 1921, and 6.3 percent in 1931), Jewish periodicals were fairly scarce in the interwar period. Many of Białystok’s Jews were quite happy with the wide selection of periodicals originating from Warsaw, such as Haynt (Today) and Der Moment (The minute), which had a nationwide circulation, and Unzer Ekspress
(Our express), which was even printed in special editions for the large provincial towns such as Białystok. Nevertheless, between the years 1918 and 1939, Białystok had at least sixty Jewish periodicals in Yiddish and Polish, although some had only one issue. These periodicals contained local and regional news, reviewed social, cultural, and economic issues relating to Polish Jewry, and discussed the Poles’ attitude toward the Jews and other ethnic minorities. The Association of Local Jewish Authors and Journalists, established in the early 1920s, grew so fast that by the early 1930s it had one of the largest reading rooms in all of Poland.

In January 1919 the independent daily *Dos Naye Lebn* (The new life) began publication. It was a high-quality paper whose founder and editor-in-chief, Peysekh Kaplan, was a prominent figure in Białystok's Jewish community. In 1931 the paper changed its name to *Unzer Lebn* (Our life). It took a strong stand against antisemitism and vigorously condemned the antisemitic measures adopted against the Jewish students at Vilna University. *Unzer Lebn* also had a foreign section, which included news from Palestine. On several occasions, the paper was subjected to the rigors of local censorship. In addition to local and world news, the paper had a literary column, a sports column, and a humor column. *Unzer Lebn* was Białystok’s longest-lasting daily, celebrating its twentieth anniversary in 1939 with a special gala edition.

Contributors to *Unzer Lebn* included, among others, Moshe Wissotzky, whose articles were acclaimed by writers and thinkers throughout Poland; Avraham Shlomo Amiel; the poets Poriyyah and Abraham Lis; David Sapir; writer and sculptor S. Lampert; Hayyim Wissotzky and Aaron Berezinsky, who also published in the New York *Forverts*; Mendel Goldman; J. Szacki; Aryeh Leib Fajans, one of Białystok's first journalists and later a member of Israel's Hebrew Academy; and Y. G. Steinsapir, a journalist with a superb sense of humor.

Białystok also had a number of Jewish weeklies, such as the *Bialystoker Shtime* (Białystoker voice), which appeared only for a short while in 1924. In 1929, Moshe Wissotzky founded the *Naye Bialystoker Shtime* (New Białystok voice). An American edition of this paper appeared in the early 1940s, catering to Białystokers living in New York. To this day, the American edition of the *Naye Bialystoker Shtime* appears twice a year, before Passover and the Jewish New Year.

Most of Białystok’s Jewish papers were of the tabloid variety, pandering to their readers’ sensationalist tastes. The *Bialystoker Yidisher Kuryer* (Białystok Jewish courier) was a typical tabloid of this type, with dramatic headlines such as “The Jewish King of the Cannibals” or “The Extraordinary
Adventures of a Jewish Lad in Australia.” Even the news and commentary had sensational titles, such as “Europe Has Gone Bust” or “Scandal Erupts as Warsaw Firemen Accept Bribes and Commissions.” Despite its tabloid allure, the paper’s news section covered all aspects of local Jewish life.44

In 1933, the Bialystoker Fraymorgn (Bialystok early morning), a daily edited by Y. G. Steinsapir, and the weekly Unzer Eispres (Our express, formerly Bialystoker Yidisher Kuryer) were established. In 1934, another daily, Unzer Tsaytung (Our newspaper), was launched, followed in 1936 by the Naye Bialystoker Tsaytung (New Bialystok newspaper).

The Jewish community also had its share of political party papers, such as the Bund’s Bialystoker Veker (Bialystok clarion), and the Zionist Unzer Veg (Our way), which provided detailed news of movement activities. However, these were the exception rather than the rule. Both the Jewish and non-Jewish press in Bialystok focused mainly on political issues, such as the critical situation of Polish Jewry in the 1930s, nazism in Germany, and the rise of Polish antisemitism.

Jewish-Polish Relations

One of the factors determining the status of the Jews in Bialystok was the attitude of the local Polish authorities toward them. Although this attitude was no doubt contingent on state policy toward Jews in general during the interwar period, it is worth considering how Bialystok’s geoethnic status (in particular, the preponderance of Jews there) may have played a part, too.

On March 30, 1919, the Polish governor of Bialystok passed an ordinance stating that all public notices and signs had henceforth to be written in fluent and correct Polish only. Since most Jews in Bialystok spoke Yiddish, it was impossible for them to abide by this ordinance. The Jewish community board tried to get the authorities to revoke the law, but in vain; the Polish authorities simply mocked the Jews’ broken Polish. To make matters worse, they demanded that the community board provide them with a detailed report of contagious diseases within the Jewish community. At the same time, they began drawing up a population registry. In the Jewish neighborhoods, rumors spread that the registration was for the purposes of compulsory conscription to the Polish army.

When many of Bialystok’s Jews refused to comply with these demands, the authorities accused the Jews of unpatriotic behavior and the Jewish press of publishing spurious information about government plots. Officials at the conscription centers treated the Jews offhandedly and refused to ac-
cept Russian documents testifying to the age of the conscripts. Only after the Białystok community board appealed to the Jewish lobby in the Sejm did the authorities clarify that compulsory conscription applied only to those Jews who declared themselves to be Polish citizens.45

Yitzhak Gruenbaum, one of Polish Jewry’s foremost leaders, delivered a cutting diatribe to the Polish Sejm on January 8, 1920, on the subject of compulsory conscription to the Polish army. He stressed that the Polish authorities themselves had determined that “the inhabitants of a region annexed to Poland automatically became Polish citizens, unless they declared their wish to become citizens of another country of which they were part.”46

Although the Jews’ attempts at what was called “draft-dodging” caused considerable anger and resentment among the local population, the authorities promised not to punish the “offenders.” The recruitment centers, however, failed to coordinate their activities with the Jewish community’s legal department, which dealt with cases of illegal conscription. They continued to draft Jews despite protests by the community and despite assertions by the minister of the armed forces on the voluntary nature of conscription in the area.

Another cause of friction was the Polish governor’s request that the Jews of Białystok present their financial books to the local authorities for inspection. After the accountant-general discovered irregularities in the community’s accounting procedures, all five employees of the community board’s Supplies Department were arrested in April 1920 on charges of embezzlement. An angry confrontation between the community board and the authorities ensued, in which the board appealed the arrest. After further investigation, the accused were released.

The issue of Białystok’s geopolitical status further contributed to the Poles’ distrust of the Jews. In late 1918–early 1919, Białystok’s status was being debated on both a local and international level: Was Białystok to be included in the jurisdiction of the Civil Administration of the Eastern Lands (a temporary body, which existed before the final borders of independent Poland were drawn), or was it to be peremptorily annexed to the Polish Republic? The contemporary Polish historian, Piotr Wrobel, claims that a group of Jewish politicians suggested other alternatives, such as granting Białystok autonomy or annexing it to nearby Lithuania, in which the Jews would be numerically equal to the Lithuanians and Poles, whereas in Poland they would simply be a persecuted minority. Wrobel refers to an article in *Dos Naye Lebn* of October 7, 1919, claiming that the decision to annex Białystok to the Polish Republic, as ratified by the Sejm, should have been entrusted to an international committee. The next day, the paper ac-
cused the Polish population estimates of being grossly inflated and claimed that, in reality, the Poles constituted no more than a third of the city's total population. This claim refuted the Poles' contention that the entire population of Bialystok favored annexation to Poland. According to Wrobel, this incident further fanned feelings of resentment among the Poles, who considered Bialystok an integral part of Poland.

The Jews further argued that the incorporation of Polish villages into the larger Bialystok metropolitan area, implemented on September 7, 1919 on the eve of the municipal elections, was designed to reduce the proportion of Jews in the city (in that year, Jews constituted a majority in the city). The law requiring city councilors to declare their familiarity with written and spoken Polish was additional proof of discrimination. The members of the Jewish council, who had no intention of submitting any such declaration, decided to boycott the municipal elections. At the first session of the newly elected council, the government's representative called for tolerance and accused the Lithuanians of stirring up conflict between the Poles and the Jews. He berated the fact that the Bialystok municipality was the only one in Poland to comprise only Poles and claimed that the Jews were to blame for boycotting the elections and refraining from political life. Finally, he expressed the hope that for the sake of Bialystok and, indeed, the whole of Poland, the good relationship between Poles and Jews would continue.47

This speech was received by the Jews with a large measure of skepticism. Indeed, it was not long before their fears proved well-founded. The new municipality, with its emphasis on Polonization, began dismissing Jewish civil servants and hiring Polish ones instead. Moreover, allocation of the municipal budget—particularly the education budget—took no account of the proportion of Jews in the city, and the Jewish schools were left without municipal funding. The government office opened by the Poles in 1919 to fight black-marketeers and loan sharks added to the climate of fear among the Jews, as thugs masquerading as government inspectors extorted money from local Jewish merchants.

Although the Jews did not boycott the next municipal elections held in 1921, the Jewish faction, the Yidishe Birglekhe Fraksye (Jewish Citizens Faction) did not make much headway. Although it later rallied round and won a seat in the municipal elections of 1927, it was wracked by internal divisions, and was unable to reverse the trend of budgetary discrimination against Jewish schools.

Another major source of tension between the Jews and the Poles was the fact that as early as the end of the nineteenth century, the Poles associated the Jews with the radical left and even coined a term Żydokomuna (Jewish
Communism) to describe the association. In the summer of 1920, after the retreat of the Red Army, the Polish General Staff maintained that the Jews had fought alongside the Bolsheviks, despite the fact that of the sixteen citizens killed by the Communists in Białystok, four had been Jews. The Poles’ attitude to the Jews of Białystok is described in a report on the Bolshevik invasion written in early September 1920 by Heschel Farbstein, a member of the Sejm. Farbstein reported that on July 21 Polish soldiers, with the help of some local Poles, began looting buildings and stores evacuated by the Jews following rumors of an imminent Bolshevik invasion. On the same day, Polish soldiers began rounding up Jews and taking them to remote locations outside Białystok, where they were forced to do degrading work. The Poles continued their program of harassment with a massive pogrom a few days later, in which a local Jew was stabbed to death. More than 300 cases of looting, vandalism, and physical injury were recorded by the Jewish community board during this pogrom.48

The Bolshevik retreat began on August 20, 1920. Two days later, when the Polish army entered Białystok, the Polish commander issued an official communiqué insinuating that the Jews had fought alongside the Bolsheviks in the street battles that had erupted when the Polish army entered the city. The Jewish community board denied this allegation and asked the Provisional Civilian Committee to clear the Jews of such a charge. In his report, Farbstein stressed that “almost all committee members [including a member of Endecja, a right-wing Polish party that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century] agreed that although an injustice had been done, the military command would lose face if it were to retract the communiqué.”49 Between August 23 and August 25, 1920, Polish soldiers, with the help of local Poles, launched a new pogrom in which two Jews were killed. According to Farbstein, this pogrom was far worse than the pogrom in July. Once again the Jews were subjected to forced labor, leading the Jewish community board to issue the following statement: “The Jews are willing to undertake any work, as long as it is properly organized, and the dignity and property of Jewish workers is safeguarded.”50

Farbstein added that, despite the intervention of the Provisional Civilian Committee, Jew-baiting continued until early September 1920. After the pogrom, the Polish press accused the Jews of hostile behavior toward the army. These accusations fueled Polish hatred of Jews, and encouraged the National Workers’ Union, Praca, in Białystok to adopt strict sanctions against the Jews there.51

The activities of Jewish Communists, who originally formed the bulk of the Białystok Communist Party, reinforced the image of a Żydokomuna
operating in Białystok as part of a worldwide Jewish Communist organization and, according to Wrobel, contributed to the rise of antisemitism in Białystok during the Polish Republic. Other contributing factors were American-Jewish aid, religious misconceptions, the influx of Jewish refugees, and the economic crisis of the 1920s. Thus antisemitism, hitherto confined to the benighted classes in the Polish Republic, spread.52

The economic crisis of 1929 caused a drop in Poland’s national product and a rise in unemployment. The Jews of Białystok who, like most Polish Jews, ran small businesses or worked in Jewish factories and workshops, were the first to be affected. The economic crisis led to a rise in the city’s crime rate in general, and crimes against Jews—especially in the poorer neighborhoods—in particular. The Bund responded by sending out self-defense units to the neighborhoods as a sign of solidarity. Instead of reassuring the Jews, however, this gesture made them more anxious by signifying the seriousness of their situation. The units, which in 1930 comprised several dozen men, also undertook to recover Jewish property that had been looted during clashes with the local police—clashes that took a toll on both sides and intensified the Jewish-Polish conflict.53

In April 1939, the map of Białystok province was redrawn, resulting in a rise in the proportion of Jews within it. In the same month, the provincial agent sent a memorandum to the ministry of the interior, on the subject of the Jews and their disproportionate presence in the province. This document, perhaps more than any other, is proof of the antisemitic sentiment of the Polish regime on the eve of the Second World War. It proposed adjusting the boundaries of the province to safeguard its Polish character and warned of the demographic and economic threat posed by the Jewish population. It stated that most Jews were morally corrupt, self-serving, and rapacious. The tone of the document became increasingly tendentious and vituperative, as it described how Jewish loyalties were governed purely by expedience. In the provincial governor’s opinion, the Jewish mentality was a combination of several factors: (1) the Jews’ lack of a country of their own; (2) their ties with international Jewry; and (3) their extreme materialism.54

“So far,” stated the memorandum “the goal of Polonization has been applied in a haphazard manner, although the Poles have woken up to the danger. However, lack of coordination in implementing the goal of Polonization has allowed Jewish economic forces to unite and enlist Jewish capital and influence worldwide to fight the Poles.”55 The document outlined a detailed plan for strengthening Polish industry in the province and fighting profiteers. It proposed the universal application of Polish accounting procedures, a ban on peddling and bartering (to sever ties between the Jews and
the nearby villages), and the extension of the border by 100 kilometers. It advanced a two-phased program to expel the Jews from the province: the first stage consisted of ruining the Jews economically, thereby “preparing” them psychologically to leave; the second stage consisted of forbidding Jews to purchase real estate, dissolving all Jewish public-political organizations, and restricting the community’s religious and economic activities.\(^{56}\) This document provides incontrovertible proof that cities such as Białystok, with a high percentage of Jews, were prime targets for Polish antisemitism.

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties of sustaining a Jewish way of life in a situation of political instability, the Jewish community of Białystok managed to preserve its traditional Jewish character while at the same time borrowing elements from other cultures. It was a highly developed society that was also changing rapidly, like all of Jewish society at the turn of the century. The Jews of Białystok, creators of Poland’s second largest textile center, were to leave their mark on the city for many years to come. In a city that was more Jewish than Polish, a city in which everyone rested on the Sabbath, there was room for both religious and secular Jews.

During the 1930s, the economic depression, rising unemployment, and rampant antisemitism undermined the status of the Jews in Białystok and in Poland in general. Domestic problems and the international situation on the eve of the Second World War brought Białystok’s Jews to an impasse from which there was no way out.
Chapter 2

Białystok under Soviet Rule

On August 23, 1939, a pact was signed between the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and the Soviet Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov. This pact had a secret appendix dealing, among other subjects, with the division of Poland between Nazi Germany and the USSR. Following the occupation of Poland by Germany the Eastern Territories, including the large cities of Białystok and Lwów, were to be transferred to the USSR. On September 1, 1939, German troops invaded Poland. World War II had begun.

The First German Occupation

Friday, September 15, 1939, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah 5700, a rumor spread through Białystok that the Germans had reached the outskirts of the city. Entries for September 1939 in a German war diary show that the German army entered the city unopposed, as the Polish army in the region had been crushed. The following day, the German armed forces marched up Mazowiecki and Dąbrowskiego Streets, and in a matter of hours, German vehicles were rumbling through the deserted streets of Białystok.1

Avraham Vered, an adolescent living with his family in Białystok at the time, wrote in his memoirs: “Early in the morning, the German Stukas and Messerchmidtks swooped like birds of prey over the city, releasing their bombs. . . . A fortnight or so later, on a Friday in mid-September, Germans were seen in the city center. We ran to catch sight of them. The large town square around the clock tower . . . was full of Germans and their equipment: strange vehicles, huge trucks, even horse-drawn wagons . . . masses of German soldiers . . . young men in green uniform.”2
An article published in New York in the *Bialystoker Shtime* (Bialystok Voice) in February 1940 described the terrible days of German occupation. The article stated that several dozen representatives of the local Polish and Jewish population were taken hostage as a cautionary measure. For several days the Jews were unharmed, and relative peace and order prevailed. However, on Yom Kippur eve, a 12-year-old boy was murdered for leaving heder five minutes after curfew. This event was the signal for the onset of a wave of persecutions. A state of emergency was declared, and a round-the-clock curfew imposed, except for a few hours in the afternoon. Survivors’ memoirs described German acts of burglary, looting, and murder. The Germans did not hesitate to shoot Jewish women who protested when the Germans tried to pry rings from their fingers. The Jews of Białystok lived in a constant state of terror, afraid to leave their houses even during the “permitted” afternoon hours.³

On September 18, 1939, the third day of the occupation, rumor had it that the Germans were leaving, to be replaced by the Russians. The arrival of the Soviets in Białystok, as set forth in the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, was delayed due to the presence of the Polish army in the area. It was only on September 20, after the last remnants of the Polish army had been defeated, that the German army began withdrawing to the lines determined by the German and Soviet governments. The next day (September 21), three Soviet planes dropped leaflets in Belorussian, announcing that the Soviet forces were about to arrive and liberate the city. The city organized a welcome committee composed of both Jews and non-Jews, to prepare for their arrival.⁴

During just six days in Białystok, the Germans killed more than 100 Jews and vandalized and looted more than 200 Jewish factories and homes.⁵

**The Arrival of the Soviets**

On Friday September 22, the Germans left Białystok and the Red Army entered the city. Vered related: “A long convoy of tanks entered from the East. The soldiers on the turrets were bombarded with flowers. We climbed up on to the tanks. The soldiers hugged us close, and we laughed with joy. After the tanks came the infantry, with their *rubashka* tunics with stiff, upright collars . . . riding breeches and boots. Their uniform was a khaki color . . . they wore their stripes on their collars and caps.”⁶

In the vacuum left between the departure of the Germans and the arrival of the Soviets, the Jews continued to hole up in their houses to be sure all the German soldiers had left. Then, in their delight and relief at the
Germans’ departure, the Jews dressed up in their best clothes and lined the streets with flowers in their hands to welcome the Russians. The city was festooned with huge red banners and innumerable pictures of Josef Stalin, party leaders, and Red Army commanders.

The Red Army’s arrival from the East struck another blow to the already ravaged Polish army and heralded the end of the short-lived independent Polish Republic. Their country’s traumatic defeat was a blow to the Poles’ national pride. For the Jews however, what mattered most was the removal of the Nazi German threat, and they welcomed the Russians into the city with open arms. Although many were aware of Soviet hostility toward Jewish religion and culture and anticipated the nationalization of private factories and businesses, the overriding feeling was one of relief.

The demarcation line between the German-occupied territories and the Soviet-administered Polish territories was drawn on September 28, 1939, in Moscow, when Ribbentrop and Molotov signed a new Soviet-German Pact, validating amendments to the pact signed one month previously. The secret protocol attached to the new pact drew the border between the two occupied areas along the Pisa, Narew, Bug, and San rivers. The document also ordered a transfer of populations between the two occupied areas: German nationals and citizens of German origin (Volksdeutsche) were required to move to the German-occupied area, while the Ukrainians, Belorussians, Russians, and Ruthenians were required to move to the Soviet-occupied area. The pact granted to Russia areas of eastern Poland and the southern provinces (according to the borders of interwar Poland), whose population numbered some 13 million, of which 1.2 million were Jews. After their annexation to the Soviet Union, these areas became known as the Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia. Białystok thus became part of Western Belorussia.7

In early October 1939, the Soviet government, together with Soviet military authorities, began assimilating the occupied territories into the Soviet Union. On October 6, the Belorussian and Ukrainian commanders announced that elections for a National Assembly would be held on October 22. The main purpose of the Soviet-style elections was to create the impression of legitimacy and affirm, both within the Soviet Union and outside it, that eastern Poland had been absorbed into the Soviet Union. Nominations had to be in by October 17, and the electorate was granted a mere sixteen days to become familiar with Soviet electoral procedure.8

Elections for the National Assembly were run by the provisional administration and the Red Army. Most of the candidates were drawn from political or military cadres, only a few were local Communists. The Jewish
population, too—whether local citizens or refugees—was caught up in the whirlwind election campaign. Many Jews, particularly those who had been members of the underground Communist Party or its branches in the Polish Republic, took an extremely active part in the campaign. They acted as agitators and propagandists in the Ukrainian and Belorussian electoral districts where there was a shortage of local activists.

On October 28, a few days after the elections, the National Assembly of Western Belorussia, comprising 926 deputies, of which 72 were Jews, convened in Białystok. At its first session, the assembly decided that Western Belorussia should be incorporated into the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Lwów National Assembly of the Western Ukraine made a similar decision in favor of incorporating the Western Ukraine into the Soviet Union. On November 1 and 2, 1939, the Supreme Soviet ratified the annexations, and the Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia were annexed to the Soviet Union. To justify these rapid steps, the Soviet press launched a propaganda campaign highlighting the oppression and suffering of the Ukrainian and Belorussian minorities in eastern Poland and emphasizing that the Soviet Union could not remain indifferent to their cause.

On November 29, 1939, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet passed a law granting Soviet citizenship to the inhabitants of the Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia. The law, which purported to be based on the Soviet Citizenship Law of August 19, 1938, and to apply only to those who had resided in the territories on the day of annexation (November 1–2, 1939), also included Poles from western Poland who had been “resettled” after this date under the population transfers arranged with Germany and Poles from Vilna after Lithuania became an independent state in October 1939. Citizens of eastern Poland who did not fall into any of these categories could apply for Soviet citizenship under normal naturalization procedures.

When, under the new Soviet-German agreement, Vilna became part of Lithuania, Białystok was designated as the new capital of Western Belorussia. Indeed, of all cities in the area, Białystok was best suited for this purpose, due to its size and social stratification, as it was predominantly working class. However, the Soviets had several reservations: The vast majority of Białystok’s population consisted of Jews who lived in the city center and Poles who lived on the outskirts; Belorussians were only a tiny minority. Also, the new borders determined by the Soviets and Germans had turned Białystok into a border town. These factors led the Soviet administration to introduce demographic changes into the city’s ethnic makeup. No doubt further changes were planned, but the Soviet administration of eastern Poland was too short-lived to implement them.
Throughout the period of Soviet rule, Białystok functioned as the Soviets’ administrative center and retained its status as the capital of Western Belorussia until the Germans entered the city on June 27, 1941.

Refugees

After the outbreak of the Second World War, large numbers of refugees, many of whom were Jewish, began fleeing eastward from Nazi-occupied western and central Poland. The Jewish refugees arrived in two waves—the first from the outbreak of war until the Red Army’s entry into Poland on September 17, and the second from the Red Army’s entry into Poland until the closing of the German–Soviet border in December 1939. At this time most non-Jewish refugees returned to western Poland, while most Jewish refugees remained in the territories that were annexed to the Soviet Union. The Jewish refugees who returned to Nazi-occupied territory usually did so out of a wish to be reunited with their families there or out of disenchantment with the repressive Soviet regime. It is hard to estimate the number of Jewish refugees who came from Nazi-occupied Poland, mainly because most of them later moved or were deported to the Russian interior. The various sources quote figures ranging from 250,000 to 1 million, although 300,000–400,000 is probably more accurate.11

The refugees formed a distinct subgroup within the Jewish community, settling in a few large cities where they sometimes outnumbered the local Jewish population. The refugees pouring into Białystok came mainly from nearby Warsaw and Łódź, owing to several factors: geographical proximity, professional considerations (many of the refugees from Łódź were textile workers who hoped to find work in Białystok), and political and ideological considerations (Białystok was considered a transit stop on the way to Vilna, a key destination for thousands of refugees with ties to political parties and pioneer youth movements). Official records quoted 33,000 refugees in Białystok in November 1939, with hundreds more arriving daily.12 In early 1940 the influx of refugees ceased.

Felicja Nowak, a refugee from Warsaw who joined her grandmother in Białystok, described the plight of the refugees in the following terms: “At first, they slept in fields and forests. Afterwards they found temporary shelter in railway stations, empty trucks . . . synagogues, schools, and pioneer collectives. . . . Here they lived for months like herds of animals, hungry and unwashed.”13 Thousands of refugees went for weeks without a hot meal. Those who were put up in summerhouses far from the city center
found it hard to obtain food, and when autumn came, they were forced out by the cold. Severe overcrowding led to a deterioration in sanitary conditions. Any available space was packed, and with the onset of winter, masses of refugees had to move to the already overcrowded train station. They were forced to take shelter in synagogues, schools, and public buildings. The situation in Lwów was similar. The Jewish refugees far exceeded the town’s absorption capacity and were a burden on the Soviet authorities and the local inhabitants alike. Frieda Zerubavel, a refugee from Łódź, described the scene upon her arrival at the Białystok train station: “The station is full of refugees. Whole families are sprawled on blankets. The children cry, the adults quarrel. People slouch on benches, or huddle together in groups. Hundreds of refugees hang around the station concourse, eagerly scanning new faces. . . . They approach me: Excuse me, would you happen to be from Łódź? Warsaw? They mention houses, streets, people—wanting to know if they still exist.”

From November 1939 to January 1940, the Małkinia railway station on the Warsaw-Białystok line, the last station in German-occupied Poland, served as the main transit point for Jewish refugees flowing en masse toward the Soviet border, which had been closed, in theory, in mid-October 1939. With the growing influx of Jewish refugees to Vilna—incorporated into independent Lithuania in October 1939—the main escape route led from Białystok to Vilna via Lida.

During the first few months of Soviet occupation, the Soviet authorities treated the refugees no differently from the local population. They were allowed freedom of movement within the annexed territory and, in most cases, were allowed to stay on in the public buildings they had appropriated prior to the Red Army’s arrival. In one case, Soviet officers housed a group of Jewish refugees in a Catholic convent in Białystok, despite the nuns’ objections.

The situation of the refugees began to change in February and March 1940, after the establishment of the Soviet Civil Administration in the Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia and after the implementation of the law imposing Soviet citizenship on all residents of these territories, including refugees. As a first step toward tighter Soviet control, Polish identity papers were withdrawn and Polish citizens were issued Soviet papers instead (the “passportization operation”). While local residents were forced to accept a Soviet passport under threat of punishment, the refugees were given a choice. Those who chose to renounce their Polish citizenship in favor of Soviet citizenship were issued new identity papers. These documents, unlike documents issued to local residents, included certain restrictive clauses,
such as the infamous clause 11, prohibiting the refugees from residing in the main cities or within a 100-kilometer radius of the international border. For various reasons—often a mixture of fear and confusion—some refugees decided not to relinquish their Polish passports.

During the winter of 1939–40, the plight of the refugees increased. It was too cold to sleep in the streets and parks, and the railway station was declared out of bounds by the authorities. Lack of accommodation and rising prices caused some refugees to consider returning to Warsaw and Łódź. From March to May 1940, the Soviets published announcements stating that under the Soviet–German provisions for the transfer of refugees anyone wishing to return to the German-occupied zone would be duly repatriated. Many Jewish refugees decided to register for repatriation. Letters from Warsaw stated that the situation there was not so bad, and that people were still living in their own homes. Bundist refugees heard rumors of a revival of party activity in Warsaw, and many began seriously considering returning home. Some refugees had left families behind in Nazi-occupied Poland and feared that as Soviet citizens they would be unable to bring family members into the Soviet Union. Others saw a Soviet passport as an attempt to force them to find work in the Soviet hinterland and preferred to keep their options open. Most refugees who registered for repatriation to Nazi-occupied Poland in these months were motivated by fear of losing touch with their families on the German side or by disenchantment with the Soviet regime.

Due to the absence of reliable official sources, we do not know exactly how many refugees in Białystok applied for repatriation and how many opted for Soviet citizenship. However, on the basis of eyewitness accounts and hearsay evidence, it would seem that over half the refugees refused Soviet citizenship. Some of these applied for repatriation, while others fled to other locations within the Soviet-annexed territories.

David Lederman, an actor from Warsaw who arrived in Białystok in November 1939, related in his memoirs: “Many are heading for Lwów and continuing on to Vilna, because rumor has it that Vilna’s the better option. People are studying the announcements posted up on the walls of their houses, calling on refugees to re-register. Even if you’ve registered once, you must re-register. . . . But many have not even registered once, let alone twice, because they don’t consider Białystok a viable option.”

The tens of thousands of refugees who converged on Białystok disrupted the life of the city and were a burden on the Jews and authorities alike. David Grodner related that in November 1939 there was only one soup kitchen, located in the Talmud Torah on Piękna Street, catering to the
hundreds of refugees arriving daily. The refugees had to wait in line for hours in order to receive a bowl of water and a slice of black bread.\textsuperscript{19} Frieda Zerubavel described how one day the owner of the Café Lux, where refugees often gathered, banged his fist on the counter in a fit of rage, yelling: “Get out of here, you beggars! Enough loafing around! Get out, the lot of you! I don’t want to see a single one of you around! I don’t want your money—just get out!” And in his fury, he hurled a loaf of bread on to the floor. She continued: “The bakery opens only twice a day, and you have to stand in line for ages before it opens. You have to get up at midnight in order to get a place in the queue, or line up from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The black bread is rank as vinegar. You can’t get sugar or salt, butter is expensive, and tea even more so. Only green, unripe apples are plentiful. The refugees’ staple diet, therefore, is rancid bread and sour apples.”\textsuperscript{20}

In Białystok, as in other large towns with an especially high concentration of refugees, the Joint Distribution Committee was active. Jewish Communists led by Joseph Lewartowsky set up another public relief committee whose members sought out refugees, especially families, and provided them with shelter and material assistance. The committee was careful to stress the rehabilitative rather than philanthropic nature of its work. It helped whole families relocate to nearby towns that were less crowded with refugees. With the assistance of the work cooperative run by eastern Belorussian Jews and local Jewish community activists, the committee tried to organize workshops to relieve the suffering of refugees who had arrived destitute.\textsuperscript{21} The authorities soon ended the committee’s autonomy, however, by appointing a Russian functionary to run it. Under his management, the committee became a general relief organization, providing maternity care, firewood, and food for the sick to all inhabitants of the city, irrespective of religion.

Various testimonies illustrate the attitude of local Jews toward the refugees. Menachem Ravitzky, a refugee from Warsaw, portrayed the attitude as “none too friendly and the word Biezhenietz (Russian for ‘refugee’) was frequently used as an insult, an indication of the contempt the Białystok Jews felt for the refugees.”\textsuperscript{22} In the same vein, the author Moshe Grossman, also from Warsaw, described how most of the residents of Białystok resented the refugees: “All the refugees have brought us is lice and inflation.”\textsuperscript{23} And yet some local Jews did their best to help the refugees, especially their relatives. They had little to show for their efforts, however. Rising prices, unemployment, and the lack of basic commodities created a climate of discontent in which people tended to blame the “outsiders” for all their troubles.
The shortage of accommodation was the most critical problem. Even with money, it was impossible to find rooms to rent. To be eligible for accommodation, the refugees had first to prove that they were employed, and even then, most available rooms were assigned to senior army officials, local functionaries, and civil servants. Lederman describes the unusual sleeping arrangements that developed as a result:

People roam the streets at night or sleep in public gardens or [on] benches, or propped up against gates. By day, they are quick to grab the beds of the “night-shift.” In many houses, beds are rented out in “night shifts” or “day shifts.” The first wave of refugees are on “night shift,” while the more recent arrivals are on “day shift.” As time goes by, the situation gets worse, since the beds are rented out for a few hours at a time, and even then they are expensive. When I came to the city, it was impossible to get a bed, even if you were able to pay for it.

Grodner recalled that hundreds of refugees squatting in the offices of the Union of Jewish Merchants were evicted in the middle of the night, when the Soviet authorities decided to turn the place into a tailors’ cooperative. Zerubavel gave a depressing picture of Białystok’s Jewish Beit Hasofer (Writers’ House): “There is one large room full of beds. There are no tables or chairs. The Warsaw authors write sprawled on their beds, covered in grimy blankets.”

Another major problem was unemployment. The economic reforms introduced by the Soviet authorities during the early weeks of the annexation brought economic ruin to thousands of local inhabitants. Any new positions created by the reforms were filled mostly by local inhabitants. The only refugees able to find work were a few intellectuals who were employed by the local government, some of them in prestigious jobs as teachers, authors, and artists. A number of refugees were also employed as accountants in government cooperatives, while others found work as laborers. Some even trained as railway workers in the hope of finding work. Most refugees, however, were unemployed. After several months of high unemployment and the critical housing shortage, the Soviet authorities decided to solve the problem in their own way—by channeling the refugees into the larger pool of the Soviet economy, in accordance with their aim of “building socialism in one country.” In this way, they hoped to solve the refugee problem while at the same time assisting the Soviet economy. Special labor exchanges and employment agencies were set up in the city, offering people incentives to move to the Soviet hinterland.
Factory representatives from Donbas and other areas offered the refugees jobs in their own specialties, promising them good conditions, job stability, and an advance payment of 50 rubles. Notices appeared in the streets, in refugee committee offices, and in the local press. The employment drive lasted from November 1939 to February 1940 and was implemented with great enthusiasm. The Yiddish newspaper Der Bialystoker Shtern (The Bialystok star), launched in Bialystok under Soviet rule, published notices banning the employment of workers without a permit and ordering land- lords and hotel owners to report “illegal workers” to the police within twenty-four hours. The newspaper initiated a publicity campaign urging people to apply for work in the Soviet interior, accompanied by extravagant promises and veiled threats. This campaign was also given widespread publicity in the mainstream Soviet press. The February 9, 1940, issue of Pravda proudly reported that a large group of workers from eastern Poland had migrated to Siberia to find work.

Letters from Bialystok to New York praise the Soviet authorities for treating the local population well and for ensuring full employment. Altogether, people were happy to have been spared the ravages of war and occupation. Although the authors of these letters sometimes asked for clothes and shoes, they did not request financial assistance.

The propaganda worked. Refugees lined up outside the registration offices for days on end. In Bialystok alone, 20,000 refugees were registered in one week. Most were motivated by despair, some by ideology. Moshe Grossman recounted: “Many wait in line for two days, to sign up for work in Russia. Youngsters and adults, men and women, artisans, shopkeepers, and yeshiva students—all are keen to find work. All share a common aim: To leave Białystok—where accommodations, heating and food become scarcer by the day—as soon as possible. They can’t wait to begin a proper life in Soviet Russia.”

Many applicants, after selling their few remaining belongings to local Russians, were issued passports and sent to remote locations throughout the Soviet Union, from the Crimean peninsula to the northern Urals and Siberia. Initial reports were enthusiastic. However, it was not long before the migrants realized they had been duped and began returning to the cities of the Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia by the thousands. It transpired that all the conscripts—irrespective of age—had been sent to work as miners, lumberjacks, and peat diggers. Not only were they unused to such heavy physical labor, but they were paid next to nothing, and their living conditions were primitive in the extreme. In certain cases, refugees were sent to remote places and abandoned to their own devices. Sometimes, local
inhabitants who were sympathetic to their plight helped them escape. Those who remained, especially the professionals, were usually those who found it easier to adapt to the new conditions.\(^{32}\)

Although the recruitment operation initially failed, the failure was only temporary. The Soviet authorities considered the refugees dangerous. Their refusal to become Soviet citizens or join the recruitment drive was used against them. Those who had contact with relatives in Poland or elsewhere were accused of dual loyalty, while those who had formerly been involved in political activity were accused of espionage. The Soviets’ distrust of the refugees grew as a result of the undercover activity of the Soviet Secret Police (NKVD), who blamed the refugees for their inability to adapt to the new regime. The climate of suspicion created a rift between the local inhabitants and the refugees. Discrimination against the refugees intensified, until they were moved to small localities and finally transferred to the notorious Gulag camps, together with other economically or politically undesirable elements.\(^{33}\)

**The Sovietization of the Economy**

One of the first steps taken by the new regime was to implement the Socialist principle of state ownership of the means of production. In the weeks following the Soviet takeover of Białystok, before this principle was applied, the city enjoyed a short period of artificial prosperity. Factory owners were ordered to double their workers’ salaries, and the Soviet soldiers and officials, who had plenty of money to spend, embarked on a wild spending spree. Although this extravagance led to unbridled inflation, many Jewish shopkeepers did well. Some even had the foresight to change their rubles into dollars on the black market, which later made it easier for them to leave the city.

Avraham Vered, whose father was a tailor specializing in leather goods, said his father’s workshop was “packed with Soviet citizens ordering leather coats. Although father sewed day and night, he could not keep up with the demand.”\(^ {34}\) The Polish złoty remained legal tender, alongside the Russian ruble. Shopkeepers were ordered to continue selling their wares at the old prices, and in just a few days they were sold out.

This situation continued until early November 1939, when the first stage of the Sovietization process—the confiscation of private property and the nationalization of capital—was implemented. Following these reforms, economic life in the city came to a standstill. Factories, banks, businesses,
real estate, and warehouses were nationalized. Bank deposits, including savings, were frozen, and their owners were not allowed to withdraw more than 300 złotys. On December 20, 1939, the złoty was withdrawn from circulation without any prior warning, leading to large financial losses by Jewish businessmen and shopkeepers. Small private businesses were heavily taxed, more so even than during the period of economic constraint under the Polish government in the 1930s. The shopkeepers struggled to survive, but sweeping nationalization, the depreciation of the ruble, and the growing shortage of goods forced most private shops and factories to close down. The reforms resulted in high unemployment and rising inflation.

Jewish property owners, industrialists, and factory owners—and there were many in an industrial city such as Białystok—were the first to pay the price, both economically and socially. Their businesses were appropriated and their property confiscated. Some affluent Białystokers who had managed to sell their property in time moved to Vilna or Kaunas, hoping ultimately to leave the Soviet Union. Some moved to other localities within the annexed territories (such as Lwów or Brody), where they lived incognito, hoping in time to return to Białystok. Others found employment in the cooperatives and stores set up by the new regime. Some were deported, and some remained unemployed. Even those who found work had to drastically lower their living standards, due to low wages and rising prices. A weaver in Białystok on a salary of 250 rubles per month could afford food only. Bread cost a ruble a kilogram and butter 20 rubles a packet, while a cartload of firewood cost 60–70 rubles. Clothing was beyond the reach of the average worker. Moreover, there was a huge discrepancy between official prices and black-market prices. As Raphael Reizner wrote: “All basic commodities were hard to obtain. You had to get up at 2 a.m. and stand in line for bread and other goods. Sometimes you had to queue up the whole day in freezing weather only to be told, when your turn came, that they were sold out.”

Private shops were replaced by state-run stores that sold fixed quotas of foodstuffs at low prices. These were usually basic commodities such as bread, sugar, salt, matches, and sometimes also meat and oil. But as supplies in the state-run warehouses dwindled, so did supplies in the stores. The situation was exacerbated by a severe shortage of raw materials, which slowed factory production and left many self-employed artisans without a livelihood. The few supplies that remained in the warehouses were requisitioned for the army, and the local inhabitants had to make do with what was left. Not only did the authorities fail to import goods into the city; they actually exported them to other localities throughout the Soviet Union. Many ware-
houses—especially within the textile and metal industries—were depleted, their stock having been confiscated or bought up by soldiers shortly after the Soviet occupation began.37

The dynamic of replacing old job structures with new ones took its toll: experienced factory workers suddenly found themselves jobless and dependent on the unions or labor exchanges. Those who were lucky enough to hold onto their jobs found that their status had not improved, despite hopes to the contrary. Those who found jobs in fields in which they had no background, and particularly older people, experienced a drastic change in their lives. Work was perceived not only an economic and psychological necessity but also as a passport to the Socialist idyll of a society of workers: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his work,” the Soviet Constitution stated.

Many Jews expected socialism to eradicate unemployment and improve the workers’ lot. It was this expectation that accounted for the continuous flow of job seekers to the major industrial cities, including Białystok. Unemployed Jewish youth from nearby towns flocked to the metropolis, eager not to miss the historic opportunity of making a dream come true.

With the economic and administrative reforms in place in February 1940, the regime embarked upon the second stage of its Sovietization program. Employment prospects began to look less bleak. On January 28, 1940, the authorities called a meeting for all Białystok’s young textile workers in Białystok’s municipal theater. During the meeting, the inferior quality of clothes manufactured prior to the Soviet takeover was contrasted with the superior quality of clothes manufactured under the Soviet administration. “The Soviet man is not prepared to wear clothes of such inferior quality,” the young workers were told, and they were encouraged in the trend toward improvement. In the short time since the Soviet takeover, the number of textile workers had risen to 10,000. Although we cannot know for certain how many of them were Jewish, we may assume that a large majority were. If, under the Poles, the majority of Białystok’s textile workers were Jewish, under the Soviets presumably even more were, due to the economic reforms and extra manpower available, including refugees and graduates of state-run retraining programs.

The old-style factories and workshops were replaced by cooperatives and kombinats (large factories resulting from the merger of smaller ones). The factories were no longer known by their old names. Instead, each kombinat or cooperative was assigned a number. In early 1940, there were 16 cooperatives and 570 workers, rising in December of that year to 111 cooperatives and 5,615 workers, with a production of goods valuing about 39 million
rubles. In the course of 1940, the Bialystoker Shtern reported a change in the city’s appearance, as small shops were replaced by large stores. One should not forget, however, that this newspaper was heavily censored, and that its contents are therefore not reliable. However, the general direction of these reports was in line with the third stage of the Sovietization process, which was less tolerant toward “renegade” economic concerns that had not yet been absorbed into the state economy. Private commerce, still practiced by some small shopkeepers, henceforth required a permit from the Municipal Department of Commerce or the Regional Executive Committee. Self-employed artisans and manufacturers, landlords, shopkeepers, and small industrialists were all to report their income for the year.

The economic reforms of Sovietization produced far-reaching economic and social transformations within the Jewish community of Białystok. For a start, most of the self-employed had now become salaried workers. The upper classes, and to some extent also the middle classes, were stripped of their assets. Jews were ousted from their positions in the traditional economic sectors—banking, industry, and commerce—that had once been the cornerstone of Jewish economic life in the city. In this respect the Jews of Białystok suffered far more—both economically and psychologically—than did their gentile counterparts. All in all, the living standards of most of the city’s Jewish population dropped significantly. Many who found it hard to find work in the new state-run economy—whether because of their “dubious” sociopolitical origins or their lack of qualifications—found themselves without a livelihood from one day to the next. A few made a living from the black-market economy that, as the purveyor of vital commodities, was a flourishing concern. Others remained in the traditional sectors and were later absorbed into the Soviet economy.

A large proportion of Białystok’s Jewish intelligentsia found itself redundant under the new order or suffered a sudden drop in income. On the other hand, unlike their Polish counterparts, some Jewish intellectuals sympathized with the new regime’s ideology and were eager to make an intellectual or professional contribution. Many who had been a persecuted minority in prewar Poland believed that under the new regime they would be allowed to apply the research they had done during the period of the Polish Republic. In their ideological zeal, they refused to address the issue of inflation and condoned the abolition of private enterprise. Many of them believed that the constraints they had suffered under the Poles would disappear under the Soviets and that they would be allowed to live freely in the true spirit of socialism. Jews from the lower classes believed they would find jobs in government offices, the police force, schools, and cooperatives. The
general climate of gratitude and relief helped fuel these illusions, particularly among the city’s younger population.

In early spring of 1940, Jewish employment rose in the city and the new way of life became more tolerable as people gradually became used, or resigned, to the situation. Some Jews even found jobs in areas that had previously been barred to Jews—within the state apparatus, the security services, or the transport ministry—thereby greatly enhancing their social status.43

Political Oppression

At the same time, as early as the autumn of 1939, the Soviet authorities began repressing autonomous Jewish activity in the annexed territories of the Ukraine and Belorussia. (This policy was applied a year later in the Baltic States.)44 The main political organizations targeted by the Soviets were former members of the Polish Communist Party, the Bund, the Zionist parties, and the Orthodox movement.

Former Members of the Polish Communist Party

Jews from the top ranks of the former Polish Communist Party, many of whom had settled in Bialystok, were the first to be targeted by the NKVD. The Communist Party in Poland (and in the Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia) had been dissolved by the Comintern in 1938 on the pretext that it was riddled with spies and informers. Therefore, when former Jewish Communist activists began arriving from Poland, the Soviets suspected them of subversion. For these Polish refugees, the Red Army’s arrival in eastern Poland had signaled an honorable end to their secret existence. It was merely a matter of time, they naively believed, before their names would be cleared and their party membership renewed. Disillusionment was not long in coming.

Among the most prominent Communist activists who escaped to Bialystok were Simon Zakhariaish, Alfred Lampe, David Richter, Ber Mark, Joseph Lewartowsky, David Sfard, Jacob Berman, Shmuel Mertyk, Pawel Finder, Regina Kaplan-Kobrinska, Vera Charonzha, and Hersh Smolar.45 Smolar, who before the war had headed the Communist Party’s Central Committee in Western Belorussia, described how the Communist activists of Vilna felt after fleeing to Bialystok (prior to Vilna’s incorporation into Lithuania): “Here [in Bialystok], more so than in Vilna, we felt the climate of suspicion surrounding prominent figures of the crushed Pol-
ish Communist Party. . . . Each of us felt deeply hurt at the injustice done to us."46

Despite constant surveillance by the NKVD, the Polish Communists held meetings at each other’s houses. At one of the first meetings, held in October 1939 at the home of Joseph Lewartowsky, a former member of the Polish Communist Party’s Central Committee, a proposal was put forward to set up a refugee aid committee with the help of the Soviet authorities. Lewartowsky was, as already noted, the moving force behind this committee and became its first chairman.

After elections to the Supreme Soviets of the Soviet Union and Western Belorussia in the spring of 1940, the authorities’ attitude toward the Polish Communist refugees began to change. Running for office were some former Communists from Western Belorussia and Poland, including a number of Jewish left-wing activists, such as Abraham Mashevitzky, a teacher at Białystok’s large vocational school. It was not easy for the Polish Jewish Communists to integrate into the Soviet ranks, and mutual suspicion was legion. The Soviets accepted the former activists only because, in numbers and caliber, they were far superior to the ethnic Poles. Even so, they were accepted only as a last resort after having first been thoroughly vetted, and they were constantly subjected to close surveillance. The local Jewish Communists, familiar with the fate of their Polish comrades who had fled to the Soviet Union before the war (most of whom had been arrested and had perished in the purges of the 1930s), feared a similar fate awaited them. Some assumed fairly ordinary positions in factories, schools, and state institutions, while others worked as propagandists, especially in the period preceding the elections.47

David Richter was one of the few Polish Jewish Communists to be accepted into the Belorussian Communist Party. And yet, when the Białystoker Shtern was launched, he was appointed only assistant editor. Alfred Lampe fared better, thanks to his distinguished past and to the fact that he was the only member of the Polish Politburo to have survived. Lampe, born in Warsaw, began his political career as an activist in the Poalei Zion–Left and went on to become leader of the Yevsektsia (Jewish section) of the Communist Party, and ultimately of the entire party. When he came to Białystok along with other former Polish Communists, he was spared harassment by the NKVD. He later moved to Moscow, where he became one of the leading theoreticians to revive the Polish Communist Party, known as the Union of Polish Patriots in the Soviet Union.48

Jewish Communists from western Poland were accused of ideological aberrations, particularly of Trotskyism. Among those accused was the widely
acclaimed author Ber Mark, one of a number of Communist writers who moved to Białystok. Only after repeated appeals by veteran Communists and the submission of a “character report” testifying to his irreproachable behavior was he exonerated. Smolar, a member of the Yevsektsia, was appointed director of the Białystoker Shtern and secretary of the Writers’ Union until he left for Minsk, when his deputy, Sfard, took over. Lewartowsky, who stayed in Białystok up to 1941, was appointed director of a textile factory. Other, less-fortunate activists were arrested and deported to the Soviet interior.

The Bundists

Another group of activists persecuted by the Soviets were the Bundists. Hostility between Bundists and Communists dated back to the fierce polemic that broke out between the Bolsheviks and the Bund in 1904–5. For the Bolsheviks, who advocated a single, multinational party and refused to recognize the Jews as a nation, the Bund was anathema. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, the controversy between Bundists and Communists intensified. During the 1920s, the Bund was incorporated into the Yevsektsia. Some Bundists became leaders of the Yevsektsia and were instrumental in organizing Jewish life within the Communist state. Later, however, Bundists were expelled from the Yevsektsia, and the Bund itself was banned. The Communists’ fear of the Bund was rooted in their perception of the Bund as a political rival, due to a certain ideological resemblance between the two. Consequently, their relationship with the Bund was more fraught than was their relationship with their sworn enemies, with whom they never came in contact.

Another factor contributing to Soviet persecution of the Bund dated back to the interwar period, when the Bund leadership in Poland was far more radical than the Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, or PPS). While the mainstream Bund was anti-Communist, an extremist pro-Communist faction tried to push the Bund in a pro-Soviet direction. When the Polish Communist Party was banned, the Bund was deliberately infiltrated by Communists, and suspicion and rivalry between the two factions grew. It was natural, therefore, that when the Soviets took over eastern Poland, they should be suspicious of local Bundist leaders, with their anti-Communist past, and hunt them down with the help of local Communists.

Most Bundists did not flee at the outbreak of war, while the few who did generally returned during the period when travel from the East to the Generalgouvernement—the German-occupied area of Poland—was still pos-
sible. In addition to the prominent Bundist leaders mentioned above, many Bundist refugees in eastern Poland had held important positions as union workers, provincial journalists, and secretaries of local youth cells. Despite a substantial rise in the Bund’s power prior to the war, it represented only a small proportion of the refugees.

The transfer of power from the Germans to the Soviets in eastern Poland threw the Bundists into disarray. In the first six weeks of Soviet rule, the entire infrastructure of the Vilna Bund was destroyed, and almost all its leaders arrested. Shaul Goldman, a member of the Bund Central Committee and head of the Białystok Bund, who had returned to Białystok after the Soviet takeover, was arrested on October 2, 1939. After being accused of working for the Polish Secret Police, Goldman was imprisoned in Minsk, and on May 20, 1941, he was exiled with his family to Siberia. Benjamin Floimenbaum, a city councilor, and head of Białystok’s Yiddish Teachers’ Union, was arrested together with two other Bundists, Feigin and Shubfish. None was ever heard of again.50

In the space of two months, the Bund leadership of Grodno, Pinsk, Łomża, and other small localities in the annexed territories was arrested, and party activity was banned in all Soviet-occupied areas, from Lwów to Vilna. The victims of these persecutions were mainly local activists; Bundist refugees from Warsaw, Łódź, and other German-occupied localities, being less well known, escaped relatively unscathed, with the exception of two prominent leaders, Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter. Although most local Bundists stayed on in Białystok after the arrest of their leaders, political activity came to a standstill. Most Bundist refugees left Białystok—the more anonymous for Vilna—while others returned to their homes in the Generalgouvernement. Shloyme Mendelsohn, head of the Warsaw CYShO was persuaded by his comrades to stay on in Białystok, against his better judgment.51

The Zionists

Although the Białystok Jewish community was pro-Zionist in the prewar years, the Zionists lacked a proper leadership. Some Zionist activists—members of the General Zionists, Poalei Zion, Socialist Zionists, and Mizrachi, as well as the principal and teachers of the Hebrew High School—saw themselves as next in line for arrest by the NKVD. To them it was obvious that the authorities wished to eradicate all Zionist parties. Therefore, when it was rumored that activists and leaders of the political Zionist and pioneer youth movements were gathering in Vilna, many of the Jewish
community’s leaders went there also. Following them were young activists of the local youth movements, including Haika Grosman of Hashomer Hatzair and Yehoshua Lewinowitz of Hashomer Hadati. They hoped to continue their activities in Vilna while at the same time seeking a way to leave for Palestine.\textsuperscript{52}

The Mizrahi and Agudat Israel

The staff of Hehalutz Hamizrahi’s liaison office, under the directorship of Mordechai Reichart, used border runners to organize their escape from Białystok. Mizrahi emissaries from Vilna stationed in Białystok persuaded their comrades to move to Vilna and provided food and material assistance to those who were left behind. After considerable soul-searching, the following rabbis also left for Vilna: Rabbi Aryeh Shapira; Rabbi Shmuel Szczedrowicki, a community rabbi and head of the local Agudat Israel; and Rabbi Aryeh Yucht, a yeshiva principal. As a rule, when yeshiva principals left, their students followed.

The Agudat Israel leadership in Białystok was ambivalent about whether to stay on or leave. At the time, it included two leading figures of the Polish Agudat Israel who had fled to Białystok: Rabbi Jacob Trokenheim, head of the Warsaw Jewish Community Council and member of the Polish Senate, and Rabbi Leib Minzberg, head of the Łódź community and member of the Polish Sejm. A few weeks later, however, after the Aguda’s political secretary in London informed them that Vilna was considered safe, they moved to that city.\textsuperscript{53}

These two leaders’ decision to leave Białystok influenced other Agudat Israel rabbis to leave the city and join the rabbinical leadership that was forming in Vilna. Effectively, therefore, Białystok’s Ultraorthodox community was deprived of a leadership, with the exception of Rabbi Gedalyah Rosenman, the community’s rabbi, who remained loyal to his community to the end. The religious parties as a whole did not wield great influence in occupied Poland, except in Kraków, probably because they were essentially educational, rather than political-ideological, organizations.

A letter written by Zerah Warhaftig, head of the Hehalutz Hamizrahi in Vilna, to the Jewish Agency Executive in Jerusalem, dated November 7, 1939, gives some insight into the Soviet attitude toward the pioneer movements. He described a visit by Soviet officials to the Hehalutz Hamizrahi training kibbutz on a farm owned by ORT (Oboevstvo Remeslenofo Zemledelheskofo Truda [Society of trades and agricultural labor]) in Nowosiółki near Białystok. During the visit, the officials discussed the purpose
and nature of the kibbutz at length with the trainees. The trainees were subsequently informed that the farm was to be requisitioned by the state, but that they would be allowed to complete their training provided they renounced Zionism and abandoned any thought of emigration, except to Birobidzhan. In his letter, Warhaftig acknowledged that the Zionist movement, in general, and the kibbutzim and training farms in the annexed territories, in particular, were “falling apart.”

Youth Movements

Among the flood of refugees fleeing the German occupation were many graduates of training farms and of Zionist youth movements, who set up local cells and training farms in large cities throughout Poland. The influx of youth into these cities swelled the ranks of the pioneer movement in eastern Poland overnight. In the early weeks of the war, Białystok, too, absorbed many members of the pioneer movements who continued their activities there.

However, after the Soviet takeover, these young people soon realized that their activities would not be tolerated by the new regime and that they would have to go underground. Many of them decided to move to cities where the pioneer movements were flourishing. The movements’ leaders soon followed, so that only a handful of Hashomer Hatzair, Dror, and Hehalutz members were left behind. Once their cells and meeting places had been liquidated, the movements effectively disbanded. Hundreds of kibbutz members from Dror’s general bloc, as well as members of Białystok’s kibbutz Tel-Hai, moved to Kovel. The kibbutz Klosowa of Kovel attracted many Hashomer Hatzair members, among them members of Białystok’s kibbutz Hakovesh.

Haika Grosman, an activist in Białystok’s Hashomer Hatzair movement, moved to Vilna in November 1939. Grosman claimed that Vilna was the natural choice for most movement members, not only because the movement’s top leaders from Warsaw had taken refuge there but also because it served as a springboard for aliya or emigration outside of Europe.

Although it was a foregone conclusion that the Soviet authorities would ban Zionist activity, the pioneer movements’ encounter with the Soviet regime was complex. Ideologically, there was considerable ambivalence. The growing influence of Communist ideology on Jewish youth, the fear that when put to the test the youth might discard ideology for expedience, the crisis facing the Zionist movement, the Tarbut Jewish schools, and the
pioneer youth movements themselves created a complex web of problems. Although united in their Zionist goals, the pioneer movements differed from each other in many respects. Both Hashomer Hatzair and Dror—Bialystok’s two main youth movements before World War II—were unquestionably left wing. Under the Soviet occupation, Bialystok’s youth became pro-Communist, preferring the Komsomol (the Communist Party’s youth movement) and Communist activity in general, to their own movements. A letter written by a Hashomer Hatzair member in Bialystok described the soul-searching that went on in the movement at the time:

News reached me that the kibbutz had reconvened in B[ialystok]. Without further ado, we left. People from other kibbutzim also arrived. We discussed the new situation and what our stand should be. Even then, the situation was difficult. Palestine and Zionism were equated with counterrevolution. Hebrew was banned, and our very existence on the kibbutz was being challenged. We decided to present the authorities with a fait accompli—and show them kibbutz life as practiced by members of a Socialist Zionist movement. We wanted them to see us as we really were. However, their sole response was to demand we change our name and renounce our ideas. Passionate arguments broke out in the kibbutz. Could we, as Socialists, engage in underground activity in the Soviet Union? And if we could, what were the chances of success? And did this not entail renouncing—who knew for how long—the idea of aliyah.57

The Hashomer Hatzair movement saw itself as locked in confrontation with a regime that denied the very essence of Zionism—the pioneering experience, aliyah, and Hebrew. Disputes were not restricted to theoretical issues only, and questions of principle and ideology also had a bearing on Zionist perspective. Dror, too, was favorably disposed toward Soviet socialism and accepted many tenets that ran counter to its own ideology. In general, however, it was more cautious in its approval than was Hashomer Hatzair. Dror, a movement with a broad popular base, stressed the importance of allegiance to Palestine, Zionism, and the pioneering enterprise. Its pro-Soviet stand was limited to including Soviet ideology in its educational program. While Hashomer Hatzair continued to be ambivalent even after it went underground, Dror, which attached less importance to theory, made concrete decisions early on regarding its allegiances.58

In any event, the two movements continued working underground, while their leaders maintained activities in various towns. Meanwhile, the youth movements in Bialystok under Soviet rule were left without leaders. Even
the isolated meetings that were held at the beginning of the Soviet period ceased as time went on. The Hashomer Hadati movement in Białystok vanished without a trace and was incorporated by and large in the Vilna branch. Betar also went underground. There is no information concerning the activities of Hanoar Hazioni during this period. All we know is that the movement existed in Białystok before the war. The Bund’s youth movements were gradually affected by the persecution of Bund leaders in the city. However, despite the reverses they suffered, the youth movements kept going, and they would prove their worth under the German occupation.

Educational and Cultural Reforms

The educational and cultural changes imposed on the Jews of Western Belarus and the Western Ukraine during the twenty-one months of Soviet rule were similar to those imposed on the Russian Jews in the 1920s. The process of change began with a cultural revival but ended in destruction, as the Soviets set about systematically eradicating Jewish life in the annexed territories, much as they had done in the Soviet Union after the Russian Revolution.

Jewish life in the Soviet annexed areas can be divided into three periods: (1) September 1939–June 1940, a period of spontaneous Jewish cultural development; (2) June 1940–May 1941, a period of gradual and deliberate curtailment of Jewish sociocultural activity; and (3) May–June 1941, a systematic campaign of destruction and arrests, cut short only by the German invasion.

Education

As a rule, government policy toward Jewish culture and education was part of a larger policy applying to all ethnic minorities. As far as the Jews were concerned, the authorities were anxious to curb the Polish influence on the Jewish population and to curtail the number of Jewish educational and cultural institutions in the city. Since the Soviets considered the educational system a tool for indoctrination, all educational reforms were carried out with swift, revolutionary zeal. The high proportion of Jews in Białystok made the Soviets’ task harder. The Jewish schools, unlike the Polish state schools, were private and included a variety of establishments, from the Zionist Tarbut network, through the Mizrahi Tahkemoni schools, to the CYShO Yiddish schools. All were doomed to destruction under the new regime.
Shortly after the Soviet takeover, the Soviet authorities did away with the entire Jewish educational system, including the Tahkemoni religious school, and all Jewish religious education in Białystok was placed under close supervision. Initially, the authorities were tolerant of Białystok's yeshivas and heders, considering them more as centers of religious activity than as educational establishments. However, in 1940, when attendance at official schools became compulsory, heders were also banned. Undeterred, the Orthodox sector held secret heder classes in the afternoons in a number of private houses. The yeshivas, on the other hand, simply ceased to exist after their principals left Białystok, taking their students with them.

The Jewish schools in the city were converted into state schools. At first, the Soviets made no attempt to enforce a specific language of instruction in the schools, and parents were even allowed to choose the language they preferred. This “generosity” on the part of the authorities was based on the assumption that most parents would choose Russian, as a passport to Soviet institutes of higher education. The choice was between Russian and Yiddish only. Hebrew was not an option, both because it was hardly spoken and because of its Zionist connotations, and Polish was banned. The issue was debated by famous Jewish pedagogues who were recognized by the authorities, such as Abraham Mashevitzky, teacher and inspector of Jewish schools, Hersh Smolar, and Beinish Shulman, editor of the *Bialystoker Shtern*. These authorities, who favored Yiddish as the language of instruction, tried to win parents and teachers over to their way of thinking by arranging for famous Yiddish authors to lecture on the achievements of Yiddish language and literature. The lectures were aimed mainly at parents who were studying at evening classes, since it was they who held the keys to their children's future. Thus, in January 1940 the poet Joseph Rubinstein and the author David Mitzmacher lectured in the former Druskin High School, while the Yiddish teacher Moses Zabludowsky and the authors Solomon Berlinksy and Israel Emiot lectured in the Hebrew High School.59

Other famous personalities who lectured were Shalom Zirman, a member of the *Bialystoker Shtern’s* editorial staff; the author Michael Burstein; the young Białystok poets Solomon Burstein and Jacob Gordon; the author Moshe Grossman; and the poets Moyshe Knapheys and Peysekh Binetsky. On January 27, 1940, the *Bialystoker Shtern* carried the following report: “In an unprecedented step, the city’s educational department called for a parents’ meeting to allow parents to decide which language they wished their children to study in. The parents came out in favor of Yiddish.”60 No doubt this choice was dictated partly by the hope that the Yiddish schools would act as an effective barrier against assimilation.
In 1940, Bialystok had about 6,000 students attending three elementary schools, three full-time high schools, and nine part-time high schools, some of which operated on a shift basis. In all schools, the language of instruction was Yiddish, even though in the Soviet Union itself, the Bund’s Yiddish schools no longer existed. Not all Jewish children were enrolled at the new state schools; some continued to attend Polish schools. These, however, were soon taken over by the Soviets, who revised the curriculum and introduced Russian and Belorussian as compulsory subjects.

One problem the new Yiddish schools had to contend with was the lack of suitable textbooks. Teachers at the CYShO school together with refugee teachers from Warsaw solved the problem by preparing ad hoc material. Further help came in the second half of 1940, when new editions of Yiddish textbooks arrived from Kiev, the relics of a period in which such books were still permitted in the Soviet Union. These editions were specially reprinted to meet the requirements of the new schools. Yiddish literary journals published in Minsk and Kiev also served as useful study material.

At first, under the Soviets, educational opportunities—especially vocational training—flourished. Avraham Vered studied to be a mechanical engineer, and his brother Eliyahu studied to be an engine driver. Soon Bialystok had its own university, and in early February 1940, the Bialystoker Shtern announced that registration was opening for the city’s Technological Institute, which was offering courses in Soviet trade and in nutrition for students aged 15 through 30. It also printed an advertisement calling for applications for art school by anyone with at least seven years’ education. The People’s Education Division announced the establishment of teachers’ training courses for elementary and high school teachers, and a three-month teachers’ training course for kindergarten teachers. Finally, the newspaper called for applications to the Bialystok School of Pharmacy and Nursing by anyone who had completed at least four years of high school education.

Apart from the Yiddish schools and vocational courses, the Soviet authorities promoted cultural activity through their youth movements and propaganda machinery. The Jewish intelligentsia, which had been discriminated against by the Poles, and the Jewish youth were extremely excited by the new possibilities unfolding in front of them. An increasing number of Jewish youngsters who were exposed to Marxist ideology at school or at work sought to join the Komsomol. Avraham Vered described his delight when a work colleague promised to recommend him to the Komsomol admissions’ committee. He was exhilarated at being accepted, after having first taken the requisite course in dialectic materialism. Never in his whole
life, he explained, had he felt as happy as when he was invited to the Komsomol headquarters in Białystok to be formally issued with a membership card and a red pennant stamped with the Komsomol insignia.65

Shortly, however, gradual changes were made in the Jewish schools. Jewish history and Jewish studies were abolished, and soon Yiddish language and literature were the only subjects with a Jewish content. A new curriculum, based on the Kiev and Minsk models, taught the works of approved Jewish authors in courses on Yiddish literature and history. These authors were either revolutionaries themselves or wrote about the revolution, such as Morris Vinchevsky, David Edelstadt, and Solomon Spektor. Also included in the curriculum were Mendele Mokher Seforim, Sholem Aleichem, and I. L. Peretz. From Peretz’s prolific output, stories about the Jewish proletariat or class issues were selected. The curriculum also included works by Soviet Yiddish authors, such as David Bergelson, Itzik Feffer, Peretz Markish, and David Hofstein. Jewish writers whose works had been destroyed in Stalin’s massive purges a few years earlier were banned.

In addition to the politicization of all aspects of school life, structural changes were introduced into the schools, such as new teaching methods, disciplinary incentives, teachers’ seminars, and greater parental involvement in the education of their children. A special Jewish department was set up in the city’s Pedagogical Institute to train Yiddish teachers. Many teachers at the schools were especially brought in from the Soviet Union. Most members of the school boards were Communists or Communist sympathizers, some of whom knew little about education and were simply there in a supervisory capacity.66

The declining number of Yiddish-language schools during the period of Soviet occupation indicates that for the Soviets, Yiddish education was seen primarily as a means of Soviet cultural indoctrination and the educational reforms were simply an attempt to Sovietize all schools in the annexed territories.

*The* Białystoker Shtern

In October 1939, the Communist Party apparatus in Minsk approved publication of a Yiddish paper in Białystok, the only one of its kind in the annexed territories of eastern Poland. The paper, whose name—*Der Białystoker Shtern*—had been determined in Minsk even before publication, was subtitled “The Organ of the Białystok Communist Party’s Regional Committee and of the Regional Soviet Executive Committee.” Białystok also had a Russian and Polish daily, which were almost identical, unlike the *Białystoker*
Shtern, which had its own distinctive character. Selig Axelrod, a famous Jewish writer from Minsk, unaffiliated with the Communist Party, was asked by Hersh Smolar from Vilna to help set up the Bialystoker Shtern.67

Teveliev, a Minsk Jew who knew little Yiddish and had come to Bialystok to set up a radio station, was appointed, in addition, official editor of the paper while Jacob Berman, a Communist and former member of the Polish Communist Party’s Politburo, took on the job of broadcast editor. Teveliev and Berman took over the printing press that had formerly served Unzer Lebn which had ceased publication after the Soviets entered the city. Axelrod and Smolar, after due consideration, decided to invite Unzer Lebn’s editorial board—the author Aaron Berezinsky, the poet Mendel Goldman, and the journalist Asher Zinovitz, among others—to serve as correspondents for the Bialystoker Shtern. Although Peysekh Kaplan, the paper’s former owner and editor, was officially forbidden to join the editorial staff because of his Zionist leanings, it was decided that he would continue writing for the paper using a pseudonym and that his salary would be delivered to his home by board members. Other members of the editorial board were Warsaw writers residing in Bialystok, such as Binem Heller, who edited the sports column; Ber Mark, who edited the culture and education column; David Sfard; David Mitzmacher; and David Richter, who the following year was appointed assistant editor. Also on the board were writers from Vilna, such as Shmuel Dreyer, former deputy editor of the Vilna Der Tog (The day), and Meir Pups, editor of the Kurz (Brief). Among the paper’s contributors were the poets Peretz Markish, Shmerke Kaczerginsky, Shalom Zirman, and Peysekh Binetsky, as well as journalists such as Leib Strilovsky and Abraham Berakhot. Smolar relates how the authorities forced the board to translate official material for inclusion in the paper, leaving no room for original contributions at a time when Bialystok had more than fifty Jewish authors looking for work.68

In early 1940, Teveliev was replaced by Beinish Shulman, a former printer from Minsk who had moved to Bialystok to run the government bank. Dov Levine says of him, “The man was a scholar with a traditional yeshiva education, a specialist in Soviet Jewish literature, with a fine appreciation of the niceties of the Jewish tongue. He had an additional skill—the ability to deal with Soviet bureaucracy.”69

From October 1940 until June 22, 1941, when the paper folded, it was officially edited by B. L. Gantman, who was sent from the Soviet Union specially for this purpose. Two hundred editions of this four-page paper, which had a circulation of 4,000 to 6,000 a day, were published throughout its existence. In addition to official material, the paper ran special features on
days marking all-Soviet events, such as Soviet Army Day or V. I. Lenin’s anniversary. Sometimes the paper contained articles of Jewish interest, such as “Jewish Cultural News,” “News from Birobidzhan,” and “In the Jewish Schools.” Some of these articles were critical of the Jewish religion.

The official editors who had been sent from the Soviet Union to run the paper were careful to exclude topics of a nationalist nature. “Not everyone,” recalled Hersh Smolar, “was aware of how limited we were, or how suspicious they were of any sign of independent thought.” On principle, the paper did not publish pro-Zionist articles, and any allusion to Jewish nationalism was in relation to well-known figures such as Lenin, Stalin, and Panteleimon Ponomarenkno, secretary general of the party in the Belorussian Republic. The Bund came under a constant barrage of attacks. For example, when a Jewish worker was described as “a former Bundist,” Minsk issued warnings that any reference to the Bund must specify the movement’s fascist character. There was very little news about Jewish communities outside the Soviet Union, and any world news that was included was provided by the state news agency, TASS, and relegated to the back page.

The *Bialystoker Shtern* served as a forum for some of Białystok’s Jewish intellectuals and for Polish Jewish authors who had settled in Białystok. The latter hoped that publication in the *Bialystoker Shtern* would confer on them the status of Soviet authors, with all that that implied—especially freedom from harassment by the secret police. Despite its limited circulation, the *Bialystoker Shtern* became the mouthpiece of all Jews in former eastern Poland.

Over the twenty months of its existence, the paper underwent several significant changes. First, the page size was reduced at least three times, and in the year preceding the German invasion, instead of appearing daily, the paper appeared only once a week. For most of this time the paper followed standard Yiddish orthography, with the exception of the spelling of Hebrew words appearing in Yiddish. Almost at the end of the period, the paper adopted fully Soviet Yiddish orthography as part of a strategy to erode its Jewish character.

An account of its history makes it clear that the *Bialystoker Shtern*’s main function was to act as a Soviet propaganda tool whose purpose was to efface Jewish social and cultural life.

**Jewish Writers**

Among the refugees flowing into eastern Poland at the outbreak of the Second World War were many Jewish writers, actors, and artists who believed
that they would be able to continue their creative activities under Soviet rule. Most of the authors (about forty in all) converged on Białystok, where they frequented the Beit Hasofer at 42 Sienkiewicza Street. Together with local Jewish authors, they made up a circle of more than fifty writers. Miriam Broderzon, wife of Moshe Broderzon (former editor of the periodical Łódź) wrote in her memoirs: “Zisha Bagish, a Jewish poet from Rumania, was appointed Commissar of Jewish Authors—that is, official inspector of Jewish authors—from his office in city hall. Any new author who arrived had to report to Bagish and fill out a questionnaire regarding his origins, parents’ professions, periodicals and journals to which he had contributed, political affiliations, etc., which was then passed on to the relevant authorities. Authors with a bourgeois past were panic-stricken.”

Bagish, who arrived in Białystok in 1937, also saw to the physical requirements (housing, food, and laundry) of the new arrivals, while the local Authors’ Association helped them find work. Many of them had to accept menial jobs at first. Thus, for example, the poet Moyshe Knapheys, who had been imprisoned in Poland for being a Communist, had to shovel snow from the streets for a living. The Białystoker Shtern provided some of the authors with a job. Communist authors were invited to contribute articles, while others were even given bureaucratic posts, such as administrators of buildings that had been nationalized for official purposes. Jacob Cohen, a writer with anti-Soviet leanings, told how a number of non-Communists who were dismissed from the periodical’s editorial board formed a splinter group. He himself was reduced to working in a bakery warehouse to support himself. The fate of the authors was decided after they had been divided into one of three categories: (1) Communists or Communist sympathizers, who belonged to the Authors’ Association; (2) Potential members of the association, and (3) “dissident” authors who had to take menial jobs.

Selig Axelrod, who arrived in Białystok from Minsk in October 1939, organized a symposium on literature and politics in Białystok’s theater for the city’s Jewish literati. The actor Chaim Nissenzweig, who attended the symposium, described how Axelrod delivered a short lecture on Soviet literature, arguing that the kolkhoz (Soviet collective farm) had not entirely replaced “love” as a theme.

In early February 1940, the Białystok Authors’ Association, learning that a large delegation of famous and influential Soviet Yiddish writers would be arriving in the city on February 16, organized a welcoming committee consisting of Ber Mark, Binem Heller, and Hersh Smolar. Among the distinguished Soviet guests were Peretz Markish, Leib Kvitko, Shmuel Halkin, Yekhezkel Dobrushin, Professor Isaac Nusinov, Aaron Kushnirov,
Samuel Godiner, Samuel Rossin, Ber Orshansky, Buzi Olevski, and Ilya Gordon. They were accompanied by Leib Strongin, director of Emes publications, and Hersh Kamenietzki, secretary of the Jewish section of the Belorussian Authors’ Association.

Early on in their visit, some of the Soviet Yiddish authors met with Jewish textile workers employed in the city’s various kombinats (cooperatives). On February 18, at a literary soirée held at the theater for the Soviet visitors and local Jewish writers, Markish promised that the Soviet Union would not abandon the refugee authors. Dobrushin also spoke, with much praise for Stalin. The guest authors read excerpts from their works. David Grossman, who attended the soirée, related how Professor Nusinov, speaking on Soviet Yiddish literature, cited Bogdan Chmielnicki as an example of healthy nationalism. This assertion immediately sparked a wave of protests by members of the audience, who demanded to know why the speaker had conveniently omitted any reference to Chmielnicki’s massacre of the Jews. No satisfactory answer was given. Meanwhile, the famous local actor Abraham Morevsky spoke of the need to take action against Britain and seize its mandate for Palestine; he denied that the Poalei Zion–Left was a chauvinist party. The guest authors, rendered uneasy by his speech, replied curtly that Palestine belonged to the Arabs and that the Jews had to subordinate themselves to the Communist Party.

Of special interest was the meeting between Smolar and Markish the following day, in the presence of Professor Nusinov, who had taught Smolar in college in the 1920s. When Markish asked Smolar what he thought of the soirée, Smolar answered enthusiastically that he believed the Soviet Yiddish authors’ visit had left a deep and lasting impression on the local population and would inspire local authors to a more fruitful literary endeavor. Markish’s response was described by Smolar as follows: “Markish silently fixed his somber eyes on me [Smolar], while Nusinov stared pointedly at the window. . . . Markish began pacing up and down the room, came to rest by me, put his hand on my shoulder and whispered: ‘Let’s be frank. . . . We know each other well enough, after all. Just don’t delude yourself that something will come out of all this. . . . Look what happened to us. They’ll leave you alone for a year or two, perhaps more, and then they’ll move in and destroy everything in their path.’” Markish went on to tell a dumbfounded Smolar how Ponomarenko, whom he had met in Minsk, had told him that soon all culture in the annexed territories would be subjected to Soviet dictates and warned him “not to pour oil on a fire that was anyway going out” (referring to his impending trip to Bialystok). Smolar’s account shows that even at this early stage, Soviet policy was aiming to
destroy Jewish culture and that the visit by the Soviet Yiddish authors had been simply a propaganda exercise to promote the Sovietization of Jewish culture.

The authorities occasionally tried to persuade the refugee authors and journalists—particularly the younger and less famous ones—to move to the provincial towns or to the Soviet Union. Grossman described how Markish suggested that he, too, move to the Soviet Union, in order to dispel the impression that the Soviets were seeking out young authors only. When persuasion failed, the Soviets resorted to strong-arm tactics and ordered fifteen authors to leave the city.

In the winter of 1940, Bagish was dismissed as commissar of Jewish authors. His successor, Sfard, who in the past had been the secretary of a left-wing group of authors in Poland, was currently deputy-secretary of the Białystok Authors’ Association, which had maintained close ties with the Belorussian Authors’ Association in Minsk. Indeed, membership of the Białystok Authors’ Association was contingent on approval from headquarters in Minsk, and Sfard and Mark were occasionally summoned to Minsk to give their opinion of prospective candidates. Sfard described the anxiety experienced by the refugee authors until the requisite approval was given. Even afterward, the authors still feared that members of the NKVD would ask why the association had accepted “so many spies in one go.”

Like all members of Soviet organizations, members of the Białystok Authors’ Association were required to familiarize themselves with Communist Party history. At a meeting held in honor of Itzik Feffer and Itzik Platner, who were visiting from Moscow, Feffer enthusiastically declaimed: “Today we are celebrating the 800th anniversary of Judah Halevi. Judah the Maccabee and the Hasmoneans are national and revolutionary heroes.” Some took this statement as evidence of a softening in the Soviet attitude toward Jews. Immediately Moshe Broderzon and Efraim Kaganowsky, of the Warsaw Haynt (Today), began confessing past misdemeanors and promised henceforth to be loyal Soviet authors. In the heady pro-Soviet atmosphere that ensued, a Warsaw author began pointing at some of his former Polish colleagues, accusing them of being Zionists, Bundists, and so forth. Feffer managed to save the day by urging the assembly to let bygones be bygones. “What happened in Poland in the past is none of our business,” he said. The climate of suspicion encouraged authors to inform on each other. Indeed, a number of jokes were circulated about authors from Warsaw and Łódź who “painted themselves red, to give the impression that they were dyed-in-the-wool Communists.”

At the beginning of Soviet rule, the Jewish authors did not know how
the Soviet authorities would react to Jewish culture and whether they would be able to continue writing. They soon found out that Hebrew works were banned, while Yiddish books were tolerated as long as they conformed with Socialist ideology. The dominant genre at the time was Socialist realism, and the fate of authors depended on their adherence to this genre. In time, new authors succumbed to these constraints, and their works were adapted to the Soviet mold.

The authors and poets (including some left-wing ones) not only had to contend with the vagaries of Soviet Yiddish but also had to adapt to a totally new way of life in which the norms that guided cultural activity were clearly defined and any attempt to disregard them was dangerous. No doubt the reason why the government implemented Sovietization in gradual stages was to give the authors time to adapt their cultural tradition to Soviet values.

The poets adapted to the New Order fairly quickly. The *Bialystoker Shtern* and other local periodicals from Minsk, Vilna, Riga, and Kiev published odes to the Socialist Homeland, the Red Army, the Rule of Justice, and Stalin, among others. The authors, on the other hand, took longer to find their bearings. Once they did, they began to disparage the previous regime and praise life under the Soviets, extolling the values of equality and fraternity. These themes were common to all authors, irrespective of previous political affiliation, from Knapheys, Mitzmacher, Sfard, and Heller, with their left-wing sympathies, to Broderzon, Shlomo Sheinberg, Kaganowsky, Israel Emiot, Rubinstein, and Solomon Burstein who were unaffiliated with, or even opposed to, the left-wing camp.82

Many authors residing in Bialystok before the Soviet takeover had been unable to publish their works, either because the contents were considered unsuitable or because they lacked status or connections in a field that was highly competitive. Under Soviet rule, however, creative artists in general, and writers in particular, enjoyed many privileges. The more they toed the Soviet line, the higher their status within Soviet society, and the more opportunities and positions available to them within the Soviet metropolises.

Bialystok’s lending libraries and reading rooms were not spared Stalin’s purges. The libraries were closed for several months while the books were inspected. Books that opposed the spirit of the regime (including all Hebrew books and some Yiddish and Polish books) were confiscated. The Soviets hoped to replace the Polish and Jewish libraries with state libraries, where books could be monitored. The purge of Bialystok’s Sholem Aleichem Library was entrusted to three Communist stalwarts—Ber Mark, Moshe Levin (Moshe Batlan), and David Richter—whose loyalty to communism
had earned them cultural leadership positions under the new regime. A Russian expert from Minsk was brought in to supervise the operation. As she did not know Yiddish, the three authors had to explain to her the contents of each book. The author Moshe Grossman, who was allowed access to the library in order to check on some of his publications, described the purge as follows:

As a rule, Russian and Polish classical works were not confiscated. . . . However, when it came to the Jewish authors, there was some difference of opinion as to whether Hayyim Nahman Bialik could be considered a Jewish classicist. Sholem Asch presented no problem—he was an out-and-out fascist. . . . Manger was a problem, as were J. Perle and other young authors. Peretz was even more of a problem . . . . The decision was left up to the Minsk expert, who pronounced Peretz a classicist. She therefore sanctioned his belles-lettres but banned his publicist articles. Upon learning that Bialik had left Russia after the Revolution, she decided that his works must be confiscated too.83

Menachem Ravitzky, whose application to the Białystok Teachers’ Training College had been turned down because of his refugee status, was, with the help of his best friend Ber Mark, appointed head of the Jewish literature section at the Sholem Aleichem Library. In his testimony, currently housed in the Yad Vashem Archives, Ravitzky told how the specialist from Minsk came equipped with a long list of banned works to be sent to the Commisariat of Education and Culture in Minsk. Among the blacklisted authors were Sholem Asch, I. L. Peretz, Zusman Segalowitch, I. B. Singer, and others. The list also included all political works published in Poland, except for pro-Socialist and pro-Communist works.84 According to Grossman, after the purge, out of a total of 10,000 books, only a few hundred remained. This purge was yet another step along the path of cultural Sovietization.

Theater

Unlike the decline of Jewish education and the Jewish press in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, Jewish theater flourished under the Soviets, both within the Soviet Union and in the annexed territories. This situation was, no doubt, due to the fact that the authorities viewed theater as a powerful tool of indoctrination. The existence of Jewish theater in eastern Poland prior to annexation and the subsequent influx of many leading actors and directors made it easier for the Soviets to promote theatrical activity.

Under the Soviets, Jewish theater in Białystok relied mainly on famous
actors who came as refugees. Shortly after the start of Soviet rule, the authorities sanctioned the establishment of a dramatic company and a musical comedy troupe. A Jewish theater company was set up under the management of the local actor Yehuda Greenhois but managed to perform only the first act of Sholem Aleichem’s *Amkho* in the town’s Polish theater (hitherto barred to Jewish actors) before folding.

Following this abortive attempt, a group of Polish actors met in late 1939 to discuss the establishment of a Jewish theater. The meeting, which was organized by the authorities, was presided over by the famous Warsaw actor Abraham Morevsky, who had come to Białystok to lead the local repertory company, and the author Ber Mark. At the meeting, Mark announced that the authorities were willing to accommodate the intellectual needs of the city’s inhabitants and that the new theater would provide work for all actors. He added that the theater’s repertoire would be varied and stressed the importance of obeying instructions. In a few days the group would be informed which plays would be performed and when rehearsals would begin, but “only after a special committee has decided whether the works of the famous playwright Moshe Broderzon, who is here with us today, are suitable for stage production.”

Shortly after this meeting, the Białystoker Yidish Dramatisher Melukhte-Theater (Białystok Yiddish State Theater) was opened under the directorship of Abraham Morevsky; later it was under the directorship of the Soviet actor Yitzhak Rokitin. Its artistic director, Max Viskind, was later replaced by Morris Norwid, a Soviet Jewish producer and former actor of the Vilna Troupe. Members of the Baku State Jewish Theater, under the directors Jacob Mindlin and Victor Zeitlin, also joined the Białystok theater. The theater opened with Peretz Markish’s play *The Ovadis Family*—a positive portrayal of the life of a typical Jewish family in the Soviet Union. The authorities criticized the play, however, on the grounds that “neither the director, nor the actors, are yet sufficiently acquainted with Soviet affairs.”

The next two plays, taken from the theater’s classical repertoire, were directed by the young Soviet director Jacob Mindlin. These were Sholem Aleichem’s *Der Blutiker Shpas* (It’s Hard to Be a Jew) and M. Gershenson’s *Hershele Ostropol*. Other plays put on by the Białystok Jewish theater in that period were Abraham Goldfaden’s *Shney Kuni-leml*, Jacob Gordin’s *Mirele Efros*, and Lipe Reznik’s *Dunya*. There were also plans to put on William Shakespeare’s *Tempest* and Mikhail Lermontov’s dramatic poem *Shpanyer* (Spaniards), translated by Aaron Kushnir, about the Spanish Inquisition. However, the plan was stillborn. While the eighty-member
Theater company was on a production tour of Eastern Belorussia, Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and the actors fled to Central Asia. The other theater set up in Białystok in those days was a satirical Yiddish theater known as the Yidisher Melukhe Miniatur Teater (Little Yiddish State Theater) under the professional and artistic directorship of Moshe Broderzon. The Little Theater had a complement of about twenty actors, including Shimon Dzigan and Israel Schumacher, and began performing in February 1940. Before the theater could put on any performances, Broderzon had to have his repertoire screened by the state inspector, a Jew from Minsk called Schuster. The actors were also allowed a say in deciding which parts of a play were “acceptable.” However, more often than not, plays were banned, and the actors had to seek out material that was free of any hint of dubious politics.

David Lederman, an actor of the satirical theater, told how after careful monitoring, the theater presented neutral material, mainly one-act sketches and dramatized versions of folk songs. In certain cases, the actors were required by the censorship committee to adapt the texts or perform tailor-made plays, such as satires on the Polish government which had fled at the start of the war. Lederman complained: “There were constant attempts to re-educate us actors, and to get us to change our bourgeois Polish outlooks. . . . Before putting on a play, each and every word of the text was subjected to the censor’s scrutiny. The gala performance was performed before a three-man censorship committee, and we had to haggle over the suitability of the play.”

The various censorship committees that came to Białystok claimed that they were not guided by literary or artistic criteria but concerned only with political propriety. The state-appointed inspectors were mostly uncompromising Jews of the Yevsektsia. It is interesting to note that even Abraham Goldfaden’s play Shulamis put on by the Minsk Theater Company in Białystok was so heavily censored so that only 30 percent of the original text was left. The rest was Soviet additions. Lederman pointed out the enormous discrepancies between the salaries of the veteran actors and those of the beginners. While a veteran actor earned 2,000 rubles a month, a beginner earned only 275 rubles a month, an amount that was impossible to live on.

When in the spring of 1940, Białystok’s Little Theater went on a production tour of the Soviet Union, it was enthusiastically acclaimed by Jews and non-Jews alike. In the middle of this tour, Germany attacked the Soviet Union.

Białystok also had its own Jewish jazz band known as Eddy Rozner’s
Jazz Band, made up of Jewish refugees who had moved to Białystok after the Soviet takeover. The Soviet authorities also set up a special body in Białystok to encourage popular art and artistic or musical talent. Musical clubs run by professional musicians were set up in the large factories. Cinemas were renovated, and tickets were sold at reasonable prices. Białystok’s places of entertainment were always packed.91

From the above, it is clear that from the start of Soviet rule, all aspects of Jewish culture were subjected to a single-minded purpose—the eradication of all its distinguishing features. Those who suffered most from these attempts at cultural Sovietization were Jewish intellectuals, by nature more liberal and open to foreign currents of thought. Most of them resisted attempts at “re-education” and were considered a threat and exiled. Unlike them, most of Białystok’s Jewish population, who were workers, easily adapted to the new cultural norms, which conformed with Socialist doctrine. The new style of life imported by the Soviets gave this sector of the population a sense of security and raised their—somewhat unrealistic—hopes of economic, social, and cultural stability and equality.

Religious Life

Under independent Poland, the Jewish community had enjoyed a formal, legal status, and the services provided by the community institutions had been officially sanctioned by the Polish government. These services included registration of births, marriage ceremonies, Jewish burial, ritual immersion, synagogues, and educational and religious institutions. With Białystok’s annexation to the Soviet Union, the fate of Jewish life and Jewish institutions in the city was once again called into question. The Soviets’ attitude to the Jewish religion, and indeed to religion in general, was unequivocally negative, arising from the view that religion and state were incompatible. For this reason, one of the first steps the Soviet authorities undertook was to shut down Białystok’s Jewish community institutions. Although ostensibly religious worship by individuals was not forbidden, the socioeconomic changes wrought by the Soviets made religious observance almost impossible. Most of the city’s batei midrash and synagogues were taken over by homeless refugees, while those that continued to function had to operate under tight constraints until they, too, closed. To make matters worse, the Soviets replaced the fixed day of rest with a random day of rest, so that the religious population had to work on the Sabbath. Even when, in late 1939, Sunday was declared the official day of rest, the authorities did not
recognize the Sabbath or Jewish festivals. Raphael Reizner described the
effect of the annexation on Jewish life in Białystok:

They would not let us go and pray. People were forced to start work early in
the morning and had to work on the Sabbath too. Soon the synagogues emp-
tied out. The shortage in accommodations led the authorities to requisition
the batei midrash for their own purposes. The Piaskie’s Beit Hamidrash was
used as a sports club, army units were billeted in the Polakov’s Beit Hami-
drash and in Beit Shemuel, while other synagogues were used as storehouses.
Worshipers at the Great Synagogue were charged an exorbitant rent of
5 rubles per square meter, or over 4,000 rubles per month. Religious institu-
tions were charged 5 rubles per kilowatt of electricity, instead of the standard
35 kopecks. The few synagogues that were recognized by the authorities had
to save on electricity and therefore held services in the dark, turning the lights
on only for festivals.92

In this climate, a cooperative of Jewish carpenters formed, whose mem-
bers refused to work on the Sabbath and festivals. The cooperative acted as
a focal point for other religious and traditional Jewish workers who refused
to work on the Sabbath and insisted on observing the dietary laws. After the
Soviets nationalized the Jewish community’s main mikveh and bathhouse,
the cooperative established a mikveh in a private apartment, which served the
local community and surrounding localities. The records and testimonies of
Jews who lived in Białystok during the Soviet period indicate that Sabbath-
observant Jews avoided jobs that required profanation of the Sabbath.
Some took on casual labor, while others remained unemployed.

The Soviet authorities stripped the rabbis of their formal legal status and
took over their functions, including registration of births and conduct of
marriages. Most of Białystok’s Jewish residents were not unduly perturbed
by these reforms, seeing the integration of official and religious functions as
a technical necessity. Indeed, the main change that took place was that the
rabbinical and communal institutions continued to function under govern-
ment supervision, and not independently as they had previously. Although
the authorities sought to discredit the rabbis, they did not wish to do away
with them completely. Under the Soviets, most Jewish community officials
came under the aegis of, and were employed by, the municipality. In their
new capacity, they were required to report all Jewish births and prospective
marriages to the authorities. Indeed, Jews could not get married without an
official marriage permit from the authorities.93 No doubt this state of affairs
eroded the official status of the rabbis in Białystok, who nevertheless faithfully applied themselves to their task. The Jewish public continued to celebrate circumcisions, bar mitzvahs, and marriages and to perform Jewish burials, even if they had to be done unobtrusively or covertly.

Unobservant Jews were in the minority. Most had already given up Jewish observance during the period of the Polish Republic. The Soviet presence merely strengthened a preexisting trend. The impact on the Jewish community as a whole, under the relatively short period of Soviet rule, was negligible.

Soviet ideology and propaganda were free of the antisemitism that had been an integral part of official policy in prewar Poland and that during the 1930s had heightened Polish hostility toward the Jews. At least in the early stages of the annexation, a kind of reciprocity evolved between the majority of the Jewish population, who saw the Soviets as infinitely preferable to Hitler, and the Soviets, who took a strong stand against antisemitism. Moreover, the Białystok Jewish community included many socialists and Communists who eagerly absorbed Soviet propaganda concerning justice, equality, and national autonomy and were openly pro-Soviet. Soviet propaganda emphasized equality of the various national groups in the Soviet Union. Special radio broadcasts from Kiev and Minsk announced that the non-Polish population in the new territories, including the Jews, would be accepted into the Soviet Army and sent special greetings from the Soviet workers to the Jewish proletariat in the new territories.94

The testimonies of Jews who lived in Białystok under Soviet rule indicate that under the Soviets, antisemitism ceased to exist. The arrival of the Soviets not only banished fear of the Poles—a regular feature of prewar life—but also brought with it a sense of relief and of security. In this respect, Białystok, as part of Western Belorussia, differed from the cities of the Western Ukraine, where antisemitism was evident in late September 1939, despite the Soviet annexation. This antisemitism, which took the form of harassment of Jews, was encouraged by Ukrainian nationalists who believed that Nazi Germany would help them in their struggle for national autonomy. They expressed their opposition to the Soviet regime by attacking local Jews and by inciting the Ukrainian peasants to do the same. In Białystok, on the other hand, most of the non-Jewish population was Polish, rather than Belorussian, and the right-wing element that identified with Nazi nationalism was not significant. A combination of factors—the defeat of the Poles and their consequent disgrace, the fact that the Belorussians were usually less anti-Jewish than the Ukrainians, and the Soviet emphasis on equality among nations—brought about a change in attitude
toward local Jews. In this new climate, the daily manifestations of anti-Semitism that had reached a peak during the last days of the Polish Republic disappeared.

Arrests, Deportations, and Exiles

Oppression and persecution of hostile elements—defined as enemies of the state, the people, and the revolution—were an integral part of Soviet policy throughout the period of Soviet rule. The Soviet security apparatus had various criteria for determining who was dangerous. Those most likely to be arrested and deported in the Jewish sector were Zionist or Bund leaders, members of militarist or Trotskyist organizations, expelled members of the Communist Party, former factory owners, wealthy merchants, and refugees.

Throughout the Soviet period, there were four waves of arrests and deportations in the annexed territories. Even if these were not specifically directed at Jews, many Jews were involved. The way the NKVD operated was to arrest the suspects at night and send them straight to the railway station, where most were transported to the Soviet hinterland. In the first wave of arrests, which in Białystok began in early October 1939, the Bund’s main activists were arrested. The rumors circulating through the city left the public and political elite in no doubt as to their own fate, and many began to flee. In her testimony, Haïka Grosman related that David Rakowitzky, the principal of Białystok’s Hebrew High School and a leading Zionist, left Białystok with his family after being warned of the fate awaiting him.

Apart from the Bundists, who were on the NKVD’s list from the start, the first wave of arrests targeted mainly Poles and only a handful of Jews, Ukrainians, and local Belorussians. The second wave of arrests in April 1940 targeted many more Jews, mainly merchants, industrialists, and wealthy property owners who, as members of “the bourgeoisie,” were considered the archenemy of socialism. Also included in this wave of arrests were Jewish refugees who refused to accept a Soviet passport, and were therefore considered suspect by the authorities. The wave of arrests and exiles sowed anxiety in the hearts of local Jews, who lived in constant fear that one day their turn would come.

The third wave of arrests took place in June–July 1940 and was directed mainly at Jewish and non-Jewish refugees, including those who had been issued with a Soviet identity card carrying the infamous clause 11. This wave of arrests was far more sweeping than the previous ones; there was not
enough room in the prisons for all the detainees, and the NKVD had to devise makeshift prisons to accommodate them all. In this badly organized two-month operation, thousands of refugees had to wait at the station for the Soviet trains to arrive. The fourth wave of arrests began on the night of June 20, 1941, when members of the NKVD went from house to house with their lists, sending entire families, most of them Jewish, in cattle and freight trucks to the Soviet hinterland.97

Toward the end of this last wave of arrests and in the early days of Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, Soviet officials frequently ordered Jewish deportees off the train, to make room for themselves. This last wave of arrests was the culmination of a systematic program of Jewish cultural, social, and political destruction that began with the Soviet occupation of Białystok in September 1939 and ended with the outbreak of war between Germany and the Soviet Union, in late June 1941.

The list of prospective deportees was prepared in advance, partly on the basis of hearsay. First on the list were the “politically” suspect, closely followed by those who had registered to return to occupied Poland. Later, the NKVD made no attempt to differentiate between the various types of detainees, and even refugees with Soviet passports were deported. At first, the deportees were sent to Kazakhstan, the Soviet Republic of Komi, and other remote areas. Some evacuees from Białystok were sent to the Vologda region, where they were set to work in the forests. In the first months of exile, they spoke of suffering and deprivation in their letters home and asked for basic foodstuffs to be sent immediately.98

It is difficult to estimate how many Jews were deported from Białystok. From the testimonies of Jews who lived in the city in those days, we see that, unlike the early days of Soviet rule, when the city was swarming with refugees, on the eve of the German invasion most had disappeared from the city, either of their own free will or by force of circumstances. Those who were left behind were mainly single people who had managed to avoid being arrested. In the first days of the German occupation, hundreds more Jews fled Białystok, together with the Soviet leadership and army. Although again it is hard to specify exact numbers, it is safe to assume that of the tens of thousands of Jewish refugees who poured into Białystok from early September 1939, only several thousand remained in the city at the end of the Soviet period in late June 1941. Bearing in mind that on the eve of the Second World War some 43,000 Jews were living in Białystok, and taking into account data from the period of the German occupation and the Białystok ghetto, an estimated 50,000 Jews were living in Białystok when the Germans entered the city.
Conclusion

In attempting to summarize the life of the Jewish community of Białystok during the period of Soviet annexation, it is important to consider both the Soviet and the Jewish perspective.

From the Soviet perspective, the authorities favored a policy of voluntary or enforced assimilation of the Jewish community, identical to, albeit swifter than, the one imposed on the Jews of the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Their objective, which was to destroy the distinctive features of Jewish life, was applied to all Jewish communities in the annexed territories, including Białystok. The Białystok Jewish community suffered more than other communities, however, on several counts: (1) it was one of the largest communities in the annexed territories; (2) it had a large “bourgeois” element; and (3) it had a high proportion of refugees.

As the capital of Western Belorussia, Białystok experienced a massive local Soviet presence and frequent visits by high-ranking party officials. Białystok’s local government, with the help of the Communist Party’s secret police, had almost total success in implementing its policy of Sovietization. In a relatively short time, Jewish schools, political parties, youth movements, religious and cultural institutions, factories, and literary and artistic endeavors came to a standstill. No doubt, given more time, the Soviets would have implemented all their plans for the political and sociocultural assimilation of Jews. It was only the Germans’ entry into the city in late June 1941 that cut this process short. If, however, the Soviets aimed at destroying Jewish culture, the Germans had in mind something far more appalling—the total physical destruction of all Jews.

From the Jewish perspective, the Soviet administration, with its die-hard Stalinists who spread fear and distrust through a policy of oppression and arrests, struck a mortal blow for Jewish community life. Nevertheless, Jewish life in the city appeared to proceed normally, perhaps because centuries of exile had taught the Jews to adapt, perhaps because there was not enough time for the true extent of the tragedy to sink in, and perhaps because the Jews of Białystok considered themselves lucky in comparison with the Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. Whatever the reason, the Jews of Białystok adapted themselves to the new regime. They took on new work arrangements and new jobs. Government shops sprang up, and there was no shortage of vital commodities. Local Jews found employment in the municipality, the local police, and local Communist Party institutions. And although the Jewish community institutions lost their independence, they continued
to function. Promising new educational, organizational, and life opportunities opened for Jewish youth. Most important of all, fear of Polish antisemitism receded.

Just as Białystok’s Jews were learning to adapt to this new way of life, the Germans entered the city, ushering in a period of destruction and death.
Chapter 3

The Early Days of the German Occupation

On June 22, 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union. The bombing of Bialystok sowed panic in the city. As the Red Army began to flee, shops were looted, and in the ensuing chaos, prisoners, including some Jewish activists, managed to escape. David Klementinowsky captured the chaotic moment: “Anyone who could, fled with the Russians. The streets are full of tragic sights. Families which have lived together for dozens of years are being forced to separate. The Soviet warehouses are being looted for food, and the Poles are attacking the Jews. We are afraid to leave the house, because there is no-one around to keep law and order.”1 By Thursday evening, June 26, 1941, Bialystok had been conquered without a fight.

Actions against the Jews in the First Two Weeks

On that day, three companies belonging to Polizeibataillon 309 entered the city, whose population, at the time, totaled 105,000. These companies took up position in the city’s market square, known as Rynek Kościuszki.2 Two of the Polizeibataillon’s companies—Company 1, which approached Bialystok from the West, and Company 3, which approached from the southwest—entered the city in the early morning, while Company 2, which approached Bialystok from the southeast, reached the city center only in the afternoon after putting down a show of resistance by the remnants of the Soviet army in the area.3

From the trials of the members of the Polizeibataillon in Wuppertal, West Germany, in 1967–68, it is clear that the officers and policemen of at least one of the companies were aware at the outset that they were part of a larger plan to exterminate the Jews. The Polizeibataillon commander,
Major Ernst Weis, at Adolf Hitler’s behest, instructed his officers to kill Soviet commissars and Soviet Jews alike. The head of Company 1 passed the order on to his men. After they had stationed their vehicles around the market square, Weis ordered his men to raid the Jewish neighborhoods, evict Jewish men from their homes, and round them up in the market square and in the synagogue concourse. While some members of the Polizeibataillon cordoned off the streets, others began hunting down the Jews, subjecting them to violence, threats, abuse, and humiliation wherever possible. One of the commanders shot Jews who refused to open the door and instructed his men to do likewise. Members of the Polizeibataillon dragged Jews from their homes, kicked them, hit them with their rifle butts, and shot them. The commander of another company ordered his men to shoot Jews who were being held in the market square or in other parts of the city. Several hundred Jews were taken to pits on the city’s outskirts and shot to death. Company commanders Schneider and Behrens took part in the raids of the Jewish neighborhoods of the Shulhoyf (Synagogue Courtyard), the Piaskes (Haymarket), and the Fishmark (Fishmarket). They gave their subordinates explicit instructions regarding who was to be shot on the spot, who was to be taken away to be shot, and who was to be rounded up in the market square or the Shulhoyf.

In one case, two Jews sank to their feet, begging Pflugbeil for mercy. A member of the Polizeibataillon who was watching the scene, unzipped his trousers and urinated over them. Pflugbeil, who had witnessed similar acts of cruelty by members of the Polizeibataillon, summoned the perpetrators and chastised them, and warned them to refrain from acts of this kind. However, the action was already in full swing, and Pflugbeil’s criticism fell on deaf ears. Later, Pflugbeil testified that he sent a special envoy to Major Weis demanding an explanation, but Weis, who was in a drunken stupor, claimed to have no knowledge of the event.

Throughout the day, the Polizeibataillon continued rounding up Jews in the market square and the Shulhoyf. The Germans who participated in the action later testified that local Poles helped them by pointing out Jewish houses and telling them how many people lived in each house. As the number of Jews gathered in the Shulhoyf steadily grew, hundreds others were taken to secret locations in the city and shot. As part of the policy of humiliation, Jews were ordered to dance before the German police. These soldiers, encouraged by the Jews’ easy compliance, took their policy of humiliation even further and began burning the Jews’ beards. The Germans then proceeded to the Jewish hospital and murdered its patients in cold blood. The bloodbath continued even after nightfall, with the help of search-
lights. Hundreds of Jews were herded into the large walled park adjoining the Branicki Palace, shot, and, dumped in a mass grave.\textsuperscript{10}

Schneider and Behrens ordered that Jews were to be locked up in the Great Synagogue, located in the middle of the Shulhoyf, in the old Jewish quarter with its old one- and two-story wooden houses. About 800 were thus incarcerated, and the building was surrounded by about 150 members of the Polizeibataillon, standing two deep, to make sure no one came or left. Two trucks drew up, and large fuel tanks were unloaded. The synagogue was drenched in fuel, and its doors were sealed.\textsuperscript{11} In the early evening, Schneider commanded that the synagogue be set on fire. Grenades were thrown at the fuel-drenched building with its Jewish prisoners trapped inside. As the synagogue rapidly caught fire, some tried to escape by jumping from the windows, but they were quickly shot down.\textsuperscript{12}

The \textit{aktion} perpetrated by Polizeibataillon 309 immediately after its entry into Białystok, and especially the burning of the synagogue with its 800 hostages, were extremely traumatic events that are described repeatedly in testimonies and memoirs of Białystok’s survivors and in historical research on the period. Yaakov Makowsky told how Berl Zaltzman, a carpenter with whom he later worked outside the ghetto, was one of the few who managed to jump to safety from a synagogue window. Zaltzman had been incarcerated in the synagogue with his father. He explained that his father, beginning to suffer from smoke inhalation, had asked for his son’s belt, which Zaltzman handed over before forcing his way through to one of the synagogue doors in an attempt to get some air. When he returned to fetch his father, he found the elder Zaltzman hanging from an improvised noose attached to one of the synagogue rafters. Meanwhile the fire was spreading fast. Zaltzman climbed onto one of the windows, from which he could see the \textit{shabbes goy}—the synagogue’s beadle Josef Bartoszko, who lived on the other side of the street—signaling to Jews to jump when the coast was clear. Zaltzman broke the window nearest him, jumped, and disappeared into one of the nearby alleyways.\textsuperscript{13} At one point it seems that Bartoszko also opened one of the doors of the synagogue allowed more than two dozen Jews to escape.\textsuperscript{14} Another Jew who managed to escape death was Domarcki, who hid among the corpses, which were not evacuated until the following day.

After the fire nothing remained of the synagogue except a charred shell and its metal dome. The Jews who were imprisoned there had been burned alive. The grenades that were hurled at the synagogue set fire to the nearby houses, too, and soon the entire area was ablaze. Jews who lived near the synagogue had to flee for their lives. It was only when the flames threatened
to engulf the Polizeibataillon’s vehicles stationed nearby that Weis gave the order to start extinguishing the fire. It took until the early hours of the morning to get the fire under control. Since most Jews had barricaded themselves in their homes, they had little idea of what had happened. The following day, Saturday June 28, the Hevra Kaddisha removed the corpses, closely supervised by the Polizeibataillon’s men. It took twenty wagons, and three days, to transport all the corpses to the “old” Jewish cemetery, on Sosnowa Street, where they were buried in a communal grave. This Friday, June 27, is referred to in the history of the Jews of Białystok as “Red Friday” (der royter fraytik), “bloody Friday” (der blutiker fraytik), and “Black Friday” (der shvartser fraytik). On this day an estimated 2,000–2,200 of a total of the city’s 50,000 Jews were burned, shot, or tortured to death.

Two days later, on Sunday June 29, the chief rabbi of Białystok, Dr. Gedalyah Rosenman, was summoned to the office of the city’s military governor and ordered to set up a Judenrat within twenty-four hours. Rosenman immediately dispatched his assistant, Mordechai Movshovich, to the homes of well-known public figures and members of the community, requesting them to attend an emergency meeting. Among the first to reach the rabbi’s house were Ephraim Barash (former president of the community), Dov Sobotnik, Yakov Goldberg, Shmuel Poniansky, and Yaakov Lipschitz. A number of those asked to attend were invited for their experience more than for their holding of public office. At the meeting, Rosenman, Barash, Sobotnik, Goldberg, and Avraham Limon were elected to the board. The following day, the Germans were presented with a list of twelve Judenrat members, as ordered. One of the Judenrat’s first assignments was to supply the Germans with a workforce, as well as large quantities of blankets and pillows, fur coats, and leather (for leather soles).

On Tuesday July 1, 1941, Einsatzkommando 8, a subunit of Einsatzgruppe B, entered the city. On Thursday July 3, the Germans cordoned off several streets and raided Jewish homes, taking about 1,000 men away to the local military command, where they were held as prisoners. That night, a number of drunken officers arrived, ordered the Jews to stand in line, and interrogated each in turn about his former profession. About 300 members of the Jewish intelligentsia—lawyers, doctors, engineers, and members of the liberal professions—were selected and detained, while the others were sent home. The next day the detainees were taken to the Pietrasze Fields, 3 kilometers northeast of Białystok, where they were shot to death.

Polizeibataillon 309 left Białystok on July 3, 1941, continuing eastward, to Białowieża. On July 5, Polizeibataillon 316 and 322 entered the city, sta-
tioning themselves on Lipowa Street. Most information concerning events in the first half of July 1941 comes from Polizeibataillon 322’s war diary (Kriegstagebuch), found in archives in Prague, and the proceedings of the trials of the Polizeibataillon commanders in Germany after the war. 23

On Tuesday, July 8, 1941, Polizeibataillon 322, under Gottlieb Nagel, was ordered to conduct a house-to-house search for goods that had supposedly been looted before the Germans entered the city. In the ensuing military operation, during which about twenty truckloads of goods were seized from the homes of Poles and Jews alike, twenty-two civilians were shot. 24 In The Architect of Genocide, Richard Breitman describes how the Germans blamed the Jews for looting shops after the Soviets left, claiming that the abandoned goods were Soviet property. Breitman’s description is based on testimony given after the war by Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, HSSPF (Senior Commander of the SS [Schutzstaffel] and Police) of Central Russia, who was stationed in Białystok. 25 The war diary’s entry for July 8, states: “The order was given to raid homes in the Jewish quarter. The mission was accomplished with total success. The looted goods were found and brought to 123 Piłsudski Street, where a provisional warehouse was set up. The looters and anyone carrying weapons were shot on the spot.” 26

On the afternoon of the same day (8 July), Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer-SS, and Kurt Daluege, chief of Hauptamt Ordnungspolizei (Civilian Police) arrived in Białystok on an inspection. Himmler was in the habit of visiting the sites of massacres, to confer with his officers and make sure his troops were obeying orders. When Himmler discovered from the Einsatzgruppen’s reports and from his own observations that Jews had been murdered with ease, he ordered the operation to be expanded into a full-scale massacre. Bach-Zelewski related how several days later, at a dinner held in Himmler’s honor to which the Polizeibataillon commanders had also been invited, Himmler instructed Bach-Zelewski to execute 2,000 Jews aged 17–45, for having looted shops on the eve of the Germans’ entry into the city. Bach-Zelewski immediately ordered the commander of Polizeibataillon 322 to implement the order in a secret operation. 27

On July 8, in the midst of these events, the Judenrat was ordered by the military authorities to publish its first announcement, which read as follows:

We hereby inform the Jewish population that as of Thursday morning, July 10, 1941, all men and women, and children aged 14 and over, must wear a white armband with a blue Star of David on their right arm. The armband must be 12 centimeters wide, and the Star of David 10 centimeters long, and one centimeter wide. Anyone unable to obtain a blue Star of David must
wear a white armband 12 centimeters wide with a round yellow patch 10 centimeters in diameter.

**Warning:** The order is binding on all Jews. As of Thursday, anyone appearing outdoors without the patch shall be severely punished.  

On the morning of July 9, Daluege, speaking to the military police assembled in Bialystok’s stadium, told them that they should feel proud to belong to a brigade whose mission was the destruction of Bolshevism: “No other company is as important as yours. Now Bolshevism will finally be eradicated, for the greater good of Germany, Europe and the entire world.” Daluege entrusted Chief of Police Montua with the implementation of Himmler’s order. Montua, in turn, ordered Polizeibattalion commanders Nagel and Waldow to launch the aktion against Bialystok’s Jewish men. In his testimony, Bach-Zelewski relates how Montua ordered the Polizeibattalion and company commanders to ensure that their men did not suffer undue psychological stress in carrying out this assignment. He advised them to hold parties and social events for their benefit and to impress upon them the need for operations of this kind.

On 11 July, Montua issued the following order:

1. All Jews aged 17–45 who have participated in the looting of shops are to be immediately shot. This operation will be carried out in a location far from cities, villages, and large traffic arteries. They [the corpses] shall not be buried in locations accessible to passersby. No photographs may be taken of the operation, and no spectators may be present. The operation and burial sites shall be concealed from the public.

2. It is important to convince those responsible for carrying out the order of the political exigency of such an action.

3. A daily report on the progress of the operation must be submitted to me before 8:00 p.m. each day.

The same day, the Judenrat again urgently appealed to Jews who were not yet wearing the armband to do so forthwith, or face dire consequences.  

There was no doubt a link between the Judenrat’s warning, as stipulated by the military authorities, and Himmler’s order to round up and slaughter the Jews. The distinctive yellow patch certainly made the Germans’ task easier.

The aktion began at 5:00 a.m. on Saturday July 12, when more than 1,000 policemen belonging to Polizeibataillone 316 and 322 cordoned off areas in the city, broke into Jewish homes, ordered the men into the streets, and
herded them into the municipal stadium. At their trial in Freiburg after the war, those who carried out the aktion admitted that it was not hard to identify their victims, both because of the yellow patch they were wearing and because the local Poles willingly provided the Germans with vital information. The stadium, located on the southwest outskirts of the city, was surrounded by a wooden fence that was closely guarded by a detachment from Polizeibataillon 322. The prisoners were not allowed to drink, although it was an exceptionally hot day, or to relieve themselves. German members of the security police and the SD [Sicherheitsdienst] were also present. When Montua arrived on the scene, the stadium was already packed. The Jews were ordered to hand over all their possessions and valuables to the Germans and to move to the center of the stadium, to make it easier for the Germans to keep an eye on them. The order was then given for them to be moved to Pietrasze Fields, a forested area with two or three large gullies that had formerly served as Soviet trenches, where they were to be shot.

On Saturday afternoon, trucks began transporting the Jews from the stadium to the Pietrasze Fields. The whole area was sealed off and guarded by policemen from Polizeibataillon 316. From the disembarkation point, the gullies were not yet visible, but as the Jews entered the area and heard gunfire, they realized what lay in store for them. They were divided into groups and counted. Each group was then taken to the trenches to be shot by a platoon of about thirty men. Anyone who refused to go, or tried to escape into the nearby forest, was shot on the spot. The Germans positioned the Jews facing the pit. Anyone who did not die immediately was shot again. The corpses were sprinkled with a thin layer of earth that barely covered them, and were visible to each new batch of men. Each fusillade lasted about fifteen minutes, but as the day drew to a close, the pace of the aktion was stepped up. Bach-Zelewski, who arrived in the middle of the aktion to check on progress, encouraged the shooters by stressing their role in the war against global Jewish Bolshevism and international Judaism, adding that anyone who believed in the German leadership could not fail to carry out the assignment. As darkness fell, the Germans moved the trucks nearer the trenches and set up spotlights to enable them to continue with the aktion. It was only when the marksmen could no longer shoot straight because of the dark that Waldow ordered them to stop. The remaining Jews were kept there all night and shot at daybreak by the Polizeibataillon men. Meanwhile, there were still many Jews in the stadium waiting their turn to be led to their death.

The following day (Sunday, July 13), Montua issued another order stating that:
1. According to the directive of July 11, 1941, the aktion was to be completed that day.

2. An interim report had to be submitted forthwith.\(^{37}\)

In all probability, the aktion was completed that day. By July 17, the Polizeibataillon had left the city, some for Baranowicze and the others for Bereza-Kartuska. Although there are no exact figures of how many Jewish men were killed in this aktion, it is clear that no one managed to escape. Both German and Jewish sources estimate the number of Jews killed at about 4,000.\(^{38}\)

The Jews of Białystok were convinced that the men had been taken away for work and would soon return to their families. On the Saturday of the aktion, representatives of the Judenrat approached the military governor of the city, asking for the prisoners to be released. The governor asked them to sign a declaration stating that the Soviets had burned the Jewish quarter and the synagogue before leaving the city, and that the Germans had extinguished the fire. Rabbi Rosenman was forced at gunpoint to sign. Following the pattern set in Warsaw and Vilna, the Germans demanded a ransom in return for the release of the Jews.\(^{39}\) They demanded 5 kilograms of gold, 100 kilograms of silver, and 2 million rubles.\(^{40}\) The Judenrat called a session to discuss the Germans’ request and decided to start collecting forthwith. Most of the ransom—which took the form of jewelry and large sums of money—was raised by the wives and mothers of the men who had been arrested. “Women are roaming the streets, weeping and begging us: Give us gold, silver, money, in order to save our husbands and sons. They bring rings to the Judenrat, silver candlesticks, anything of any value,” wrote Srulke Kot in his memoirs.\(^{41}\) In the end, the amount they collected even exceeded the amount stipulated by the Germans. After the ransom had been handed over to the Germans, the military governor informed the Judenrat that the ransom would serve to prevent more men being taken away, since the first lot had already been sent to Germany for work. The representatives of the Judenrat, fearful that if the truth were known riots would erupt and undermine their incipient authority, decided not to inform the Jews of what they had learned. However, the wives and mothers soon realized that they were being duped and held daily demonstrations in front of the houses of Judenrat members. When they realized that their efforts were in vain, they set up an independent committee, headed by Moshe Korianisky, and collected a large sum of money in a bid to obtain the release of their husbands and sons. After several months, these attempts proved abortive, the committee was disbanded and the money returned to the donors.\(^{42}\)
The *aktionen* perpetrated by the Germans against Białystok’s Jews in the first two weeks of the city’s occupation resulted in nearly 7,000 deaths. The wives of those who perished on Thursday, July 3, were known as *di donershtike* (Thursday widows), while the wives of those who were taken away on Saturday, July 12, were called *di shabbesdike* (Sabbath widows). The poem Pey-sekh Kaplan wrote in the ghetto in memory of those who were taken away on the Sabbath, expresses the pain of the widows and orphans, some of whom hoped and believed that they would still see their loved ones again:

*Rivkele the Sabbath Widow*
Rivkele the Sabbath widow
works in the factory
spins threads
twines cord
Oh the ghetto’s so dark
It’s been too long already
Her heart contracts
with too much pain
Her darling Hershele
has gone, departed.
Since that Sabbath
that moment
Rivkele mourns
Day and night she weeps
and besides the loom
sits and ponders
Where is my beloved?
Perhaps he’s alive? Where?
Perhaps in a concentration camp
Working his knuckles to the bone?
It’s so hard for him there
So hard for her here
Since that Sabbath
that moment

**Bezirk Białystok (Białystok District)**

The Białystok District stretched over an area of more than 32,000 square kilometers. It bordered on Lithuania (Komisariat Ostland) in the north, East
Prussia in the northwest, the Generalgouvernement in the west and southwest, the Ukraine in the southeast and Belorussia (Komisariat Ostland) in the east. The district’s population of 11.13 million was mixed: a majority of Poles in the west, a majority of Lithuanians in the northeast, and Ukrainians and Belorussians in the southeast. When the Germans occupied the district, most of its 150,000 Jews were living in large cities, such as Białystok, Grodno, Bielsk, Wołkowysk, Łomża, Sokółka, and Grajewo. Białystok, as the district’s capital and geographical and industrial center, was a crossroads of major traffic arteries. The second largest city in the district was Grodno, northeast of Białystok, with a total population of 50,000, about half of whom were Jewish.

Northeast of Grodno stretched a large forested marshland, while in the southeast, near Puszcza Białowieża, was a huge virgin forest that had formerly served as a hunting ground for the Russian tsars. After the German occupation in June–July 1941, Hermann Göring, who had hunted in the forest in the 1930s as a guest of the Polish government, declared the area a closed hunting zone, effectively turning it into an extraterritorial enclave.

In the early days of the German occupation, the Białystok District was governed by the military administration, which was phased out on August 15, 1941. On July 17, Hitler gave the order for the eastern territories to be governed by the civil administration. The territories were to be divided into commissions (Kommissarite), the commissions into general districts (Generalbezirke), and the general districts into regions (Kreisgebiete). Alfred Rosenberg was appointed Reich minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories. In another order issued by Hitler the same day, Erich Koch, the governor (Gauleiter) of East Prussia, was appointed state commissioner (Reichskommissar) of the Ukraine and governor of the Białystok District. This appointment put Koch at the head of a huge stretch of land, from the Baltic Sea (Königsberg) in the north, to the Black Sea in the south.

Białystok District was never fully incorporated into East Prussia, but remained an independent administrative unit under the jurisdiction of Gauleiter Koch. The district had its own police force, but from November 1941, the customs checkpoint between East Prussia and Białystok District was abolished, and the German foreign currency law was applied to the entire district. Koch, who was appointed governor of the district on August 1, 1941, was a Nazi Party stalwart, having joined the party in 1922 when he was employed as a railway official. In 1928 he was appointed party representative for East Prussia, and in 1930 was elected to the Reichstag as deputy for East Prussia. In September 1939, he reached the pinnacle of his career when he was appointed Oberpräsident of East Prussia.
In orders issued by Hitler on August 18, Koch was promoted to Chef der Zivilverwaltung (head of the civil administration). As such, he was directly subordinate to Hitler. The same order stated that: (1) Police security in the Occupied Eastern territories was the responsibility of Reichsführer-SS Himmler and Gestapo Chief Heinrich Müller;\(^50\) (2) Himmler, as Reichsführer-SS, was entitled to give orders to commissioners (kommisars); and (3) the SS and police commanders (SSPF) of each district were subordinate to the district governors.\(^51\)

Koch had too many important functions to show any real interest in the Białystok District, and soon appointed Magunia as deputy head of the civil administration to manage affairs in his stead. Magunia was president of the Union of Factory Workers and leader of the German Work Front (DAF) in East Prussia. The offices of the civil administration were situated in Białystok's Branicki Palace. To a large extent, ghetto life in Białystok was determined by the civil administration's economic and industrial divisions. The civil administration in the Białystok district was the highest executive division responsible for implementing policy toward the Jews, through the city governor and the superintendent of police (the ORPO or “ordinary” police). Dr. Brix, governor of the Tilsit Subdistrict (landkreis), was Magunia’s subordinate. When Magunia was appointed head of the Kiev District in February 1942, Brix took his place as head of the civil administration of the Białystok District, a position he held until the end of the German occupation.\(^52\)

As stated, under the Germans the Białystok District ceased to belong to the Soviet annexed area but became a separate administrative unit in its own right. The district, like other districts in East Prussia, was divided into subdistricts (Kreiskommissariate): Białystok, Grajewo, Grodno, Bielsk, Łomża, Wołkowysk, and Sokółka. The subdistricts were further divided into local authorities (Amtskommissariate). Unlike other districts, however, Białystok retained a degree of administrative autonomy.\(^53\)

The city of Białystok was also organized as a free and independent city. Its mayor (briefly Waldek Riegart, then Dr. Heinz Schwendowius, and finally Nikolaus), who also served as regional governor, was effectively administrator of the ghetto. At first, direct contacts existed among the Judenrat, the municipality, and the civil administration. In March 1942, however, the city governor appointed a special committee to supervise the economic administration of the ghetto, and to serve as a liaison with the Judenrat.\(^54\)

Until November 1942, Dr. Herbert Zimmermann served as head of this committee. The committee considered itself solely responsible for ghetto affairs and even supplied the Judenrat with a “letter of patronage” that was
displayed in Barash’s room. In a Judenrat session on March 22, 1942, Barash stated: “The ghetto committee has now been functioning for three weeks. In our opinion, it is not a bad thing. On the contrary, it may even be to our advantage. For the time being, however, its duties and rights have not yet been determined. It is run by extremely upright people, who will not tolerate any injustice toward us.”

In August 1941, the Ordnance Supervision Corps in Königsberg, which included the Quartermaster Corps, had set up an external division in Białystok, headed by Froese. Froese thus became responsible for the economic exploitation of the Białystok District—that is, for obtaining raw materials, setting up and running the factories, and exporting manufactured products to Germany.

Dr. A. Kanaris was appointed commander of the Security Police and SD (Inspecteur der Sicherheitspolizei—IdS) in East Prussia. Kanaris, who resided in Königsberg, made a habit of visiting the district ghettos. He was instrumental in determining the fate of the Jews in the Białystok ghetto and put the basic guidelines of the Reich Main Security Office into practice.

In August 1941, the doctor of law, Wilhelm Altenloh was appointed chief of police and SD in the Białystok District. Until April 1942, Altenloh carried out this function from Allenstein. Members of the Gestapo were brought in from Königsberg, Tilsit, and Allenstein to oversee the Gestapo in the Białystok District, which was run as a subsidiary of the Allenstein Gestapo. The first Gestapo commander of the Białystok District was Waldemar Macholl of Tilsit, and the deputy commander was Richard Dibus. After the Grodno area was annexed to the Białystok District in September 1941, another Gestapo unit was set up in Grodno, run by Heinz Errelis.

In April 1942, the Gestapo, Kripo [Kriminalpolizei], and SD in Białystok were united under a single framework. Altenloh was appointed district commander of the Sipo and SD (Kommandeur der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD or KdS), but continued using Allenstein as his base, while his deputy Dr. Theodor Paeffgen represented him in Białystok. When Paeffgen was posted to Berlin in late August 1942, Altenloh moved to Białystok on October 1, 1942, serving as KdS of the city until June 1943.

The new police staff was divided into departments based on the Reich Main Security Office, Department IV, headed by Macholl, was further subdivided into IVA (Department of Dissidents—Widerstand), run by Macholl, and IVB (Department of Jewish Affairs—Judenreferat), run by Fritz Friedel. In January 1943, after a personnel shuffle, Lothar Heimbach was appointed head of the Gestapo. Friedel was given direct responsibility for
the Białystok ghetto, and Barash had to provide him with a daily report on ghetto affairs. Important issues were addressed to Heimbach, while vital issues were addressed to Dr. Altenloh himself. The Jewish ghetto police were directly responsible to Heimbach, and the Jewish chief of police had direct contact with him. Macholl, an expert on local history, was appointed Heimbach’s deputy, and director of Department IVA. In March 1943, after the destruction of the Grodno ghetto, Errelis was transferred to Białystok, where he assumed responsibility for setting up and training the “Belorussian Unit.” The Schupo (Schutzpolizei, or Regular Police) were responsible for guarding the ghetto gates even after November 1942. It was usually possible to reach an agreement with members of the Schupo on issues such as smuggling and the like.

In November 1942, the ghettos of the Białystok District were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Sipo (Security Police) and the Gestapo. About the same time, Zimmermann was appointed Altenloh’s deputy, while Gerhard Klein took over his position as head of the ghetto administration. In June 1943, when Altenloh was posted to Paris, Zimmermann became KdS in his stead.60

Although administration of the ghetto was transferred from the military authorities to the German civil administration and finally to the Security Police and Gestapo, in practice all these agencies continued to intervene significantly in ghetto affairs. This situation was to a large extent due to the structural complexity of the German hierarchy and the frequent overlap of areas of authority. Ties between the ghetto and the German army’s Quartermaster Corps grew stronger throughout the occupation, due to the army’s dependency on ghetto production.

In March 1943, Peysekh Kaplan, a member of the Judenrat, wrote: “Relations with the authorities were complex due to the confusion that reigned within the governing institutions. The German military, civil, and police administrations, rather than constituting a single governmental body, comprise a plethora of governmental bodies, each with its own dictatorial and draconian demands. Frequently, the orders issued by one body contradict those issued by another, and it is difficult to know whom to obey.”61

Even after November 1942, when control of the ghetto was transferred to the Security Police, the duplication and overlap continued, never really ceasing until the destruction of the ghetto, in August–September 1943. Mordecai Tenenbaum (also Tenenbaum-Tamaroff), soon to become leader of the resistance in the Białystok ghetto, wrote the following in his diary on February 17, 1943: “There is a struggle going on within the Gestapo itself for control of the ghetto. Klein (“the good guy”) gave B. [Barash] a permit
without Friedel ("the bad guy," overseer of the aktion) knowing. Friedel also gave him a permit. Each ridicules and insults the other. . . . Our fate shall be determined on Friday, when General Kanres [Kanaris] returns. . . . He has become our ‘friend’ and in him lies our hope.”

The Establishment of the Ghetto

On July 26, 1941, the Judenrat announced that the military authorities in Bialystok had ordered the establishment of a Jewish ghetto in the city. When Barash, a founding member of the Judenrat, discovered that the German authorities had chosen the city’s most dilapidated area as the ghetto’s location, he tried to persuade them to change their minds. It made more sense, he argued, to set up the ghetto near the city’s factories. Thanks to his efforts, a better area was chosen, with wider streets and larger houses, some of which bordered on the Aryan side of the city.

After announcing the establishment of the ghetto, the Judenrat advised people to move in with relatives wherever possible. All home owners and tenants located within the ghetto perimeter had to inform the Judenrat of the size of their apartments and the number of people per room. The Judenrat’s Housing Department was then given a few days to arrange accommodations for Jews living outside the ghetto, who were ordered to register with the Judenrat: “No one may occupy a room without a permit from the Judenrat. Anyone who does so without the Judenrat’s permission, will be forcibly evicted and severely punished.” This was the Judenrat’s first test of its ability to impose its authority in a potentially explosive situation.

Poles living in the designated area were evicted, while Jews living outside the ghetto were required to leave their houses spotlessly clean and hand over the keys to the municipality. The transfer of the Jews to the ghetto was handled by the Judenrat’s Housing Department, under Moshe Schweyf. After serious deliberation, it was decided that each person would be allocated an area of three square meters. David Klementinowsky remembered: “Happy were those who already dwelt in the “blessed” quarter which subsequently became the ghetto. Anyone who had an acquaintance or relative there tried to appropriate a room and ensure a roof over his head. When it transpired that the ghetto area included some Polish streets . . . fierce competition broke out among the Jews for Polish apartments. Some Jews tried to effect an exchange of apartments with the Poles, even contracts with them with the intention of reclaiming their houses after the war.”

The transfer of Jews to the ghetto did not take long. Since wagons were
scarce and very expensive, people had to carry their personal belongings—mattresses, bedding, furniture, and dishes—through the streets themselves. Many Poles took advantage of the chaos to rob children of the few goods they were carrying. Srulke Kot described the situation: “Two or three families to a room. The rooms are divided by wooden or cloth partitions. *Batei midrash*, shops, schools—all vacant buildings—have been appropriated. Furniture has been stored in attics or left behind. The wealthy are able to hire wagons, for which they pay with pianos or beautiful items of furniture they no longer have any use for. . . . The Germans meanwhile photograph the event. Furniture and goods are strewn along the street. An infelicitous juxtaposition of neighbors causes heated arguments.”69 Felicja Nowak explained that her apartment, which had formerly housed seven people, now had to accommodate another nine. Partitions between families were improvised from furniture, and use of kitchen and bathroom was subject to a rotation system.70

The main gate to the ghetto, on Jurowiecka Street, was kept open throughout the ghetto’s existence, while another gate, on Kupiecka Street, was usually kept closed. Later a third gate was added on Czysta Street, near the railroad, by Liberation Square (Plac Wyzwolenia).71 Two German soldiers and two Jewish policemen stood guard by the main gate. The Germans ordered a wooden fence to be built round the ghetto 2.5 meters high, topped by half a meter of barbed wire. The Jews went out searching for planks, nails, and tools with which to erect the fence. The inhabitants of each street were ordered to build the part of the fence that was nearest to them. In some places the walls of houses adjoining the ghetto served as natural boundaries.72

On Friday August 1, 1941, five days after the order had been given to move into the ghetto, the gates were closed on its 43,000 Jewish inhabitants. The following day the Judenrat held its first session, with a full quorum of twenty-four members, as stipulated by the authorities.73 Engineer Ephraim Barash held the post of acting chairman of the Judenrat throughout the ghetto’s existence.

Ephraim Barash was born in 1892, in Wolkowysk, to a prestigious family of scholars and communal workers. His father, Shalom Barash, a successful businessman and industrialist, was popular with Jews and gentiles alike. A member of the city council, he had visited Palestine and was known as a devoted Zionist. Ephraim, one of seven children, received a Jewish and general education at Slonim High School and at the Białystok High School. He completed his higher education in Germany, where he qualified as a mechanical engineer. Even in his youth he was active in pub-
lic life, and he was a member of the Jewish Defense Organization in Wołówysk. He was a Zionist, like his father, and belonged to the General Zionists’ youth movement. During the First World War, he moved with his mother and sisters to Leningrad and to Nizni-Novogrod, where he married Yocheved, a dentist, who was active in the General Zionists’ women’s organization and in various relief organizations. When he returned to Wołówysk, he was elected to the city council, with the backing of local Jewish dignitaries. Aware that financial help was necessary in order to revive the city’s ailing economy, he met with Yitzhak Gitterman, the representative of the Joint Distribution Committee, in 1922 in Warsaw, to discuss the establishment of a philanthropic fund in Wołówysk.

In 1926, Barash opened a Jewish commercial cooperative bank in Wołówysk, after raising the necessary capital, $1,000 of which was provided by him and his father. In time, the bank became a recognized and even prestigious financial institution, with branches throughout the country. In the early 1930s, Barash served on the Wołówysk municipal council, was president of the Jewish Commercial Bank, sat on the Jewish community board, was chairman of the local Zionist Organization and president of Zionist foundations, as well as holding senior positions in many other institutions. His extraordinary organizational ability enhanced his status and earned him the respect of all strata of Jewish society in the city.

In 1934, Barash and his family moved to Białystok at the invitation of the Białystok Jewish community council. In Białystok he was soon appointed director of the Jewish community council, in recognition of his devoted efforts to improve the workers’ lot. That in the second half of the 1930s the Białystok Jewish community became the center of Jewish public life in the entire district was due largely to Barash’s efforts.

Barash brought up his children in a Hebrew and Zionist spirit. His eldest son, Isaac, emigrated to Palestine in 1935 after being granted an immigration “certificate” by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Isaac apparently died from an illness while serving in the Jewish Brigade.74

The Early Days of the Judenrat

The Judenrat was headed by Rabbi Gedalyah Rosenman, its chairman, and Ephraim Barash, its acting chairman. Other important board members were Glikson (former director of the Businessmen’s Association), head of technical operations in the ghetto, Sobotnik, Limon, and Goldberg. The rest of the Judenrat comprised Yaakov Lipshitz (former president of the
Businessmen’s Association), Nahman Goldfarb, Shmuel Poniansky (a member of the Mizrahi), Pesah Melnitzki (former head of the Weavers’ Union), Peysekh Kaplan (former editor of *Unzer Lebn*), Yitzhak Marcus (former head of the voluntary fire brigade), Dr. Moshe Katzenelson (former member of the city council), Mordechai Rubinstein (a Bund leader and former principal of the Mendel School), Shmuel Polonsky (a long-standing member of the Great Synagogue board), Mordechai Chmielnik (a leader of Poalei Zion–SS), Rabbi Baruch Eliyahu Halpern (a member of the Mizrahi), Rabbi Pinhas Eisenstadt, Avraham Tiktin (former owner of a transportation firm), Moshe Schweyf, Zvi Wieder (former trade union leader), Abba Furman, and Dr. Menahem Mendel Kaplan. Dr. Franczesca Horowitz was the Judenrat’s chief secretary while Raphael Gutman, its registrar, kept a faithful record of minutes in Yiddish.75

At its first session on August 2, 1941, the Judenrat set up thirteen departments to run its affairs. As the Judenrat’s activities expanded, new departments were set up to handle the additional work.76 In due course, various committees affiliated with the departments also came into being. These were the Registrations Committee, the Budget Committee, the Self-Help Committee, the Information Committee, and the Sanitation Committee. As well as departments and committees, there were also divisions affiliated with the departments. These were the Tax Division (also known as the Tax Department or Tax Bureau), the Court, the Criminal Court, the Furniture and Raw Materials Division, the Gardening Division, and the Latrine Division.77

The Judenrat was located at 32 Kupiecka Street, in a three-story building that had formerly been used as an old-age home. Most departments were housed in this building, each in its own office. The Traffic Department, set up in order to solve the ghetto’s transport problems, was moved from the Judenrat building to 4 Kupiecka Street. Under the Germans, all motorized vehicles had been confiscated and all wagons owned by Jews impounded. The ghetto’s Works Department used these wagons to bring goods into the ghetto, remove garbage from the ghetto, or for any other purpose determined by the Germans. There were also a number of institutions that were affiliated with the Judenrat, such as hospitals, orphanages, prisons, bathhouses, pharmacies, schools, parks, shops, stables, and children’s clinics, Linat Hazedek, the bakery, a children’s playground for children ages seven and under, an old-age home, storehouses, a dental laboratory, a clinic, a prison cell in the basement of the Judenrat building, an ice cellar, workshops, a first-aid clinic, a market, and five Jewish police stations.78

Initially, the Judenrat focused mainly on providing the quotas of work-
ers stipulated by the Germans and on regulating and improving the conditions under which the Jews lived. Even during its first sessions, members of the Judenrat spoke of the need to open soup kitchens and provide accommodations for those who were still homeless. A proposal was put forward to approach the Joint Distribution Committee, via contacts in Switzerland, for help. In one of these early sessions, Yitzhak Marcus, chief superintendent of the ghetto’s Jewish police force, spoke of the need for strict hygiene, while Dr. Holandersky proposed spraying places with chlorine where necessary.79

One of the Judenrat’s main concerns was to provide food and housing for the ghetto population. On August 20, Goldberg proudly announced that despite difficulties, almost 95 percent of the ghetto’s Jews had been provided with permanent housing.80 The Judenrat, aware that most Jews were unable to improve their lot, did everything it could to make life bearable for them. Its insistence on law and order, on cleanliness in the home and in the streets, and on housing, food, and medication for all, endeared it to the citizens from the start.

In addition to trying to alleviate hardship in the days following the German occupation, the Judenrat tried to promote the work ethic by advertising for plasterers, carpenters, polishers, painters, locksmiths, blacksmiths, car technicians, radio technicians, and simple laborers. Skilled laborers working outside the city were issued special passes.81 The Judenrat’s emphasis on the importance of work was based on two assumptions: first, that work was a passport to safety, and second, that work would supply the minimum requirements for survival under occupation conditions.

At a session of department heads on August 20, Shmuel Finkel, head of the Ghetto Industry Department, announced that he had managed to obtain the Germans’ consent to open the Chimtrod factory, a chemical plant that had operated during the Soviet occupation. He also announced the opening of a furniture factory and a tailoring workshop inside the ghetto. Finkel stressed that the raw materials for these factories would come not only from the ghetto but from the entire city, and that the employees of these factories would be Jewish.82 A few days later, at the Judenrat’s session of August 28, Finkel proudly announced:

1. We have opened a furniture factory, which is currently employing 57 workers, and which shall ultimately employ a total of 250 workers.
2. Likewise, we have opened a tailoring workshop, which is currently employing 22 tailors, and will employ a further 20 . . .
3. A milliners’ workshop has been opened.
4. Chimtrod, the chemical factory, has been reopened. It already has 33 workers. Ferber’s chemical factory has been taken over by the Judenrat.83

At the request of the German Ministry of Labor, the Judenrat drew up a list of all skilled laborers and artisans in the ghetto, and in early September 1941, it introduced sewing and carpentry courses.84 The Judenrat’s initiative in opening up factories in the ghetto shows that it not only recognized the value of Jewish labor but took practical steps to turn it to the advantage of the Jews themselves. The Judenrat’s attempt to balance the needs of the ghetto population against the needs of the Germans formed the basis of its policy throughout the ghetto’s existence.

During the weeks following the establishment of the ghetto, the Judenrat began organizing Jewish life in the ghetto, attempting to normalize life as far as possible under the harsh occupation conditions. News of the annihilation of Jews in the East had not yet filtered through to the ghetto. Despite the trauma the Jews underwent in the early days of the German occupation, the relative calm that ensued created the illusion that the worst was over.

**The Deportation to Pruzhany**

Rabbi Rosenman’s opening speech at the Judenrat session of September 12, 1941, referred to the Germans’ intentions to evacuate some of the ghetto’s population in the near future. At the same session, Barash also stated that he believed there was a plan “to evacuate the entire Jewish population from Białystok.”85 These fears were based on a written order handed to the Judenrat the previous day (September 11, 1941), concerning the evacuation of Jews from Białystok to the town of Pruzhany, about 100 kilometers south. In actual fact, members of the Judenrat had known for two weeks that something was afoot. At a Judenrat session of August 28, Barash had even alluded to the fact “that unskilled laborers would soon be taken to work.”86 However, most other members of the Judenrat had taken this comment to refer to labor quotas rather than to a large-scale evacuation of Jews from the ghetto.

Evidently, the German authorities were displeased with the size of the Białystok ghetto, which in August 1941 had some 43,000 residents. As the largest ghetto in the district, it had twice as many inhabitants as the Grodno ghetto, the second largest ghetto in the district. Therefore, the Germans de-
cided to decrease the number of Jews in the Bialystok ghetto by transferring some of them to another ghetto. When the Judenrat met on September 12, Barash had no doubt concerning the impending evacuation. The Germans had already informed him that children and the frail would be transported in motor vehicles, to enable them to take some luggage and food with them. However, no member of the board had any idea of the nature or scope of the operation. The pessimists believed that the Germans intended to evacuate the entire ghetto population, while the optimists hoped that the operation would be limited to a few thousand people.87 Barash added that although the Judenrat would do everything within its power to persuade the Germans to abandon, or at least modify, their plans, steps would be taken to prepare for the evacuation, just in case. He read out loud a letter from the civil administration providing details of the evacuation. The letter gave instructions for the Judenrat to submit a list of 1,000 people each day. The unskilled and the unemployed would be the first to be evacuated. A special committee, headed by Goldberg, was set up to handle the evacuation. After lengthy and painful deliberation, the committee decided to draw up the list of evacuees in alphabetical order. The list would not include skilled laborers, Judenrat members, and employees, or members of the Jewish police and fire brigade. The Judenrat also decided, with the authorities’ permission, to send Barash and Limon to Pruzhany, to facilitate the absorption of the new arrivals from the Bialystok ghetto.88

Rumors of the evacuation spread through the ghetto like wildfire. Some derived comfort from the argument that the evacuation was the Germans’ response to overcrowding in the ghetto, fearing the spread of diseases and epidemics. They quoted figures of 13,000 Jews, adding that Barash “was trying to bribe the officials to revoke the order, but had only managed to get the numbers down to 10,000.”89 Rumor also had it that the Judenrat lists targeted mainly the families of the unemployed and unskilled. Srulke Kot described the scene: “The streets near the Judenrat are black with people. Suddenly all of them are skilled laborers . . . all are seeking work outside the ghetto.”90 A work permit from the Judenrat or police cost $10–50, an exorbitant amount in those days.91 Some, believing that conditions would be better in Pruzhany, asked to be placed first on the list.92 They were, however, the exceptions. Once the Judenrat announced that the first to be evacuated would be the poor and the homeless, most people in these categories tried their hardest to elude their plight. Many were “Sabbath widows” and their families or those whose houses and possessions had been burned down on the first day of the German occupation.
On September 17, the Judenrat published the order it had received the previous day from the chief of police, as follows:

In pursuance of my order of September 11, 1941, below are my instructions for the evacuation of Jews from Bialystok to Pruzhany:

1. The evacuation shall begin on (Thursday) September 18, 1941.
2. Trucks shall be made available [for the evacuees] for the transfer.
3. Each day, the names of the Jews who are to be evacuated on that day shall be underlined in red, from a list that is to be submitted to me each day, according to my written order of September 11, 1941. . . .
4. Jews whose names are underlined in red, shall line up at 6:00 a.m. on the specified day, on the eastern side of Fabryczna Street, ready for the transport.
5. Those to be transported may take with them only personal items, such as clothes, underwear, and bedding. Furniture and other large items are forbidden.
6. During the transport, Fabryczna Street will be closed to everyone, except for a few members of the Jewish Police.
7. The Judenrat shall be responsible for implementing the evacuation, according to the specified schedule.
8. All apartments and houses must be cleaned and tidied up after they have been vacated. Furniture and other items must not be removed.
9. The penalty for infringement of the above instructions shall be forced labor.93

On the eve of Rosh Hashana, the Judenrat put up notices ordering those underlined in red on the list to report the following morning to Fabryczna Street. The German authorities made sure orders were obeyed with ruthless efficiency. Jews were pulled out of their homes in the bitter frost (which had begun earlier than usual that year) and were hustled, with their meager possessions, to the ghetto gate on Fabryczna Street. Those who resisted were forcibly evicted by the Jewish police.94 Srulke Kot wrote in his memoirs:

Men walk through the streets, bent double under their bundles. It is impossible to identify them. The only sounds are groans, and the crackling of snow underfoot. In Fabryczna Street . . . they lay down their bundles, and await instructions. The street is full of the old and the sick, and babies covered in snow. People knock their feet together in an attempt to keep warm. You can hear the sighs of the women as they recite the psalms, and the querulous
tones of mothers trying to calm their children. These sounds are interspersed with blows and yells by the Germans.95

Although some Jews claimed they were skilled laborers in a last-minute attempt to escape the deportation, only those approved by the Judenrat were released. All others were ordered onto the waiting trucks.96

A Judenrat official who accompanied the first group of 500 evacuees to Pruzhany, returned the following day with depressing news about the way they had been treated.97 At a session called by some Judenrat members on September 18, after the start of the deportation, the Judenrat was taken to task for its poor handling of the evacuation: it had allowed errors to creep into the list of deportees, it had failed to keep the ghetto residents properly informed, and it had allowed some of the ghetto’s finest people to be taken away. Although Barash was not present at the meeting, Goldberg, who was, argued in the Judenrat’s defense that it was doing its utmost on behalf of the ghetto’s Jews.98 In another session two days later, Barash declared: “We are powerless. Although we asked permission to organize the evacuation more efficiently, and thereby reduce the possibility of error, we were ordered to submit the lists [each day] at 8:00 a.m. We were desperate. Inevitably, there were cases of fraud. The lists have been tampered with, documents have been forged.”99

Quite possibly Barash would have organized the evacuation differently had he been given the chance. However, these were still the early days of the civil administration, and Barash had not had sufficient time to build a working relationship with the authorities. Attempts by Judenrat members and employees to prevent the evacuation of relatives and friends only created more friction. If Barash failed to restore order, it was almost certainly because he felt afraid of making matters worse.

Meanwhile, the deportation continued according to plan. On the way to Pruzhany, the evacuees were ordered off the trucks and into huts for “inspection.” During the “inspection,” the Germans confiscated all valuables. In the Judenrat session of September 24, Barash reported that the authorities had informed him that they had amassed a small fortune.100

The evacuation lasted about a month, ending officially on October 19. A total of 10,000 Jews were transferred to Pruzhany, half of them from Białystok,101 and the remainder from Kamieniec, Hajnówka, Narew, and twenty other localities.102 It is not clear whether the authorities had intended sending more people prior to Barash’s intervention. Before the arrival of the evacuees, there had been some 4,000 Jews living in Pruzhany.

The evacuees were housed in peasants’ huts, which had been stripped
bare. About half the deportees from Białystok were sick and destitute and depended on others for their survival. The Judenrat in Pruzhany, unable to help these deportees, sent a delegation to Białystok asking for help. Barash decided to donate an immediate sum of 100,000 rubles and a monthly sum of 50,000 rubles (about 5,000 Reichsmark) to help the refugees. Until November 1942, Schein, a member of the Pruzhany Judenrat, traveled to Białystok once a month to collect the remittance and to bring letters and money from relatives in Białystok to the evacuees in Pruzhany.103

Jews who had failed to report for deportation were struck off the registry of ghetto residents. As illegal residents, they were not issued food cards, and they wandered around the ghetto for many weeks, jobless and homeless. Most of them were taken in by relatives or acquaintances who took pity on them. Some earned a living through smuggling and other illegal activities. Their only chance of surviving was by finding work outside the ghetto for which no papers were required.104

From early 1942, many of the Pruzhany deportees began returning to Białystok, slipping back into the ghetto among ghetto residents returning from work on the so-called Aryan side. However, when they reached their homes, they found them occupied by others. In order to qualify as refugees and escape discovery, they adopted different surnames and claimed to have arrived from other places. The return of the deportees to Białystok did not escape the Germans’ vigilant eyes. The Judenrat was warned to be on the lookout for saboteurs and to advise the returnees that they would be severely punished, by death if necessary. In a Judenrat session on February 2, 1942, the Judenrat decided to publish a notice warning the evacuees “not to return to Białystok illegally, since both the Judenrat and the authorities would adopt severe sanctions against them.”105 Two day later, the Judenrat put out the following notice to ghetto residents: “It has come to our notice that Jewish residents of Białystok who were evacuated to Pruzhany, have found their way back to Białystok. These returnees will not be registered, will not receive bread or work cards, and as illegal flotsam, may expect the heaviest penalties from the German authorities. Anyone harboring these returnees shall likewise be punished. The returnees must leave Białystok forthwith.”106

In the space of a few months, about 1,500 deportees returned to Białystok, in the belief that anything was better than conditions in Pruzhany. Although initially their plight was deplorable, it improved in time, thanks to the Judenrat’s intercession with the Germans. As a result, the Germans modified their policy toward the deportees, and they were soon absorbed into ghetto life.107
On November 30, 1941, Rabbi Dr. Rosenman sent an official document in the name of the Białystok Judenrat to the town of Brody, concerning the Rivkind family. Menahem (Munya) Rivkind, a wealthy industrialist, had left Białystok for Brody with his family shortly after the Russian annexation, taking his parents and sister with him. Rivkind was married to Lunya, Rosenman's daughter. After the city was occupied by the Germans, the Rivkind family wished to return to Białystok. German documents show that from August 1941 on, correspondence among the various authorities attempted to authorize the Rivkinds' return to Białystok. Since Brody was part of Eastern Galicia, it was subject to the laws of the Generalgouvernement, while Białystok was part of the Reich and subject to its laws. The transition from one administrative authority to the other was tantamount to moving from one country to another. Dr. Rosenman, who was involved in the attempt to obtain permits for his son-in-law and family, sent a document to Brody stating that the “Białystok Judenrat certifies that the members of the Rivkind family are permanent residents of Białystok, and that their return to Białystok would be advantageous due to their professional expertise.” The document reached its destination and was signed by a certified notary. The available documentation indicates that the exchange of correspondence between Brody and Białystok continued throughout the German occupation, and sheds light on the subsequent fate of the Rivkind family.

Conclusion

The deportation to Pruzhany left a blot on the Judenrat’s record and soured relationships between it and the ghetto public. As if the victimization of the poor and defenseless were not enough, the privileges and connections that members of the Judenrat and their associates enjoyed were revealed in all their ugliness. Even supposing the Judenrat had no choice but to do as told, ultimately it still had the power to decide who would be sent and it could have drawn up a fairer list of evacuees. Its discrimination against the weaker sectors of the population aroused the latter’s wrath. At the very least, one would have expected Barash to condemn the corruption and bribery that were rife and punish Judenrat employees who exploited the situation to their own advantage. One may assume that Barash’s main intention at the time was to win the authorities’ approval, even if this meant losing face with the Jewish community. It should also be remembered that the deportation took place shortly after the ghetto’s establishment, when
Barash was still anxious to establish his reputation with the Germans. For him, the deportation to Pruzhany was a test of his ability to impose his authority on the Jews while simultaneously meeting the requirements of the German authorities.

Barash was aware of the criticism leveled against him following the evacuation. In a meeting of Judenrat members and officials on November 2, 1941, four months after the Germans entered the city, Barash summarized the period as follows: “What was done through us history shall tell,” and he went on to list the Judenrat’s achievements: (1) the community had succeeded in paying only part of the ransom demanded by the Germans; (2) the subsequent ransom had been completely waived; (3) the area originally assigned for the ghetto had been abandoned in favor of a superior location; (4) only 4,500 people had been deported to Pruzhany, and (5) the Germans’ request for a list of the intelligentsia had been revoked. “All this has been achieved thanks to our good relations with the authorities, after arduous and persistent efforts.” In the same speech, Barash expressed his sorrow at the ghetto’s anger with the Judenrat, which he took as a personal affront, perhaps aware of his part in the tragedy. In an attempt to boost the morale of his Judenrat colleagues, he added: “The Judenrat acts as a kind of shield that protects the ghetto from trouble. However, the ghetto does not behave toward the Judenrat as it deserves. We are not asking for gratitude, since our actions are dictated by conscience. But at the very least, we do not deserve the curses and slander that are being leveled at us. Mistakes have been made, but we are seeking to rectify them.”

The first months of ghetto life were particularly difficult, and no doubt they taught Barash many harsh lessons. Barash’s great achievement was gaining the trust of the Germans. Once this was achieved, he put all his efforts into improving the living conditions of the ghetto Jews. By so doing, he hoped to enlist their sympathy and secure their recognition of him as a leader who was concerned first and foremost to ensure their survival during those troubled times, which had only just begun.
Chapter 4

The Period of Calm, November 1941–November 1942

A close scrutiny of the material written during the year between November 1941 and November 1942 provides a fairly clear picture of daily life in the Białystok ghetto. If we add to this the written and oral accounts of the few who survived, we see that life in the Białystok ghetto, as in other ghettos, was determined largely by the Judenrat. After the evacuation to Pružany, Ephraim Barash aimed to normalize ghetto life and to appease the German authorities, whose pressure on the ghetto residents increased daily. As acting chairman of the Judenrat, he supervised the Judenrat departments in the knowledge that the Judenrat’s functions were much more than mere municipal functions. At a very early stage, the Judenrat leadership realized that the ghetto’s existence depended primarily on (1) effective internal organization, including payment of taxes, and (2) full employment, in coordination with the German officials responsible for the Reich’s economy. “Those who fail to report for work will eventually be destroyed” said Sokolski at the Judenrat session of November 9, 1941.1

The Judenrat

The majority of Judenrat officials were members of the intelligentsia who found it hard to make ends meet under ghetto conditions. Most of them were unwilling to work outside the ghetto, for fear of being kidnapped like the sixty Jews (including one of Barash’s sons) who had been kidnapped several days after the establishment of the ghetto and were never heard of again.2 For them, working as Judenrat officials seemed the lesser of two evils. In general, there was a great demand for work in the Judenrat, not only because Judenrat employees enjoyed a certain immunity (as in the Pružany evacuation) but also because they received special privileges in
lieu of salaries. Barash, in an attempt at even-handedness, ordered that preference be given to those who did not have relatives in the Judenrat. In this way, he reasoned, the jobs would be divided fairly among the ghetto residents, and many families would have a representative within the Judenrat institutions.3

Sources indicate that the number of Judenrat employees grew from month to month. At a meeting of department directors on January 18, 1942, Barash announced that the number of officials (1,600) was three times the requisite number. By June 1942, this number had grown to 4,000.4 Barash was extremely critical of nepotism on the part of department directors: “Barash declared that since there are three times more Judenrat officials than necessary . . . they cannot be paid salaries,” stated the minutes of the January 18 session.5

Indeed, the Judenrat officials were not paid a fixed salary but instead were allotted half a kilogram of bread per day (in the summer of 1942, this was reduced to 370 grams per day). Department heads and senior officials received double rations of bread until November 1942, when the sheer profusion of officials made it necessary to cut back the allocation to 300 grams per day. From time to time, the officials received vouchers for jam, skimpy sausages, meat (very occasionally), buckwheat, various types of legumes, soap, laundry soap, and (very occasionally) cigarettes at reduced prices. Officials who did not eat non-kosher meat were given extra vouchers for goods such as flour or oil. Judenrat employees also received large amounts of coal in the autumn of 1941 and the winter of 1942. In the summer of 1942, when ghetto life had begun to normalize, large amounts of legumes, vegetables, meat, and potatoes were allocated at more regular intervals. Note that the 8,600 or so industrial workers employed in the Judenrat’s factories in the summer of 1942 were also considered Judenrat employees. The factories’ important contribution to the ghetto’s economy and stability also led to a constant rise in the number of factory workers. Although most workers had to pay for foodstuffs, the very poor received food and shoes for free.6

In the spring and summer of 1942, the Judenrat began paying employees a salary. In 1942, in honor of Passover, department heads were given a bonus of 75 Reichsmarks, Judenrat officials 50 Reichsmarks, and other employees 30 Reichsmarks. Certain categories of workers, such as policemen, house managers, and bakery supervisors were given extra perks. Teachers were paid a salary of 8 Reichsmarks per hour. In the Judenrat factories, skilled workers were paid a higher salary than nonskilled workers.7 All in all, being a Judenrat employee undoubtedly conferred certain advantages.
Anyone fortunate enough to be the bearer of an employee card enjoyed a certain immunity, was exempt from forced labor, and generally had a greater chance of surviving.

Right from the start, during the evacuation to Pruzhany, the integrity of the Judenrat officials was put to the test and found to be wanting. Judenrat officials were guilty of accepting bribes, stealing lists of potential evacuees, forging documents, and other offenses. At some point, the Judenrat leadership decided to put an end to this corruption and set up a special comptroller’s committee, led by Judenrat member Yaakov Lipshitz, to investigate the various departments and report its findings. The committee found that with a few exceptions, most Judenrat employees adhered to the accepted criteria of public behavior, as determined by the Judenrat.

After the first few months of the German occupation, the economic situation in the ghetto seemed to be stabilizing. This situation lasted until November 1942, when the ghetto was sealed.

The Housing Department

The Judenrat’s Housing Department dealt with the housing needs of the ghetto population. As the Judenrat’s status consolidated, it began laying down procedures for dealing with the ghetto’s property and assets. All houses in the ghetto became Judenrat property. Private property ceased to exist, and key-money transactions or house exchanges were not allowed without the Housing Department’s permission. Anyone wishing to move had to obtain a permit from the Housing Department. The ghetto residents continuously besieged the Housing Department with complaints, and on several occasions the Judenrat threatened that “any action taken without the Housing Department’s permission will not be approved. . . . Residents are hereby ordered to obey this instruction for their own good.” The inspectors were Moshe Wissotzky, former chairman of the Small Businessmen’s Union in Bialystok and editor of the weekly Bialystoker Shtime; Aaron Albek, a well-known cultural activist and former publisher of the journal Dos Naye Lebn; and Asher Trosnowitz, former editor of the Bialystoker Yidisher Kuryer.

Officially, all ghetto residents were tenants who paid rent to the Judenrat. A special Housing Department division was responsible for keeping the houses and apartments in good repair. House managers were appointed to distribute bread coupons, collect taxes, and acquaint tenants with Judenrat instructions. Three or four Housing Department inspectors oversaw the operation of the house managers.
Assisting the house managers were housing committees, set up by the Judenrat to facilitate the distribution of bread coupons. To ensure a regular supply of bread, the Judenrat carried out a population census. Each house elected its own housing committee, comprising a chairman, secretary, and treasurer. The committee drew up a list of tenants for the house manager, which formed the basis for the allocation of bread coupons by the Judenrat. The house managers, as Judenrat officials, were allowed to attend special Judenrat meetings on administrative matters. They were also responsible for ensuring cleanliness in the yards and streets, a task they entrusted to janitors, who were officially recognized by the Judenrat. The janitors, usually elderly people, were provided with a special card and armband, and were paid by the tenants, not by the Judenrat. The system, however, had its drawbacks, as Moshe Schwyf, head of the Housing Department, stated in a session of department directors on January 16, 1942: “The janitors are too old, the cleaning utensils inadequate, and refuse collection erratic.”

All “newcomers” to the ghetto (returnees from Pruzhany and refugees fleeing aktionen in other places) had first to register with the Judenrat. The German authorities threatened punishment if “even one person in the ghetto was not registered.” The Judenrat therefore ordered the housing committees and house managers to ensure that all tenants were registered forthwith, otherwise “both the illegal tenants and their hosts will be severely penalized.”

For several months, the Judenrat lived in constant fear that the ghetto would be split in two. Barash informed board members on November 8, 1941, that the authorities, afraid of an epidemic, had decided to set up a new ghetto near Bema Street, for about 6,000 skilled workers. Evidently the Germans, at the height of their campaign for the destruction of eastern European Jewry, were displeased with the large size of the Białystok ghetto—the largest in the district. Indeed, the evacuation to Pruzhany had been devised as a means of reducing the size of the ghetto population. After the evacuation, however, even though Barash minimized the official figures, the German considered them excessive. Barash almost certainly exploited the fact that the Germans were not in the habit of carrying out population censuses by reporting a population of 35,000 instead of 41,000, so as to give the impression that the ghetto was smaller than it was.

The idea of splitting up the ghetto, after being deliberated for several months, was finally rejected in mid-1942, when the Germans realized that it was in their own interests to preserve the status quo. However, the anxiety provoked by the uncertainty of the ghetto’s fate was one of the reasons...
why the Judenrat decided to set up a Population Registration Department. Barash argued that the registration of ghetto residents would not only enable the Judenrat to keep a check on tax collection and work attendance (both of which were seen as guarantees for survival), but would prove to the Germans that even a relatively large population could be well organized.

The Population Registration Department, headed by Dr. Bergman, was situated in a small room on the third floor of the Judenrat building. The department, with its attendant committees and house managers, distributed bread coupons and drew up lists of the ghetto population, as requested by the Germans. In April 1942, when Barash warned that “the size of the Białystok ghetto could have disastrous consequences,” the Registration Department was allowed to put pressure on “illegal” tenants. Although there were no known cases of forcible eviction from the ghetto, Barash was reluctant to accept newcomers, both because they added to the already large population and because their stories of atrocities induced panic among the ghetto residents. However, when Barash raised the issue for deliberation by the Judenrat in late November 1941, Rabbi Gedalyah Rosenman came out strongly against him: “From a Jewish ethical point of view, the question does not even arise. We are living in abnormal times. It will be no great tragedy if we absorb a few thousand more people. . . . How can we turn the wretched refugees away. . . . Surely we owe it to History!” Rabbi Rosenman’s appeal to Jewish compassion evidently struck a chord among members of the Judenrat. And Barash’s respect for the rabbi’s competence to rule on life-and-death matters prevented him from translating his views into action. Nevertheless, he used every opportunity to express his own views on the matter.

The Finance Department

Even before the establishment of the ghetto, the military authorities demanded a high tax in what was to become a systematic policy toward the Jews. The issue of taxation soon became a major issue on the Judenrat’s agenda. The Judenrat, through its Finance Department, was responsible for assessing tax rates, collecting the taxes (sometimes by coercion), and delivering them to the Germans. Some of the money collected was set aside for Judenrat expenses, such as welfare projects. In the Judenrat session of Saturday November 1, 1941, Rabbi Rosenman emphasized the serious implications of the Judenrat’s enormous financial burden for the ghetto population. Barash took the opportunity to announce that the city governor had
also demanded payment of a poll tax and housing rates for the coming trimester—120 rubles per person (5 million rubles in total) to be paid within two weeks (i.e., 700,000–800,000 rubles every three days). Failure to deliver this sum on time would have serious consequences. “They may even decide to shoot us first, and then the whole population,” warned Barash at the meeting.22

Dov Sobotnik, a member of Yehiel’s Beit Hamidrash famous for his extraordinary talmudic erudition, was appointed head of the Judenrat’s Finance Department. Sobotnik had both an extraordinary financial acumen and an unusual ability in meeting the Germans’ financial demands and balancing the ghetto’s budget.23

Although at the start of the German occupation, the Judenrat’s revenue was based on gold reserves and general tax collection,24 from early 1942, a series of new taxes were legislated. These included three types of direct taxes:

1. Individual taxes (an extremely high income tax). This tax was the Judenrat’s main source of income. The tax was based on assessments drawn up by Finance Department officials, notarized declarations, or employers’ affidavits.25

2. General taxes. These taxes included a basic housing tax (starting at 20 pfennigs a month, rising in January 1942 to 1.50 Reichsmarks a month, and dropping in May 1942 to 1.30 Reichsmarks a month); a poll tax, or rent for residential and commercial buildings (calculated according to the number of square meters per person or size of business); and a hygiene tax for sanitation purposes.26

3. Various dues and fees. These included trade and industrial licenses, renewable every six months. All documents issued by the Judenrat were taxed, and use of Judenrat institutions, such as the bathhouse, the slaughterhouse, hospitals, and pharmacies were conditional on payment of a fee.27

In addition, there were many indirect taxes. Electricity, water, and bread were assessed at 10 percent of the official price. In time, a duty of 5 pfennigs per kilogram of bread was introduced, as well as similar duties on other goods provided by the Judenrat. Electricity and water rates were later raised to 20 percent. Customers were not issued with individual bills. Instead, the bills were sent to the Judenrat, which then issued each family with a bill. The Judenrat was allowed only a short period of time in which to pay up and therefore had to charge interest on late payments. After the Germans entered the ghetto, they raised the water and electricity rates, and the Judenrat had to tax the wealthier Jews in order to cover the costs. After pro-
tracted negotiations, Barash managed to persuade the authorities to halve the water and electricity rates, thereby bringing them in line with the official rates levied on the Poles. Use of water and electricity was restricted, and the prices remained constant throughout the German occupation.²⁸

The instability of ghetto life made it impossible for the Judenrat to work out a regular budget. In a session held by the heads of five Judenrat departments on January 16, 1942, Sobotnik ascribed the lack of a budget to the fact that “so far we have not had a minute’s peace, and have been unable to get into a work routine.”²⁹ As the socioeconomic hierarchy of the Jews in the ghetto changed, the Finance Department found it hard to establish fair criteria for tax collection. Social distinctions, which under the Soviets had already become blurred, became even more indistinct in the ghetto, and an affluent class as such no longer existed. The highest income earners in the ghetto were smugglers and blackmarketeers, most of whom had previously had no fixed income and some of whom had even been members of the underworld. Another group of high earners were the physically strong who were prepared to undertake any kind of hard work, from wagon driving to porterage and refuse collection. In short, those who knew how to exploit the new ghetto conditions earned a good salary, and they swiftly climbed to the top of the economic ladder.³⁰

In early November 1941, the Judenrat began collecting taxes from the public. Sobotnik made it his business to warn all ghetto residents that paying electricity and water rates were incumbent upon all citizens without exception. Despite his efforts, a considerable number of people refused to pay. The Judenrat, which saw tax evasion as a threat to the entire ghetto, warned it would report the offenders to the Germans. It is not surprising, therefore, that the ghetto residents grew to hate the Finance Department officials, as Raphael Reizner so eloquently described. Tax evaders usually ended up paying after spending a day or two in jail.³¹

One of the reasons why the Judenrat was so strict about payment of taxes was that these constituted its only regular source of income. Other sources of income were occasional contributions, “donations” that had been given by or extracted from the ghetto’s rich, the assets of Jews who had been deported or killed, and the wages of laborers employed outside the ghetto, which the Judenrat retained either fully or in part. Naturally, none of these sources of income was reliable.

The Judenrat’s intransigence on the matter of tax payments meant that it sometimes ended up with a surplus, which was used to finance the activities of the various departments and to pay for extraordinary expenses. Although some might object that the Judenrat was too intransigent in the
matter of taxation, it was undoubtedly its very intransigence that prevented a state of anarchy.

The Labor Department

Even before the gates of the ghetto were closed, the authorities demanded that the Judenrat provide them with a quota of workers. The quotas set by the Germans immediately after the occupation began were so high that the Labor Department found it hard to meet them, both because of time constraints and because of widespread reluctance on the part of the ghetto residents to work outside the ghetto. Workers returning to the ghetto reported that at the tiniest slipup they were beaten, forced to work overtime, made to carry loads that were far too heavy for them, and taken in wagons to remote areas where they were arbitrarily abused. The Germans, for their part, constantly threatened the Judenrat with sanctions. The Judenrat’s failure to meet the German’s demands was not for lack of trying. As stated, the Judenrat considered Jewish labor essential to the ghetto’s survival, and even before the authorities laid down the law it sent more than 2,000 workers each day to work outside the ghetto.32

For a long period, the Judenrat’s Labor Department was incapable of meeting the authorities’ demands. Avraham Limon, the Labor Department’s first director, resigned in frustration and despair. His successors (Shmuel Polonsky and Diamant) did not fare much better.33 The issue of labor recruitment figured high on the Judenrat’s agenda. Because the Judenrat saw Jewish labor as a prerequisite for the ghetto’s survival, it invested most of its energy into finding solutions to this thorny problem.

Brix, head of the civil administration in the Bialystok District, officially issued the order requiring all residents ages 15 to 60 to register for forced labor, on April 1, 1942.34 However, long before that, the German authorities had stressed the need for Jewish labor, and their plans to set up another ghetto may even have been for this purpose.

Despite the emphasis given labor recruitment, Barash was unable to explain to the authorities why he had failed “to find the requisite 4,000–5000 workers out of a total ghetto population of 35,000.”35 In an attempt to remedy matters, the Judenrat decided, on November 22, 1941, to streamline the Labor Department by lending it its most gifted personnel. It likewise decided to introduce physical punishment for offenders, which the Jewish police was responsible for enforcing. Srulke Kot, in his memoirs, wrote that anyone who was given twenty lashes for failing to report for work was
unable to sit down for the next two months.\textsuperscript{36} The Judenrat’s belief that work was the key to life was what led Sokolski to say in the Judenrat’s General Assembly held in the Linat Hazedek building on November 9, 1941, that “those who failed to report for work would be destroyed in the final analysis.”\textsuperscript{37}

It is difficult to ascertain exactly when Barash became convinced of the supreme importance of Jewish labor as a key to survival. It may well have been in early August 1941, when a group of Germans kidnapped several Jewish young people—including Barash’s second son—ostensibly “for forced labor.”\textsuperscript{38} None was ever seen again. It was this incident that led Barash to put public safety above all other considerations. By compulsively meeting the Germans’ demands (the Judenrat often sent its own officials or factory workers to make up the missing numbers), he sought to keep them away from the ghetto. It was this concern, coupled with the certainty that the Germans were about to break into the ghetto, that influenced the Judenrat’s decision in August 1942 to empower the Jewish police to force Jews to work.\textsuperscript{39}

The Jews who worked outside the ghetto left for work in groups, led by a “brigadier” (a term originating under the Soviet occupation) who was issued a collective permit for the entire group. Only those who worked outside the ghetto on a permanent basis were issued individual work permits. The workers were accompanied each morning by a German superintendent from the local police force.\textsuperscript{40}

The only incentive for working outside the ghetto was the opportunity it presented for smuggling. Jews smuggled goods outside the ghetto, which they exchanged for foodstuffs, which were then smuggled into the ghetto for personal use or to be sold on the black market. The Germans, not unaware of this contraband activity, forbade “purchases outside the ghetto, either from stores or from individuals.”\textsuperscript{41} However, growing economic hardship and fear of a food shortage in the ghetto made the smuggling trade prosper, despite the danger involved. Felicja Nowak related that her factory paid her with food, not money, and that the food lasted her and her family for a long while. They also smuggled out embroidered tablecloths and bedspreads, which were eagerly bought by their co-workers.

The immediate measures Barash adopted to solve the work crisis appeared to mollify the authorities. One was to set up more factories inside the ghetto. At a Judenrat meeting on November 29, 1941, Barash reported that “our standing with the city governor has improved, so much so that he has put ghetto products on display in his office.”\textsuperscript{42} Indeed, right from the start, the Judenrat had set up factories inside the ghetto and had drawn up
lists of skilled laborers and owners of work tools. Srluke Kot described the work situation as follows:

It was usually the wealthy Jews who worked inside the ghetto who were able to survive on their assets and food supplements [food rations]. The poor were obliged to work outside the ghetto, at all types of hard manual labor. However, they had one advantage: They were able to buy goods outside the ghetto and smuggle them into the ghetto. Tunnels were dug at various intervals along the ghetto fence, and times were arranged for the ghetto children to come and smuggle the goods into the ghetto. . . . In many work places Jews were beaten and were not allowed to buy goods either. No one lasted long in such places, but the Jews were forced to work there too. Therefore, the Judenrat’s Labor Department arranged a rotation system, whereby no worker would have to work in such a place for more than one day a week. Work inside the ghetto was considered by far the easier option, since there was no German supervision. The wealthy Jews were not prepared to work outside the ghetto even for one day a week, and they hired stand-ins. The salary of the malach [stand-in] was determined according to the kind of place he worked in.43

Also right from the start, the ghetto enjoyed a strong leadership that adhered throughout to its principles. This leadership firmly believed that the ghetto Jews would survive by serving the economic interests of the German Reich through the provision of cheap labor. In actual fact, the first fifteen months of ghetto’s life seemed to endorse this belief, thereby enhancing the leadership’s credibility. The Judenrat’s slogan was “salvation through work,” an idea that gained currency within the Judenrat and, later, within the Jewish community itself. The idea behind this view—to “make the ghetto so indispensable to the German authorities that they would be reluctant to destroy it”—was so logical that it was difficult to challenge.44 Reports testify that this theme ran like a leitmotif through all Judenrat sessions.

Ephraim Barash sincerely believed that Jewish labor was a safe—albeit difficult—prescription for survival. For many months, he tried to persuade others (and perhaps himself, too) that the benefit the Germans reaped from the labor of the ghetto Jews had softened their attitude toward them. In his opening speech on the first anniversary of the ghetto’s establishment, Rabbi Rosenman stated: “The authorities can see for themselves that we are working without thought of personal gain, and over time their attitude toward us has improved due to their positive regard for our work.”45 This process
of self-delusion kindled in Barash the hope, and ultimately the conviction, that the Białystok ghetto would come through the war intact.

The visits by various government officials to the ghetto lent credence to this conviction. In his report on these visits at the Judenrat session of August 14, 1942, Barash stated: “Recently, the most important events in the ghetto have been visits to our factories and to the ghetto in general. They are important for our future; our “to be or not to be” depends on them. . . . Two delegations sent by the Gauleiter stated that throughout East Prussia they have never come across such well-organized work.”

Similarly, at a Judenrat session of October 10, 1942, Barash gave the following report on the situation in the ghetto:

The authorities’ visits continue unabated. Their interest in our work has not diminished. Sometimes, there are two visits on one day [in the ghetto]: The representatives are sent by the Wehrmacht, the Party, politicians, the Ministry of the Interior. . . . I wish, in particular, to refer to two visits that were particularly beneficial: (1) a visit by the ordnance general from the District Office, who in conversation with me spoke of his positive regard for us; (2) the attitude and behavior of the Reich correspondent, during her visit, reminded me of the Great Germany of Goethe and Schiller, and I complimented her on this fact.

Barash set great store by the compliments handed down by the German officials. The same was true of Jacob Gens, head of the Judenrat in the Vilna ghetto, and Chaim Rumkowski of the Łódź ghetto. Indeed, the more interest the authorities showed in the ghetto, the more Barash was convinced of the plausibility of his idea of work as a key to survival. Nor did he spare any effort in persuading the Jewish community of the correctness of his views. During the October 10 session after reporting on the imminence of an akção in the district, Barash voiced the sincere belief that “as long as matters are in the local authorities’ hands, we can rest assured that no harm will befall us.” Yet in a special meeting the next day, he again spoke of the danger posed by the size of the ghetto: “Recently, Białystok has become the largest ghetto, after Łódź and we must try and do something to nullify, avert, or mitigate this danger.”

On the same occasion, Barash expressed his displeasure with work-shy residents whose behavior was endangering the ghetto’s existence: “It’s as if they are deliberately trying to bring down disaster on us.” He was constantly berating the fact that out of some 40,000 ghetto residents, only 14,000 were actually working. Barash considered malingerers a real threat, not only be-
cause they endangered the ghetto’s future but also because they jeopardized the lives of the 14,000 Jews who were working. As Barash put it:

A revolution must occur in the psychology of the masses, if things are not to go from bad to worse. The ghetto residents believe that we are the ones behind the decrees! I have been petitioned by mothers who wish to stay with their children etc. Obviously, in normal times, children should stay with their mothers. However, at present, there is a great danger that both mothers and children will be exterminated. . . . We must stop thinking in normal terms! Anyone who can work must, and by so doing contribute to our safety. 14,000 [workers] out of [a total of] 35,000 . . . that’s the danger.51

The first signs that the equilibrium of ghetto life was about to be upset by an imminent aktion came in October 1942, after a year of relative calm.52 Barash’s anxiety over the rumored aktion pushed him to make even greater efforts to ensure the ghetto’s survival. The insecurity he felt, rather than undermining his belief in the power of work, simply strengthened it. As he saw it, if all ghetto Jews had been fully employed in October 1942, the German authorities would never have thought of including Białystok in their extermination program.

Matters had come to a head in September 1942 when the Germans asked the Judenrat to supply 200 young women for work in Wołówysk. Since young women in the ghetto generally refused to work, especially outside the ghetto, the Judenrat was unable to muster the requisite number. The German police commander, who had been ordered by the German Ministry of Labor to settle the matter, ordered the Judenrat to round up all the ghetto’s unemployed. It was only this threat, in the end, that made the girls change their mind. The incident drove a wedge between the Judenrat and the Jewish community and aroused a hysteria the likes of which the ghetto had not experienced since the deportation to Pruzhany. In the end, the Judenrat had to call on the Jewish police to forcibly remove pupils and staff from the vocational college to make up the requisite number.53

Barash, who had reassured the public that the young women were being recruited to pick potatoes in Wołówysk, was impatient with this show of defiance, for while the residents saw forced labor as endangering their lives, Barash saw forced labor as a way of saving their lives. The confrontation between Barash and the ghetto residents left Barash badly shaken. He felt that the cries of “Shema Israel” (Hear O Israel), uttered as the women left for Wołówysk, made a mockery of the traditional “Shema Israel.” He wrote: “There was pandemonium. Some people hid the women. It was a showdown
between the Judenrat and the community. And when they were taken [to work], [the men] ran after the wagon shouting ‘Shema Israel!’ Let us hope that their specious ‘Shema Israel’ will not hasten the true ‘Shema Israel.’”54

Barash believed that those objecting were using this issue to incite the ghetto against the Judenrat, which he represented and led. He saw absolutely no justification for the ghetto’s reaction, and he vented his frustration at his failure to convince the public of the importance of work on the ghetto residents themselves. In an assembly convened in the Linat Hazedek hall on October 11, he complained bitterly: “It’s simply outrageous! Everyone knows what happened in Warsaw and Slonim. Nowadays, the cities that have been spared are in the minority! What has happened to their sense of self-preservation? When will they realize that it is better to be led to Wołkowysk than to Treblinka!”55 For a whole hour he assailed the assembly with his bitter invective, the likes of which the ghetto public had never heard.56

The issue of work, always high on the Judenrat’s agenda, soon became top priority. Barash’s standing as former president of the community, and his role as mediator with the German authorities on behalf of the ghetto Jews, enabled him to win his colleagues to his way of thinking. They accepted his reasoning that a united front was essential if they were to fulfill their mission in these difficult times. The available sources indicate that in October 1942 the Judenrat leadership (Rabbi Rosenman, Sobotnik, and Yakov Goldberg) supported Barash unconditionally.57 Most of the Jewish public, on the other hand, did not share his views, at least during the first year of the ghetto’s existence. Thus, even in October 1942, workers still formed a minority of the ghetto’s population. People agreed to work (both inside and outside the ghetto) only if they had no alternative source of income, although plenty still managed to get by without working. The unemployed, lulled by the relative calm that prevailed in the first year of the ghetto’s existence, found it hard to take Barash’s threats of imminent destruction seriously. But by mid-1942, Barash was convinced that only full employment could save the Białystok ghetto from the fate of the other ghettos. Most of the ghetto residents, on the other hand, not only failed to realize the enormity of the danger awaiting them but also appeared to believe that they would survive the war intact.

The Industry Department

In addition to encouraging people to work outside the ghetto, Barash saw industrial development inside the ghetto as a way to make the Jews useful
to the Germans, thereby ensuring their survival. When the Judenrat discovered, in early November 1941, that the ghetto’s existence was in danger and that the Germans were considering setting up another ghetto in the city, Barash began focusing on industrial development inside the ghetto. The goods manufactured in the factories and workshops that were opened during the first month of the ghetto’s existence led him to conclude that “the ghetto’s status has improved in the eyes of the authorities.” At the Judenrat’s initiative and with the help of the authorities, the Wehrmacht established ties with the ghetto in late 1941, when it placed a large order for boots. This order corroborated Barash’s hunch that industrial activity could, as he indicated on January 10, 1942, “ensure the safety of the entire ghetto.”

Barash’s view of industrial development as a key to salvation was an integral facet of his view of the necessity of work in general. Within this context, industrial expansion was not merely a function of German demand but was actually designed to create German dependency on ghetto-manufactured goods. As Barash put it: “Even without the authorities, we must do everything possible to make ourselves indispensable . . . so that they will spare us [as a workforce]. This is our only hope.”

Although Chaim Rumkowski, head of the Łódź ghetto, and Barash shared the same view on the necessity of work, their motives were different. Barash was inspired by the wave of mass murders he witnessed after the German occupation of Białystok. For him, industrial productivity was a way of forestalling murder, preventing deportation, and ensuring the physical survival of the Jews. Rumkowski, on the other hand, advocated industrial development in the Łódź ghetto even before the physical destruction of the Jews. For him, industrial productivity was a way of ensuring the economic survival of the Łódź Jews, most of whom were suffering from extreme poverty.

In the Judenrat session of December 20, 1941, Barash reported that the leadership had not only managed to convince the Germans to allow the factories to function in winter but had actually received new orders: “An unlimited supply of wooden clogs [has been ordered]. Also 1,000 blankets, which will necessitate opening new factories. . . . An order has also been received for a million cigarette cartons, and this will mean opening up a cardboard factory. We have received a permit from the city governor to open a distillery.”

The Industry Department was responsible for finding suitable locations for factories and supplying them with machines and manpower—assignments that, in those times, were extremely difficult. In an attempt to demonstrate the ghetto’s production potential to the German authorities, the
Judenrat presented the German army, in January 1942, with about 3,500 items of clothing, 500 winter coats, 500 vests, 500 pairs of gloves, 500 hats, socks, etc.62 Apartments were converted into factories, and machines and tools were obtained from individuals through gentle or not so gentle persuasion. Since the Judenrat had at its disposal only the most rudimentary equipment for industrial development, it had to obtain machines and tools by all available means.63

On June 21, 1942, at the sixth General Assembly of the Judenrat in Linat Hazedek hall, Barash informed the Jews that twenty factories were operating in the ghetto. The number of new factories was not the only indication of industrial development; other indications were the constant expansion of existing factories, increased output, new industries, and a growing workforce.64 Products manufactured by the ghetto factories and workshops included shoe trees, clothes, barrels, rope, cigarettes, electrical appliances, hats, alcohol, chemicals, gloves, felt goods, brushes, boots, uniforms, suitcases, soda water, metals, shoes, wooden clogs, soap, haberdashery, knitted goods, wagons, leather, starch, fur, chemical dyes, cotton wool, toys, furniture, blankets, and medical dressings. The ghetto also had a laundry, a glass polishing plant, an upholsterer, sewing workshops, a blacksmith, and a saddler. Although most of the manufactured goods were designed for the army’s use, some were sold on the private market.65

The ghetto’s first director of the Industry Department was Judenrat member Pesah Melnitzki, who carried out this assignment with exceptional imagination and enthusiasm. Shmuel Finkel, a businessman who joined the ghetto soon after the German occupation after escaping from a Soviet jail, was responsible for streamlining the factories and for serving as a liaison with German industrial outlets. In due course, the ghetto boasted two large plants, both German-owned but managed by Jews. These two plants, which in late 1942 employed more than 2,000 workers, were called after their German owners. The first, known as the Oskar Stefan factory, was managed by Finkel’s son; it manufactured furniture, clothes, shoes, furs, and various chemical products. It also housed an artists’ studio, run by Joshua Rożansky.66 The second factory, known as the Linde factory, manufactured clothes, women’s pocketbooks, and hats.

As the ghetto industries became increasingly sophisticated, Barash was considered the only person capable of running the Industry Department—a tribute to his personal talent and an indication of the important role played by industry in the ghetto. Barash held daily meetings with the factory managers and signed work proposals and work certificates for D. Livrant, head of the Industrial Manpower Office.67
At the Judenrat session of March 1, 1942, Melnitzki reported that a team of forty men was responsible for collecting raw materials in the ghetto, such as iron, wire, spinning thread, and glass, and that 1,730 workers were employed in the seventeen Judenrat-owned factories. At the time, the factories still relied mainly on the ghetto residents for its supply of raw materials and machines. It was only after November 1942, when the destruction of the Jewish communities in the Białystok District began, that old machines, machine parts, and work tools were brought into the ghetto from nearby towns. From then on, industrial expansion grew by leaps and bounds: the number of workers rose from month to month, the factories expanded and output grew. The ghetto factories not only proved their productive capacity to the Germans but also afforded their workers some protection against being seized by the Germans for forced labor.

Białystok’s two large textile kombinats, which had survived from the Soviet period, employed hundreds of ghetto residents as well as Poles. Factory I, which had formerly been owned by a Jew called Pollak and was now owned by a German called Artur Schade, was situated outside the ghetto. The Jewish workers who went to work there returned to the ghetto each evening. The other textile factory, Factory IV, was managed by Otto Beniske, a German of Czech origin. This factory was situated on Jurowiecka Street along the ghetto’s border, so that the Poles entered it from the Aryan side and the Jews from the Jewish side.

A permanent exhibition of ghetto goods organized by the German ghetto administration at the Judenrat’s initiative in March 1942 triggered a rush of new orders. The exhibition was housed outside the ghetto in a three-room apartment on Warszawska Street. The exhibit of goods, designed both for military and civilian use, included a harness and saddle, a pair of high equestrian boots, a pair of suede shoes, women’s fashion shoes, an assortment of brushes (shoe brushes, nail brushes, hair brushes), dyed fabrics, socks, gloves, kerchiefs, hats, cardboard boxes, jars of jam, rope, string, carpentered goods, trench coats, short coats, and military and civilian trousers, among others. A female artist from the ghetto (originally from Warsaw) was custodian of the exhibition, while two Jewish girls who were fluent in German greeted German visitors to the exhibition, provided explanations, and encouraged them to visit the ghetto factories where the goods in the exhibits had been manufactured. In a Judenrat session on March 22, 1942, Barash emphasized that the exhibition, with its high degree of professionalism, was an asset to the ghetto: “Its 500 exhibits make a good impression, almost like before the war. . . . I hope it will prove of advantage not only to the ghetto, but will lead to a change in attitude toward the Jews in general.”
It is interesting to note that Jacob Gens, head of the Vilna ghetto, used the same arguments regarding the ghetto’s chances of survival. In *Geto Nayes* (Ghetto news), a journal he published in Vilna, Gens was quoted as saying in June 1943: “Both by the ghetto industries and by our work outside the ghetto, we must disprove the conventional belief that we are good for nothing, by showing that we are not only useful, but irreplaceable. Under current war conditions, work in general, and work for the Wehrmacht in particular . . . is indeed an imperative of the times.”

Barash grasped at any straw that corroborated his belief in the importance of productivity and of converting the ghetto into a labor camp. For him, the exhibition was an important landmark in the ghetto’s existence. As the exhibition was open to the public at large, it was attended by a large number of Poles who were not too happy with the idea of an exhibition of Jewish products. In their contacts with Jews outside the ghetto, these Poles were openly hostile, awakening fear among the Jews of a Polish backlash after the war. When Barash found out that some Poles were critical of the exhibition, his response was simply to tighten security there: “The fear that once the reign of terror is over, they [the Poles] will see us in a bad light is unfounded. Their attitude toward us had never been determined by our behavior, but rather by politics. If their politics are not directed against us, no one will harm us.”

Not everyone was so sanguine about turning the ghetto into a cheap labor camp in the enemy’s service. Some were opposed to providing goods to a nation that had as good as pronounced the death sentence on the Jewish people. Others feared that if they “supported Nazi Germany,” the Poles would retaliate after the war. Although the sources do not specify who opposed Barash’s policy, the fact that he felt the need to defend his position just after the opening of the exhibition in March 1942 shows that there was opposition. Criticism of his theory and practice (including the exhibition) caused Barash to state on April 5, 1942:

The industrial workers are not only saving themselves but the entire ghetto. You have heard of the large-scale deportations from Berlin and from Königsberg. We have done everything to convince them [the authorities] that the ghetto must be left intact. . . . The exhibition makes a very good impression, and this is very important both for us and for the Jewish people as a whole. I have also heard criticism of our work. [Some say] that we are too eager to cooperate. However, we must not lose sight of the future. Therefore I declare: Our goal is to survive, and we must do all within our power to attain this goal. As to the regime here, its actions are not determined by [our] behavior but
by its own policy. Already, we see a certain lack of logic in the Poles’ attitude towards the Jews. Let Jews who have connections with Poles not lose sight of this fact.”

Barash finished his speech by saying: “We are doing what we can. History shall be our judge.”

On a number of occasions, Barash stated that the ghetto exhibition “has struck our adversaries dumb.” For him, there was a connection between the exhibition and visits to the ghetto by Gauleiter Koch, military delegations, Gestapo chiefs from Königsberg and Berlin, directors of the Bureau of Commerce in Berlin, representatives of East Prussia, and the mayor of Königsberg. On October 10, 1942, Barash reported that the exhibition was henceforth closed to the public at large, for political reasons, apparently connected with German plans to evacuate Jews from the Białystok District. From that point on, the exhibition was attended only by committees and official delegations. In November 1942, when the Gestapo took over administration of the ghetto, the exhibition was closed down and its exhibits transferred to one of the ghetto buildings.

Although at the time Barash already knew that an aktion was imminent, the fact that the Wehrmacht was still placing orders with the ghetto convinced him that the ghetto would be spared. At the aforementioned Judenrat session, he reported a working population of 14,000 out of a total ghetto population of 42,000. Of these 5,000–7,000 worked outside the ghetto, and 7,000–9,000 worked inside the ghetto—far too few to prevent the impending catastrophe. It was essential, he stated, to raise the number of workers inside the ghetto to around 20,000–21,000. Although until the sealing of the ghetto in November 1942 Barash was unable to attain this goal, he continued working tirelessly to keep the plants and factories going.

The Jewish Police

The Germans did not, as a rule, interfere in the ghetto’s internal affairs. Instead, they ordered the Judenrat to set up a Jewish police force to help enforce regulations passed by the occupation authorities. After the closure of the ghetto, the police force took on additional functions. In the Judenrat’s first session after the closure of the ghetto, Yitzhak Marcus, director of the Security Department, was appointed head of the police force, while Bubrik was appointed head of the fire brigade. The following day, the Judenrat put up a notice calling for applicants to the police force. On August 8, 1941, the
Judenrat instructed the selected candidates to report for work, and on August 12, the following announcement was posted on the ghetto walls: "As instructed by the authorities, a Jewish police force has been set up today, August 12, 1941. The Judenrat asks for the Jewish population’s full cooperation. Whoever disobeys the police, or disrupts public order, shall be severely punished."79

Even before the police force received official backing, it was far from popular with the ghetto population. Few were eager to enlist, and it was generally believed that its members would be drawn from the underworld. It was only when Marcus, a well-known industrialist and former head of the fire brigade, was appointed head of the police force, that the public’s attitude toward it changed. From that point on, many of Bialystok’s intelligentsia decided to join the force, too. As Kot stated: “When the policemen appeared on the streets in their green hats bearing the inscription *Jüdischer Ordnungsdienst* [Jewish police], everyone was amazed to see intellectuals, high school graduates, businessmen, and members of the intelligentsia among them."80

The 200 young, middle-class members of the police force—who were answerable to the German authorities and the Judenrat alike—had no political affiliations. In practice, the existence of a Jewish police force turned the Judenrat into an autonomous government of sorts, with an executive power. The functions of the Jewish police in the ghetto were similar to those of a regular police force: maintaining law and order; managing traffic control; preventing illegal gatherings; ensuring cleanliness of public thoroughfares, courtyards, and stairways; fighting crime, maintaining order in the Judenrat buildings; guarding the ghetto fence and all areas adjoining the Aryan side; and punishing those who disobeyed the Judenrat’s orders.81

Although these seemed to be normal policing activities, there were serious showdowns between the police and the Jewish public, particularly when the police were ordered to recruit workers for forced labor. Another function peculiar to the ghetto police was to disperse crowds and empty the streets prior to visits by German delegations, to dispel the impression that the ghetto was full of idle people. To this end, the police set up headquarters at 4 Szlachecka Street, as well as a children’s playground for children up to the age of 7, which was open daily from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., so as to give the impression that their mothers were working.82 At some point the ghetto police set up a special department for the enforcement of tax collection. Tax collection was an important part of their work, since as part of the Judenrat, they were not paid a salary but were subsidized by taxes.83
The Jewish police had a number of police stations attached to the Judenrat, known as the ghetto district police stations.\textsuperscript{84} It was to these stations that the ghetto population went when they needed documents, wished to sign up as labor reserves, or make exceptional payments, and so forth. It was here that they brought goods that had been confiscated for German use. The police also had a detention center in the basement of the Judenrat building and a prison on Zamenhof Street (Yatke Gas). Sometimes, the Jewish police were ordered to accompany Jews to the Gestapo offices on Warszawska Street, outside the ghetto. Naturally, this function did not help endear the police to the ghetto public.\textsuperscript{85}

Right from the start, the ghetto police were perceived in a negative light, perhaps due to its part in the Pruzhany deportation. For a long time the ghetto Jews regarded the Jewish police with misgivings, even though many were known to be trustworthy men. Moshe Berman, who later became Marcus’s deputy, ruefully pointed out on February 1, 1942: “We members of the police are considered Jew-snatchers. We have to fight with our fellow-Jews to maintain basic cleanliness and sanitation in the yards and streets. One would think that we Jews love dirt and deliberately pollute our streets. We have the same problem with blackout. Outside the ghetto, they shoot to enforce curfews. Here in the ghetto, when the police come to announce curfew, they are simply jeered at.”\textsuperscript{86}

This negative perception of the Jewish police was due not only to its behavior during the Pruzhany deportation but also to corruption. Policemen in the Gestapo’s pay instilled fear in the hearts of the ghetto residents and Judenrat alike. Only after the purging of the police force on June 16 and 17, 1942, during which more than twenty corrupt policemen were sent to labor camps, did Barash confess at the Judenrat session of June 20, 1942, that criminal gangs operating under police protection had almost undermined the Judenrat and jeopardized its existence.\textsuperscript{87}

In the same session, Barash reported on the activities of Grisha Zelikowicz, Marcus’s right-hand man and the most notorious Gestapo agent, who had a network of men working for him and supporters inside the Judenrat itself. To be fair, Zelikowicz’s supporters in the Judenrat believed that his good standing with the Germans was due to personal charisma rather than to his activities as an informer. Barash said of Zelikowicz and his men that they “sent some policemen to the house of a Jew. The policemen stayed there for three days and three nights, until they extorted from him the sum of 10,000 Marks. . . . Zelikowicz’s gang also stripped Dr. Szacki and his wife of all their valuables and silver, claiming they were ordered to do so by the authorities, but taking everything for themselves.”\textsuperscript{88}
Prewar Białystok, the mikveh (ritual bath) and the beit midrash (house of study).

The Jewish quarter in Białystok, 1926.
Sienkiewicza Street (date unknown).

Street demonstration, May 1, 1935.
Unemployed in Kasztioshka market.

The Jewish theater, prewar Białystok.

A group of Hashomer Hatzair youth with their leader Yitzhak Szczopak, Białystok, 1934.
A group of young members of Hashomer Hatzair.

Jews in the street, September 22, 1939.
Jews cleaning the streets, June 29, 1941.

Construction of a gate to the ghetto, July 1941.
Site of the ghetto before the war.
Protocol number 1 of the Judenrat, July 8, 1941.
Ephraim Barash, an engineer, and head of the Judenrat.

Peysekh Kaplan, a writer and journalist, and a member of the Judenrat.

Mordecai Tenenbaum, leader of the ghetto revolt, 1943.

Daniel Moszkowicz, a communist and second in command of the underground.

Zipporah Birman, a member of Dror from Vilna, who arrived in the ghetto in January 1942 and participated in the underground.
Nazi roundup of Jews in the ghetto, (likely August 1943).

Deportation of Jews from the ghetto (likely August 1943).
Another photo of the deportation, (likely August 1943).

Deportation of Jewish women to the camps, (likely August 1943).
Bodies of Jews from the ghetto.
Postwar reinterment of bodies in a mass grave, Białystok.
Jewish cemetery, after the war.
War crimes trial of Fritz Friedel.

Memorial ceremony at the monument to the Jews killed in the Bialystok ghetto uprising.
In her book, Haika Grosman revealed facts about Zelikowicz that were not public knowledge:

When a Jew dealt in smuggling cattle Zelikovich would inform on him, and then ransom him for money which he shared with his German confederates. He occupied himself with extortion and his house was filled with valuable objects. . . . He worked against Barash, spied on him and frustrated many of his plans. When Barash bribed a German of one of the institutions Zelikovich would inform another institution about it. He stirred up trouble and served everybody in turn. . . . When “illegal refugees” who, according to German plans, had been supposed to die like their brothers in Vilna or Slonim or Volkovysk arrived, Zelikovich considered it his duty to betray them to the authorities.89

Klementinowsky related how everyone in the ghetto—particularly smugglers and black-marketeers—were petrified of Zelikowicz and his gang: “When he [Zelikowicz] discovered that someone was doing business in the ghetto, he or one of his accessories came and demanded protection money. If anyone refused his demand, he had no compunction about denouncing him to the Gestapo. He also extorted money and jewels, by threatening to inform the authorities that his victims were Communist activists.”90

Although Zelikowicz wished to bring about the downfall of Barash’s Judenrat, he also aspired to become director of the Judenrat’s Finance Department, and he even negotiated with Barash for this appointment while hiding his true objectives. Barash’s suspicions were aroused, however, and he decided to investigate. The investigation showed that Zelikowicz had tried to stir up trouble between Barash and the German authorities and had spread rumors that the Judenrat was intending to hand over the returnees from Pruzhany to a firing squad. After Zelikowicz admitted that he had forced Jews to sign a petition against the Judenrat, and when it became clear that he had supporters within the Judenrat itself, Barash decided to bring Zelikowicz and his men to justice and to carry out a purge of the Jewish police. At the Judenrat session of June 20, 1942, Barash gave a detailed report on the Zelikowicz affair, which he summed up as follows: “[The police purge] was an extremely difficult operation. We were afraid of missing some of Zelikowicz’s confederates. We could only begin the purge proper once we got hold of the ringleader. I hope we shall be able to resolve the matter successfully.”91

Barash did not try to hide the Zelikowicz affair from the ghetto residents. The following day, on June 21, 1942, the Judenrat called a General As-
assembly in which Barash described how Zelikowicz and his gang had robbed both the ghetto residents and the Judenrat alike. His condemnation of Zelikowicz was received with much applause and cries of “hear hear.” Even if Barash’s intention in “turning over this shameful page in the ghetto’s history” was to vindicate his own image, he still managed to muster the support of the entire ghetto population.92

The Zelikowicz affair was not the first of its kind: Pfenigstein, a police superintendent, was discovered to be extorting money from the ghetto Jews and collaborating with the Gestapo. In the end, his German bosses discovered that Pfenigstein was deceiving them, too, and he was arrested and executed in one of the Gestapo’s cellars.93 Even after Pfenigstein was brought to justice, Barash was unable to take the honesty of his policemen for granted. Unlike his close associates in the Judenrat, he was suspicious of Zelikowicz, and kept him under surveillance.94

Barash felt it was safest to hand over Zelikowicz to the authorities, and let them deal with him, to avoid complications. Zelikowicz was duly arrested with the help of Yitzhak Engelman, Barash’s assistant. A thorough search of Zelikowicz’s house revealed large sums of foreign currency, gold, diamonds, twenty women’s fur coats, suits, expensive fabrics, hides, and many other valuables. The loot was loaded on a large truck and handed over to the Germans. Zelikowicz himself was marched with his hands raised through the streets of the ghetto to Gestapo headquarters, where he was tortured. In the end, he died in the local prison. Klementinowsky recorded that Zelikowicz’s wife, too, was arrested, after forged papers were discovered indicating that Zelikowicz had intended to escape with his family to Switzerland.95 On the same day—June 21, 1942—after the assembly, Barash called a meeting of the Jewish police in the Linat Hazedek hall, to discuss the purge, and to impress upon them the importance of their mission and of moral integrity in carrying out their duties in those troubled times.

Why did it take Barash so long to take action against corruption in the police force? In order to answer this question, we must bear in mind that many members of the Judenrat believed that Zelikowicz was well intentioned and that the gold, jewelry, and valuables they gave him were being used to bribe the Germans to adopt a more humane attitude toward the Jews. Another factor was Barash’s inability to intervene in Marcus’s affairs. For although the police force was an integral part of the Judenrat, Marcus’s contacts with the German police granted him a power over and above any other department head.96 It is unlikely, however, that Barash imagined Marcus capable of dealing with corruption in the police force on his own.
The only plausible explanation for Barash’s failure to take immediate action was his wish to consolidate his reputation both within the Judenrat and with the authorities before undertaking an operation of this kind. Moreover, Barash’s primary aim was to consolidate the ghetto’s industrial status. Indeed, it was only after the authorities expressed their satisfaction with industrial development in the ghetto that Barash felt able to address the other matter of corruption within the police force. Finally, there was Barash’s reluctance to sabotage the tenuous “normalization” he had achieved in the ghetto, by instigating a witch hunt. This concern was expressed in his speech at the meeting in the Linat Hazedek hall:

The figures show that 10 percent among you are criminals. I had feared worse. This means that 90 percent of you are upright officers! It has been necessary to eliminate the rot, and this no doubt has enhanced your reputation. If anyone in the population has other ideas, we will show them [that they are wrong]. We will force them to behave toward you with the respect you deserve. We shall use all means to punish those who show contempt toward the Jewish police. . . . We have but one goal: to get the Jews out of the Bialystok ghetto alive. This is not the time to think of career prospects! . . . I know that it is very hard for you to make a living. I cannot make you any promises. . . . But the board will consider ways of meeting your demands with the limited means available to it, so that you can carry out your sacred mission successfully.97

In an attempt to improve the image of the Jewish police, Barash appointed Moshe Berman deputy police commander in Bubrik’s place. Unlike Marcus, whose lack of familiarity with Yiddish prevented him from befriending the ghetto Jews, Berman, as “a warm, upright, moral, decent, open, intelligent, and affectionate Jew,” soon won them over.98 Berman was assigned the task of rebuilding the reputation and integrity of the police force, so that “if at some point a monograph is written on the ghetto—we shall deserve an honorable mention.”99 At the meeting in the Linat Hazedek hall, Berman was loudly applauded for his speech, in which he made a passionate appeal for “those who are still in uniform . . . to behave in an upright manner . . . for the day will yet come when we will meet our brothers out of uniform.”100

Despite the Judenrat’s purge and its attempts to recruit men with a social conscience to the police force, sources indicate that “that there were still some undesirable elements left who were a disgrace to the police force.”101 In the end, Marcus himself decided to resign: “Not only have Zelikowicz’s
friends been suspended from the Jewish police, I too have tendered my resignation to the Judenrat," he stated.102

In conclusion, from the beginning of the German occupation until the evacuation in June 1942, corruption within the police force—and the Judenrat—was so serious it threatened to disrupt life in the ghetto. Since the composition of the Judenrat remained constant throughout the occupation, we may assume that it was the low-ranking employees that were guilty of corruption rather than the high-ranking officials.

During the following period (from June 1942 until the destruction of the ghetto) the Jewish police force was noted for its integrity and courage. Following the Zelikowicz affair, the Jewish police was made solely dependent on the Judenrat leadership, which took a strong stand against corruption. No doubt this firm stand led to a total revolution in the behavior of the ghetto police during the evacuation from the ghetto, as we shall see below.

The Supplies Department

Two Judenrat departments were responsible for the ghetto’s economy: the Department of Economic Affairs and the Supplies Department. Officially, the ghetto Jews were not allowed to conduct business either inside or outside the ghetto; the Judenrat’s Supplies Department, run by Yakov Goldberg, was responsible for supplying the ghetto residents with their basic needs. The civil administration supplied the municipality, which supplied the Judenrat, which distributed the food among the residents.103 At first, the Judenrat received dozens of kilograms of flour per day, which were used to bake bread for the Judenrat’s twenty-four members and for poor people. When workers at Judenrat factories, who were not initially paid a salary, demanded a larger bread ration, the Judenrat acceded to their request and set aside a quota for them and for manual laborers, such as coal men or porters.104

Soon the Judenrat became the exclusive provider for thousands of Judenrat officials and factory workers, and the Supplies Department became important in its own right. The quantities of barley, flour, sugar, oil, and other commodities, such as soap and soda, that the Judenrat managed to obtain from the authorities were stored in a warehouse belonging to the Supplies Department, and then distributed to institutions and individuals. The Supplies Department also allocated wood and coal, especially to Judenrat institutions and officials. During the ghetto’s first winter (early 1941), the department managed to obtain enough fuel for the entire popu-
lation. In the winter of 1942, however, the Judenrat received a much smaller quantity of fuel, and since most of this went to public institutions (hospitals, clinics, and factories), many private houses were left without any heat. Luckily, the winter of late 1942—early 1943 was mild. The Supplies Department also distributed potatoes to the ghetto residents, who were ordered to burn the peel so as to limit the accumulation of garbage. The fact that potato peel was burned rather than cooked indicates that Białystok was actually better off than other ghettos. Some months later, the Judenrat decided to salvage the potato peel for industrial purposes and put up notices specifying collection points. Reizner explained that the potato peel was used to manufacture starch, and Friedel, the ghetto’s German overseer, testified that “the peel was used to manufacture adhesives.”

The Supplies Department also supervised the bakeries and dairy farms to ensure a fair distribution of bread and milk. When the authorities suddenly confiscated more than fifty cows, the department set up its own dairy farm, which supplied enough milk for the ghetto’s welfare institutions. It likewise made sure that all privately owned cows in the ghetto were registered, kept a careful record of milk supplies, and controlled the price of milk on the free market.

In early 1942, the ghetto’s economic situation improved, thanks to an expanding economy and a lively smuggling trade. Although the cost of living was high, it was possible to make ends meet. As business centered around the clothing, leather, and textile industries, clothes soon became more expensive even than food, a situation reminiscent of the prewar period. The ghetto’s small stores sold food exclusively. The ghetto also had a few restaurants and cafés. Many businesses were conducted in the ghetto’s streets.

From the summer of 1942, when the supply of trafficable objects had dwindled, the black market began to flourish. The Judenrat, recognizing the need for a place where goods could be traded, unofficially designated the Praga Gardens, near Szlachecka and Nowy Świat (Nay Velt) Streets, as a marketplace. The market was under the Judenrat’s supervision, and anyone with a stall there had to pay a license fee. Whenever Germans entered the ghetto, the Jewish police quickly evacuated the area. The market sold everything, from food to valuables. Representatives of the Judenräte of other towns frequently came to the ghetto in Białystok to purchase “gifts” for the Germans, such as furs, costly fabrics, boots, jewelry, and so forth.

Goods were smuggled in and out of the ghetto by about 100 wagon drivers employed by Germans firms or by ghetto residents who worked outside the ghetto. Not all the ghetto guards were particular about searching people leaving or entering the ghetto, and this fact was exploited by the smugglers.
However, there was always the risk of an impromptu search by the German sentries. Anyone caught smuggling in goods was beaten or imprisoned. Still, many succeeded in convincing the guards that they were providing an essential service for the ghetto’s economy. Where words failed, bribes often succeeded. Reizner reported that each day about 5,000 Jewish workers left the ghetto. Many of them were dressed in several layers of clothing in which they hid their wares. During the day, they removed their yellow patches and exchanged their goods for food or money. According to him, the wagon drivers, many of whom were “on friendly terms” with the German guards, built secret compartments in their wagons in which to smuggle their goods. Those who aimed too high, however, paid for it with their lives. Felicja Nowak said that the Jewish police would often distract the German guards while goods were being smuggled into the ghetto.\(^{110}\)

Smuggling not only brought extra food and fuel into the ghetto; it was the sole livelihood of many ghetto residents and was to a large extent responsible for the improvement in the ghetto’s economy. The Jewish factory workers who worked outside the ghetto developed connections with the Poles and Belorussians, and even with the Germans themselves, some of whom were bribed to turn a blind eye to what was going on. The good working relationship between the Judenrat and the authorities also helped, and ghetto Jews who traded with the Germans did especially well for themselves. Children were also seen in the streets of the ghetto trading goods such as cigarettes, matches, and saccharine.

By the end of the first period of the German occupation, workers were paid a wage of 1–1.20 Reichsmarks per day (half the wage of Polish workers), and skilled laborers received even more. By the summer of 1942, a worker’s daily wage sufficed to purchase half a kilogram of bread. As a result, more money flowed into the ghetto; the food situation improved, despite inflation; and the economic situation appeared to be stabilizing.\(^{111}\)

One of the Supplies Department’s most successful ventures was the planting of a vegetable garden, in the spring of 1942, in a vacant lot on Nowogródzka Street, near Barash’s house, under the supervision of Shalit, an agronomist from Vilna. Gardeners were recruited from the ranks of the Zionist youth (who preferred to grow food for Jews than to work in German factories) under the leadership of Zvi Mersik of the Hehalutz Hatzair Dror. The vegetable garden, known as the “Barash Gardens” or the “Judenrat Gardens,” was guarded by special wardens. There, workers grew cucumbers, beets, carrots, tomatoes, radishes, onions, lettuce, and cabbages which they supplied to Judenrat institutions and sold on the free market.\(^{112}\)
On April 29, 1942, the Supplies Department put up a notice stating:

We have planted a vegetable garden for your own good. We are sure that we can count on you to tend it and look after it. We also ask you to use any spare patch of earth near your homes or in your yards to grow vegetables for your own consumption. We shall supply seeds, shoots or instructors, as requested. Our office is situated at 1 Nowogródzka Street.
Please forward your applications immediately!

Don’t let the land go to seed!

Gardening Department
Under the auspices and administration of Hehalutz Secretary, Mersik
Number of employees required for the summer—300 max.
Applicants should be members of Zionist youth organizations.
The Garden is an area of sunshine [light], song, and youth in the ghetto’s dark existence.
Expected yield for the summer: 190 tons of vegetables.113

The meat provided by the authorities was not fit for human consumption; it included oxen’s heads and feet, offal, lungs, spleen, liver, horse meat, and sometimes even rancid bacon. Although initially the ghetto residents shunned this meat, as time went on they fought over it. On the whole, meat supplies were fairly regular, and even in April 1943 horse meat could be bought for 15–20 Reichsmarks per kilogram, and kosher meat for 40 Reichsmarks per kilogram. Despite constant inflation (a loaf of bread, which in the autumn of 1941 cost approximately 1.6 Reichsmarks, had by April 1942 risen to 10 Reichsmarks, and the price of potatoes also rose sevenfold in one year), the speculation, fraud, and hoarding that typified Białystok during the First World War, and other ghettos during the Second World War, was nonexistent—except in times of real danger, such as in November 1942 and February 1943. Items such as butter, fat, oil, and fine flour, although expensive, were snatched up. The Judenrat’s Supplies Department also manufactured basic commodities for the ghetto residents and ran its own sausage and jam factory, whose products were occasionally sold at a discount on the free market, without coupons.114

Even making allowances for the relatively small size of the Białystok ghetto, it was thanks to the wise management of the Judenrat’s Economics and Supplies Departments that the residents of the Białystok ghetto did not die of starvation. The Economics Department, headed by Abba Fur-
man, ran all the Judenrat’s “economic” activities, which were basically designed to keep the Germans supplied with a steady stream of gifts. It collected furniture and household utensils from citizens, which it then stored in its warehouses. Force sometimes was used to “persuade” citizens to part with their possessions. After the evacuation of Jews from the ghetto (the deportation to Pruzhany and the aktion of February 1943), many more items were added to its stock.\textsuperscript{115}

The Economics Department also helped the Welfare Department by giving away or selling clothes, bedding, and the like at a discount to the homeless and poor (refugees and returnees from Pruzhany, who frequently arrived at the ghetto ragged and barefoot). The Economics Department also ran an underwear factory that kept both the German authorities and Jewish institutions supplied. A tailoring workshop repaired clothes and altered them to fit the needy, as well as supplying thousands of ghetto residents with clothes.\textsuperscript{116} Goldberg, head of the Supplies Department, was kept busy making sure his employees, most of whom received only 300 grams of bread per day, did not abuse their position to line their own pockets. Such abuse was highly resented by the other ghetto residents.

The Judenrat’s policy of placing political considerations above economic ones led to certain constraints in the ghetto’s economic life. After the Germans began taking photographs that were reminiscent of prewar pictures in \textit{Der Stürmer}, the Judenrat clamped down on economic activity in the ghetto. Its main concern was to show the authorities they were obeying orders and enforcing prohibitions. It tightened control of its fleet of wagons and for a while forbade stores to open their front doors, urging them to conduct business from the side or back door. These measures led to a decrease in the Judenrat’s income from taxes and created a climate in which smuggling thrived.\textsuperscript{117}

The Judenrat’s efforts to stabilize the economy bore fruit; the Białystok ghetto did not suffer from starvation. Effective food distribution, legal trade permits, food factories, and the conversion of vacant lots into vegetable gardens not only saved the ghetto residents from starvation but actually rendered their lives tolerable. Although at the time the Białystok ghetto numbered only 41,000 residents—an easy number to feed compared with large ghettos such as Warsaw and Łódź—most of the traditional sources of income had disappeared already during the Soviet period, prior to the German occupation. Only a highly efficient economic administration could prevent dire shortages and serious economic hardships, even during the war period. In this respect, the Białystok Judenrat succeeded.
The Health and Sanitation Departments

There were no hospitals or clinics in the area designated for the ghetto, and the question of medical services arose during the Judenrat’s first sessions. When rumor spread of epidemics on the Aryan side, the Judenrat, on August 11, 1941, put up a notice warning of the danger of an epidemic inside the ghetto, too. In a Judenrat assembly in late November, Barash announced nineteen cases of typhus and warned that “if G-d forbid the epidemic spreads to the ghetto, not only will peoples’ lives be at stake, but the ghetto will be sealed, and people will be barred from entering or leaving.”

In the first month of the Judenrat’s existence, a hospital for infectious diseases and a pharmacy were set up in response to an urgent request by Dr. Moshe Katzenelson, director of the Judenrat’s Health Department. The Judenrat, aware of German propaganda claims that Jews spread diseases, feared an epidemic would have dire consequences for the entire ghetto. Therefore, a few days after the ghetto’s establishment, the Judenrat appealed to the authorities to distribute food among the Jewish population so as to prevent an epidemic. The authorities’ reply was: “There is enough food in the ghetto. If anything will lead to an epidemic it is lack of hygiene, not hunger.” Fortunately, the contagious diseases that threatened the ghetto shortly after its inception did not develop into epidemics, and on August 20, 1941, Dr. Holandersky, head of the Judenrat’s Sanitation Department, reported “that there have been no new cases of typhus and only one mild case of scarlet fever.”

The fact that the Judenrat put up many notices appealing for cleanliness in the streets, yards and homes shows the importance it attached to matters of health. The Judenrat’s Health Department ran medical services that provided the ghetto residents with cheap or even free medical care. The Judenrat also put an end to profiteering by private doctors, who charged exorbitant fees only the rich could afford. The Judenrat ordered all doctors and medical personnel to register with the Judenrat’s Health Department, which issued them a license to practice.

The TOZ building at 27 Fabryczna Street was converted into a general hospital, directed by Dr. Ovadiah Kaplan, with four departments, including a surgery and X-ray department. In time, the hospital expanded and took over the building opposite it. The new building housed a pediatric department and clinic for toddlers up to the age of two, where children received standard vaccinations. A former orphanage at 7 Jurowiecka Street was con-
tered into a Hospital for Infectious Diseases; it also housed the Health Department. Another building was converted into a maternity clinic.

The Linat Hazedek building on Rożanska Street housed the main clinic, with a staff of general and specialist doctors who worked regular schedules and supplied most of the ghetto’s population with medical care for a modest fee or for free. The clinic also ran a round-the-clock first aid service, which charged 30 rubles for home visits between 8:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m., and 40 rubles from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. The Linat Haholim building on Zamenhof Street housed a dental clinic and dental laboratory, which charged a flat fee for all, as well as an electrotherapy clinic, whose equipment was expropriated from private doctors. When Zamenhof Street was removed from the ghetto area, the clinics moved into two rooms in the Linat Hazedek building.

Doctors and nurses also provided medical care in the Judenrat factories. The ghetto’s three pharmacies worked under Judenrat supervision and sold medications at discount prices, or for free to the poor, who received a special dispensation from the Welfare Department. Pharmacists were considered Judenrat employees and, like factory workers, received food rations in lieu of payment. Dr. Tuvya Citron, a surgeon at the general hospital, reported the existence of a German Pharmaceutical Agency in Białystok that marketed products to the public at large, in exchange for German Reichsmarks. Altogether, medicines were not in short supply. The pharmacies also operated on a night rotation so that medical assistance was available round the clock. The Health Department worked with the Labor Department to provide disability permits on grounds of sickness or disease.

Barash frequently criticized the doctors for charging inflated fees and for dispensing disability certificates so freely: “Doctors hand out disability certificates far too liberally without performing thorough examinations. . . . They offer psychological rationales, as if we were living in normal times. They believe that everyone suffering from TB is unfit for work. That may be so! With one caveat. The man won’t die from TB. He’ll die from not working.” The doctors continued issuing work exemptions to all and sundry throughout the first year of the ghetto’s existence, until the Judenrat insisted that it would only recognize exemptions that bore the stamp of the Health Department.

The Health Department worked together with the Sanitation Department to introduce wide-ranging preventive measures essential for maintaining health and hygiene in the overcrowded ghetto. For example, the Health Department ordered all doctors, medical orderlies, and nurses to report all cases of infectious diseases to the Sanitation Department, which
ran a comprehensive information campaign designed to promote hygiene under ghetto conditions. On November 23, 1941, it held a special assembly on ways of preventing typhus fever. Lectures were delivered by Drs. Holendersky, Zlotar, and Aharon Beilin, who discussed the causes and symptoms of the disease, preventive measures, mortality rates from typhus fever in the Warsaw ghetto, and the need for personal hygiene. Most health information came in the form of notices warning of contagion from lice, typhus, and dysentery. The notices emphasized the authorities’ concern about poor sanitary conditions in the ghetto and warned of heavy penalties for those who failed to keep streets, yards, and apartments clean.126

The Sanitation Department was also responsible for the ghetto’s two bathhouses. In densely populated apartments and areas, sanitary inspection of underwear and bedclothes was habitual. Where necessary, people were forced to wash and delouse themselves. The authorities insisted on absolute cleanliness in the ghetto, fearful that the germs in the infected ghettos would be transferred to the “master race.” Thus it is not surprising that the Sanitation Department stressed the importance of cleanliness and hygiene and ran information campaigns to alert the public to the real danger of epidemics. In actual fact, the situation was better than the Judenrat implied, due to the sound sanitary infrastructure that, according to Dr. Citron, the Soviets had introduced. Under the German occupation, this infrastructure included a pool of about 160 Jewish doctors serving a population of about 41,000 people.

Thanks to the Sanitation Department’s insistence on cleanliness, there were no cases of typhus in the Białystok ghetto. If sick people entered the ghetto, their houses were placed in quarantine and subsequently disinfected and deloused. When refugees joined the ghetto, they had to show a permit from the bathhouse that they had been deloused, before receiving a housing permit and ration card.127

The Sanitation Department played an instrumental role in ghetto life. For example, it issued a regulation mandating cleanliness among bakery employees on August 26, 1941. Ghetto residents guilty of littering their yards were fined, and their bread cards were confiscated for a week. The department prohibited the sale of secondhand clothes that did not bear its official stamp. It also organized all cleaning and spraying operations in the ghetto. Finally, the Sanitation Department deployed mobile inspection and control units, which included a doctor and sanitary inspector.128

Another important function performed by the Judenrat was the collection and disposal of refuse. In the very first month of its existence, the Judenrat set up a special refuse collection unit, run by Abba Furman, head of
the Economics Department. The price of bread coupons was raised in order to cover the costs of garbage collection and disposal. Special permits were given to wagon drivers to remove refuse and sewage from the ghetto. The wagon drivers took advantage of the situation to smuggle food and firewood back into the ghetto in the empty bins.\textsuperscript{129}

Occasional complaints were voiced in Judenrat sessions about organizational problems in refuse collection and the unsanitary condition of streets and courtyards. Indeed, as if to corroborate these complaints, the mortality rate in the ghetto rose to almost double the rate prior to the German occupation.\textsuperscript{130} The above notwithstanding, the tireless efforts of the Health and Sanitation Departments ensured reasonable sanitary conditions in the ghetto, held epidemics at bay, and helped contain the rise in mortality.

The Welfare Department

One of the Judenrat’s functions was to provide aid to the needy, through its Welfare Department, headed by Judenrat member H. Peciner, a member of Poalei Zion–SS. Other members of the Welfare Committee were Poalei Zion–SS stalwarts Mordechai Chmielnik and Moshe Schwyf (also head of the Housing Department) and the Bundist Mordechai Rubinstein.\textsuperscript{131} At one of its first sessions, the Judenrat discussed a proposal for opening soup kitchens. After it was assigned a budget, the Welfare Department set up a network of welfare institutions, in close cooperation with the Supplies and Sanitation Departments. Most of its activities were based on voluntary work and contributions.

A special welfare committee opened an old-age home catering to the elderly, the infirm, and refugees. The home’s 200 residents were given bread rations on a par with Judenrat officials, coffee twice a day, and a bowl of soup for lunch. Until the home was destroyed in February 1943, the Judenrat’s Supplies Department delivered food on a regular basis. The ghetto also had two orphanages—the old orphanage, at 7 Częstochowska Street and a new one on Fabryczna Street—which cared for infants from Białystok and from nearby towns. Both orphanages were supplied regularly with oil, sugar, barley, flour, potatoes, and so forth. The orphans received adequate medical care and, as Kaplan wrote in his chronicle, “did not taste the bitterness of ghetto life.”\textsuperscript{132}

On November 29, 1941, when Rabbi Rosenman proposed a clothes collection for the needy, Peciner demanded that “the Judenrat first do its bit by
allocating the sum of 50 thousand rubles for the needy, or conducting its own appeal.\textsuperscript{133} Goldberg confirmed that the Judenrat leadership had agreed to this request. From time to time, the Welfare Department conducted special drives or appeals to the ghetto residents to contribute warm clothes, underwear, shoes, and bedclothes for the needy. The following, from September 8, 1941, is but one example of many:

Brothers and Sisters!
As the autumn and winter approach, with biting winds, cold weather, and snow, we appeal to you to help us. We are currently facing a difficult problem—how to provide for the homeless, the orphanages, the children’s day care centers, old-age homes, hospitals and other institutions. In order to avert a calamity, the Judenrat has decided to launch a general appeal. Do not forget that we have only ourselves to rely upon. . . . In the next few days, pairs of collectors will come knocking on your doors. Please give generously, in the true Jewish spirit.\textsuperscript{134}

Unlike other departments, such as the Industry and Labor Departments, which were run directly by the Judenrat, the Welfare Department was run by public aid committees, which also subsidized private soup kitchens. One such soup kitchen, proposed by Barash, catered to members of the intelligentsia. Opened on December 14, 1941, it was run by a special committee headed by Dr. Segal and the dentist Dr. Koppelman. After this soup kitchen was opened, the Judenrat decided to open up its own public kosher soup kitchen, organized by Judenrat member Shmuel Poniansky of the Mizrachi, in conjunction with the welfare committee. As time went by, the intelligentsia’s soup kitchen began catering to Judenrat employees, too. As private contributions dwindled, the Judenrat had to subsidize this soup kitchen almost entirely from its own funds, and so it began charging a minimum of 10 pfennigs per meal.\textsuperscript{135}

In the early months of the ghetto, a meal at this soup kitchen included soup and a meat course. When meat became scarce, it was replaced by a thick vegetable broth, and a few months later even this was replaced by a portion of rather diluted soup. At the Judenrat session of March 1, 1942, Dr. Rosenman reported that the Judenrat leadership and officials in charge of the soup kitchens had decided to introduce the following reforms:

1. Instead of the 1,500 lunches a day that had hitherto been provided, all soup kitchens would henceforth provide a total of 3,000 lunches a day.
2. All patrons of the soup kitchens would receive a meal a day, instead of a meal every other day.
3. All meals would be uniform.

Despite cutbacks in the menu, the meals provided by the soup kitchens were a significant help to thousands of indigent Jews. In time, another kitchen was set up for about 1,000 Judenrat employees and other poor people. A third canteen was set up by the Judenrat for Jewish policemen and firemen and their families. The three kitchens were regularly supplied by the Judenrat’s Supplies Department. Altogether, in the ghetto’s first year, the Judenrat provided about 4,000 lunches a day.

In the summer of 1942, as the ghetto’s economic situation improved, fewer people frequented the soup kitchens. The head of the soup kitchen on Nay Velt Street even reported that, due to the surplus food, it had, for the past few weeks, been serving meals for free. This prosperity was short-lived, however, and when the ghetto was sealed off in November 1942 and Jews were not allowed to leave, the situation once again deteriorated.

The Ultraorthodox Jews set up their own soup kitchen, which provided more than 1,000 lunches comprising two courses and bread, at a higher price than the other soup kitchens. In time, even this soup kitchen was forced to limit its meals to a portion of soup, while still charging the same price. Another private soup kitchen—considered the best in the ghetto—was set up at the initiative of the Agudist, Bunim Farbstein. This soup kitchen, subsidized by the Judenrat, was located in the “women’s gallery” of Citron’s Beit Hamidrash. Each day it provided hundreds of people with nourishing kosher meals.

The relief and welfare institutions that arose in the Białystok ghetto were to a large extent kept going by the generosity of Białystok’s Jews and volunteers who worked in coordination with the Judenrat’s Welfare Department. Although the Białystok ghetto, unlike the Warsaw ghetto, received no help from outside sources such as the Joint Distribution Committee, the Judenrat there went a long way toward relieving the plight of the destitute, even during the most difficult period that ensued.

The Education Department

In August 1941, the Germans authorized the Judenrat to open schools in the ghetto. Peysekh Kaplan, a former teacher and editor of the Yiddish paper *Unzer Lebn*, was appointed head of the Judenrat’s Education Department.
He began by organizing an education committee, which was entrusted with the task of opening two schools—a general school and a vocational school. The committee had a hard time finding suitable locations for the schools, since there were hardly any empty buildings left. However, on August 29, 1941, barely a month after the establishment of the ghetto, the Judenrat announced that enrollment for the Jewish schools was beginning.\textsuperscript{139}

The first two classes were opened on Succoth eve, October 5, 1941. Over the next four months, other classes were added until the school evolved into an ordinary elementary school with a seven-year curriculum. The general school, located at 30 Fabryczna Street (formerly the site of the CYShO high school), had about thirty-nine classes, with 1,600 boys and girls studying in three shifts. All schoolchildren were provided with 100–150 grams of bread a day. The second school, at 24 Nay Velt Street, was a religious school with about 500 boys and girls in separate classes. Kaplan claimed that Jewish education brought some happiness into the life of these children and prevented them from roaming the streets. Reizner, however, conceded that these schools were a mere drop in the ocean, and that most of the ghetto children did not attend school.\textsuperscript{140}

Playgroups for preschoolers were formed in private homes. Parents who were reluctant to send their children to regular schools for fear of a surprise \textit{aktion} often enrolled them in these playgroups. The Judenrat tried to bring these groups under its purview by ordering the teachers to register them with the Judenrat’s Culture Department. The Culture Department also ran vocational courses in the schools, which over time evolved into small workshops, and organized summer camps in the summer of 1942.

Enrollment for academic year 1942–43 started on August 18, 1942, and the new school opened on September 6, 1942. However, two months into the academic year, after the evacuation of the Jews from the Białyostok District, the ghetto was sealed, and the schools closed down.\textsuperscript{141}

The sources give no indication regarding cultural or religious activity in the Białyostok ghetto, probably because such activity had already ceased during the Soviet period.

\textbf{The Legal Department}

Under the Germans, the Judenrat—the only body recognized by the authorities—took on a legislative function and served as arbiter of legal disputes between ghetto residents. On September 2, 1941, a month or so after the ghetto’s establishment, the Judenrat put up a notice announcing the
establishment of a Legal Department, with powers to deliberate in civil disputes between Jews in the ghetto. The Legal Department also adjudicated disputes between individuals and the Judenrat. Claims against Judenrat employees, however, were beyond the Legal Department’s competence and were brought before the Judenrat for adjudication, after the petitioner had submitted his complaint in writing or orally. The petitioner was assured that if the Judenrat employee was found guilty, sanctions would be adopted against him and he would be made to repay any money unlawfully gained.

The rigors of daily life in the ghetto led to a proliferation of crime, and the Judenrat was concerned that rampant lawlessness would endanger the ghetto’s existence. In an attempt to salvage the Judenrat’s authority, Sobotnik—at a Judenrat session on May 31, 1942—proposed the establishment of a criminal court alongside the Judenrat. On behalf of the Judenrat’s presidency the motion was adopted, as follows: “The Judenrat Presidency shall draw up a panel of 15 jurors: six shall be members of the Judenrat, six shall be members of the public, and three shall be members of the legal profession. In any legal hearing, the Judenrat Presidency shall convene a tribunal of three men. . . . The accused shall choose his own counsel. The Judenrat Presidency shall draw up the panel of jurors within two to three days.”

The criminal court was set up the following day. Due to the Judenrat’s special standing with the authorities, the court had to include Judenrat members and all appointments had to be approved by the Judenrat. Although this arrangement effectively denied the court autonomy, the Jewish community did not protest. The function of the criminal court was to endorse the Judenrat’s authority. Notices issued by the Judenrat indicate that the type of cases brought to the court stemmed from crimes of violence against members of the Judenrat Presidency, failure to report to work, and theft of bread or potatoes and the like.

Conclusion

During the first fifteen months of the ghetto’s existence (August 1, 1941–October 31, 1942) the Judenrat invested tremendous effort into organizing ghetto life. As we have seen, many Judenrat members and officials had formerly been communal workers. The conditions of ghetto life, however, dictated new roles, as Sobotnik put it on the first anniversary of the ghetto’s establishment: “Things are different in the ghetto. Our communal workers and activists have had no experience of ghetto life. We have not experi-
enced conditions such as these for centuries. We must adapt ourselves to the new conditions. Unfortunately, we have become politicians.”

Although the Judenrat’s official chairman was Dr. Rosenman, the community leader Ephraim Barash was its active chairman. No doubt Dr. Rosenman deferred to Barash due to the latter’s vast public experience and his political savvy in his dealings with the authorities. Not only was there was no sign of rivalry between the two, but the fact that they actually shared the same two-story building for a while, at 1 Nowogródzka Street, testified to a strong bond of friendship and loyalty between them. Rabbi Rosenman’s failing health may have an additional factor in his decision to hand over the leadership of the Judenrat to Barash.

Barash assumed the function of acting chairman of the Judenrat even before the ghetto’s establishment, about a month after the Germans’ entry into Białystok. An experienced and circumspect leader, Barash had to formulate a policy that accommodated the strategy of the new rulers. Initially at least, Barash rejected the assumption that the murder of Białystok’s Jews during the early days of the German occupation was part of a general plan to liquidate European Jewry. He entertained no illusions about the weakness of the ghetto and the might of the German rulers, but sought all possible ways to protect the ghetto’s 41,000 Jews, for whom he felt responsible. Barash believed that he had to give the public some hope to latch onto, to keep it going. Although Barash had no ideology to speak of, he clung tenaciously to the belief that the ghetto Jews could be saved by making themselves indispensable to the Germans.

Some might argue that Barash’s behavior, especially his attempts to force his views on other Judenrat members, was dictatorial. However, it is important to remember that while such an interpretation may be valid under normal circumstances, the circumstances under which Barash was operating were far from normal. In the context of the times, his behavior was not so much “dictatorial” as guided by an intense desire to provide the community with hope in the face of despair.

A study of the sources shows that it took Barash a year to become the undisputed leader of the ghetto. Although his actions went virtually unchallenged during that year, it was only after the purge of the police force and the stabilization of the ghetto economy that he had the full backing of both the public and the Judenrat and was fully regarded as an upright public servant who had the good of the community at heart. At the Judenrat’s first anniversary celebrations, June 29, 1942, Barash reviewed the hardships the community had endured and the astonishing recovery the Białystok ghetto, unlike other ghettos, had made. His speech was a tribute to the
dedication of the collective leadership, which had played a large part in this recovery, as the final words indicate: “I am amazed at the total harmony between members of the Judenrat. There has not been one case of dissension. All our decisions and actions have been unanimous. Although, by rights, optimism has no place in the ghetto, when I consider the distance we have covered and the burden we have carried [so far], I feel confident that we bring the Bialystok ghetto to a happy end.”

After these heartfelt sentiments were loudly applauded, Sobotnik took the floor:

The Judenrat did not come into being overnight, but has slowly evolved into its present format, by means of hard work. It is thanks to these efforts that the Judenrat, as we know it, exists. As you know, we members were not elected to our posts, but were asked by the honorable engineer Barash to step into the breach in these difficult times. Today, the Judenrat can be likened to a government, with attendant ministries, departments, and ministers. . . . Within this government, Barash has the triple function of prime minister, minister of the interior, and minister of industry. This is because in the ghetto, these functions are interdependent and must therefore come under a single authority. Industry, for example, by serving the German army, is an integral part of foreign policy. Sometimes we wonder how he does it, how he manages to keep everything running smoothly. Without wishing to detract from the efforts of other board members, it is Barash who provides us with inspiration and direction. . . . Although, in our prayers, we ask for a “life of goodness,” a “life of sustenance,” a “blameless life,” today we are grateful for “life” itself—a life made possible by “Rav” [the Hebrew for “rabbi”], the initials of Rosenman-Barash.

Other speakers, such as Goldberg, Melnitzki, Lipshitz, and Berman, took up similar themes. Limon, in his closing speech, said: “We have done everything we could to deliver Bialystok from decrees and misfortunes. Let us pray that, with the Judenrat’s help, ‘the year with its curses shall end, and a new year with its blessings shall begin,’ and that we shall all remain alive on the face of the earth.”

Available testimonies and memoirs confirm that until the sealing of the ghetto in November 1942, life in the ghetto gradually stabilized and even became tolerable. A large percentage of ghetto residents were employed, food was in reasonable supply, health services were satisfactory, and factories and workshops thrived. This situation lulled people into the false belief that they would weather the storm safely, even when news reached the
ghetto of the extermination of Jewish communities in Poland and the Eastern Territories.

Although the German authorities empowered the Judenrat to impose its authority on the Jewish population by force if need be, Barash preferred to keep the community informed of events. The general assemblies he called at regular intervals in the Linat Hazedek building (the ghetto’s main hall) were designed for that purpose—to provide the population with information. It was probably due to shortage of funds that the proposal to launch a weekly newspaper never got off the ground. Instead, the General Assembly fulfilled the role of a newspaper, except that it reached a much smaller public. Therefore, those who attended the assemblies were asked to disseminate their contents to the public at large. Note that the General Assembly also served another purpose: to win public support for the Judenrat. In this, Barash was highly successful.

Right from the start, Barash saw the establishment of good relations with the Germans as a prerequisite for obtaining concessions from them. His success in this area enhanced his reputation and authority. His “domestic policy”—to set up factories, expand production, and recruit workers—was subordinate to his “foreign policy,” which was to prove to the Germans that the Jews of Białystok were indispensable. Barash hoped thereby to gain time and lead the ghetto safely through the war.

Although Barash’s leadership was uncontested, it took him a long time to convince the ghetto Jews of the importance of work to the ghetto’s survival. In a special assembly that took place on October 11, 1942, Barash bitterly complained that sixteen months after the ghetto’s establishment, thousands of Jews were still unemployed, without any idea of the catastrophe they were about to bring down upon the entire community. Ironically, Barash was more successful in his “foreign policy” than in his “domestic policy.” Although he failed to bring the ghetto population around to his way of thinking, he did manage to convince the local Germans of the ghetto’s usefulness and of the folly of splitting the ghetto into two. Barash soon realized that the local German commanders did not want the ghetto destroyed, and he hoped, through them, to convince the higher echelons, too, of the ghetto’s indispensability. With this goal in mind, he attempted to turn the local commanders into champions and defenders of the ghetto.

In October 1942, when rumors reached Barash of an imminent aktion in the district, he informed his colleagues that the local Germans had promised that as long as they were in charge no harm would befall the ghetto. He was also convinced that the local Germans would pressure the higher echelons to leave the ghetto intact. In the following chapters we shall see...
that Barash's assessment was realistic. German documents show that the
German commanders in Białystok were in favor of leaving the ghetto in-
tact until the end of the war. In the short term, Barash's foreign policy suc-
ceeded. By March 1942 he had managed to forge direct contacts with higher
cadres, in particular with the Wehrmacht. As part of his policy of working
from the bottom up, Barash also met with high-ranking army officials, such
as Krüger from the Armaments Ministry, whom he asked to intercede with
Berlin on the ghetto's behalf.\textsuperscript{153} It was also thanks to Barash that a never-
ending stream of visitors, including Gauleiter Koch himself, came from
Königsberg and Berlin to see the ghetto's productivity for themselves.

Barash, throughout his tenure, worked tirelessly to achieve his twin goals
of stabilizing ghetto life and appeasing the Germans. A study of Barash's
objectives shows that his overarching goal of saving lives overshadowed all
other considerations. The above notwithstanding, the question arises as to
whether Barash should have adhered so single-mindedly to his policy right
to the end. This question shall be examined in the following chapters.
Chapter 5

The Early Days of the Underground

After the Germans invaded Bialystok, Tadeusz Jakubowski (code name “Antony”), a Communist member of the Polish underground, approached Marila Rozycka, a Communist activist in the ghetto, with a proposal to set up a joint Polish-Jewish underground. Early on during the German occupation, Jakubowski even hid in the ghetto under the alias of Abraham Levin. In early 1942, he left for Warsaw in order to establish ties with the Polish Workers Party (PPR, Polska Partia Robotnicza), as the Polish Communist party was called during the occupation. Jakubowski kept close ties with Communist workers in the ghetto and instructed Rozycka to organize former members of the Polish Communist Party (KPP, Komunistyczna Partia Polski) to help the Soviet Union in its struggle against the German conquerors.1

The Anti-Fascist Committee

Several weeks later, in December 1941, when the Jewish Communists held their first meeting in the Children’s Hospital in the ghetto, Jakubowski was in attendance. It is not surprising that the founding meeting of the Jewish underground was initiated by the Communists, since during the Soviet annexation almost all other parties and youth movements had been banned. The underground organization, originally known as the Organization of Workers and Peasants for War against the Invaders, later became known as the Anti-Fascist Committee,2 a name reminiscent of the popular Communist organizations set up in various countries to fight fascism. During the meeting, a strategy was formulated, and a provisional board, which later evolved into a permanent leadership, was elected. The Anti-Fascist Committee saw itself as part of the larger anti-Fascist organization in Bialystok,
comprising Polish and Belorussian Communists, and maintained ties with it throughout the German occupation. Rozycka and Sheyne Pat-Levin, a teacher, were responsible for maintaining connections with Communists outside the ghetto.

The Committee regarded secret propaganda, inside the ghetto factories in particular, as a means of setting up an active Communist organization to help the Soviet Union and resist the Germans. In early 1942, the Communist organization, which included both Communist young people and the old guard, focused mainly on helping Soviets imprisoned in the large prisoner-of-war camp known as the Tenth Cavalry Battalion (the Tenth “Polk”), about 50 kilometers from Białystok. Former members of Komso-mol youth groups who worked outside the ghetto smuggled clothes, food, tobacco, and medicines to the Soviet prisoners through comrades who worked in the camps.³

The Pioneer Coordination Committee

In December 1941, members of the Pioneer Coordination Committee, the representative institution of all pioneer organizations, met in Vilna to decide what action to take after the massacre of Jews in Ponary and other places in the East. The members were divided. Some, such as Abba Kovner and other members of Hashomer Hatzair, argued that “Vilna is not just Vilna, Ponary is not an isolated incident. . . . It is part of a larger program [encompassing all of European Jewry].”⁴ Others, such as Mordecai Tenenbaum, head of Hehalutz Hatzair–Dror in Vilna (hereafter, Dror), believed that Ponary was an isolated incident triggered by the hostility of the local Lithuanians to the Jews or by the Germans’ belief that the Jews were Communist agitators.⁵ Later, in April 1943, in a letter to the secretariat of the Kibbutz Hameuhad in Palestine, Tenenbaum wrote:

Some saw the akton in Vilna, the subsequent destruction of the Jews of Lithuania, and the partial liquidation of the communities of White Russia as revenge by the Germans against the Jews of Soviet Russia—for being the architects and accessories of the Soviet regime. The local residents themselves viewed the massacres as reprisals against the Jewish “Commissars” and “Communists.” In the Generalgouvernement things were still quiet. . . . We knew that self-defense was pointless. The power that had conquered all of Europe and had crushed entire countries in a few days, can squash us—a handful of youngsters—in an instant. It was an act of despair, of resolve.⁶
Although he claimed, “We have begun preparing for resistance in Vilna. . . . We have adopted the slogan: Lomir nisht geyn vi shof tsu der shekhite [“We shall not go like sheep to the slaughter!”], the sources indicate otherwise. Indeed, Tenenbaum was at the time convinced that it was too late to set up a resistance movement in Vilna, and he wished to transfer Dror members in Vilna to “quieter” places, such as Bialystok. In his testimony, Nissan Reznik, a member of Hanoar Hazioni in Vilna, stated that Tenenbaum and Zvi Mersik, a Dror activist, believed that local factors, associated with former Soviet control of the area, were responsible for the deportation of Jews to Ponary and insisted that it was imperative to move comrades away from areas formerly under Soviet control. In a different testimony, Reznik recalled that between October and December 1941, when the Jews of Vilna were still uncertain how to react to the massacres in Ponary, Tenenbaum claimed that the Jews in Ponary were being murdered because the Germans saw them as allies of the former Communist regime in the city. Abba Kovner testified that Tenenbaum was convinced that Bialystok would be spared the fate of Vilna. This view is corroborated by Rożka Korczak in Lehavot ba-Efar (Flames in the Ashes), and by Haika Grosman, who wrote: “For us, the decision of Mordecai Tenenbaum and his friends in Vilna to move members of Dror out of Vilna to other ghettos that were ‘safe,’ was a betrayal of the harsh reality of the liquidation [of European Jewry] for the illusion that other ghettos would not be harmed.”

Tenenbaum became even more convinced that he was right after receiving information about Warsaw and Bialystok from Dror members Tema Schneiderman and Lonka Kozybrodska, who had been sent there by the movement. When they returned to Vilna in the second half of December 1941, they brought a message from the Dror leadership in Warsaw recommending that members be sent from Vilna to Bialystok. Itzhak Zuckermand, a leader of the Warsaw Dror, had the following to say: “We sent Lonka and later Frumka [Plotnicka], at our own initiative and discretion, to get most of our members out [of Vilna]. . . . It was our idea to send people from Vilna to Bialystok to set up a base there . . . because under the circumstances, building up a force in Vilna was out of the question.” Presumably Tenenbaum reached this conclusion even before receiving the directive from Warsaw, not only because Bialystok was safer but because he wanted his comrades to be as far away as possible from the center of the storm.

Note that the members of Dror in Vilna had it far harder than members of Hashomer Hatzair. Not only were they fewer in number, but they were
mostly refugees from the provincial towns of Lithuania who had no local associates and were unable to establish ties with the Judenrat. Moreover, they had no authoritative leadership, apart from Tenenbaum (himself a refugee from Warsaw, arriving in Vilna in 1939). The last straw for Tenenbaum was when many members of youth movements who had come to Vilna as refugees at the outbreak of war decided to return to their native cities and join their comrades who were in danger. Tenenbaum became increasingly convinced of the necessity of finding ways to transfer comrades from Vilna to Białystok.

Tenenbaum would never have been able to accomplish this without the help of Anton Schmidt, a sergeant in the Wehrmacht in charge of soldiers who had lost their units, whose office was situated opposite the railway station in Vilna. During a patrol through the streets of Vilna, Schmidt met Mrs. Adler, a Jewish woman who had formerly been married to an Austrian friend of Schmidt’s and was now married to a Jew called Herman Adler. Upon their arrival in Vilna as refugees from Czechoslovakia, Adler, a member of Poalei Zion, was imprisoned in Vilna’s Lukiszki jail. When Mrs. Adler informed Schmidt of his plight, Schmidt managed to obtain his release. In November 1941, Adler arranged a meeting between Tenenbaum and Schmidt, during which Schmidt revealed that he had visited Palestine and that he admired the Zionist and pioneer movements.

It was through Tenenbaum that Zuckerman heard about Schmidt. In his memoirs, Zuckerman wrote that Schmidt’s proposal was to transfer members of Dror from Vilna to Palestine. Tenenbaum and Schmidt together devised a daring plan to smuggle Jews to the Latvian port of Libau “and from there—in winter—over the frozen Finnish Gulf to Sweden.” The entire operation would cost $200, plus 4,000 rubles per person. The idea was to smuggle out twenty-four Jews, twelve of whom would be wealthy enough to cover the cost of the remaining twelve pioneers and the Adler couple. The plan, however, never got off the ground, since few people were willing to take such a risk at a time when aktionen were continuing in Vilna unabated.

Members of Hashomer Hatzair in Vilna, unlike Dror, preferred to stay put and organize a broad-based fighting underground within the ghetto. However, the option of sending members out of Vilna was still an open issue, especially after Tosia Altman arrived to replace Edek Boraks, who left for Warsaw in the second half of December 1941. Altman, a Hashomer Hatzair courier, spoke of life in the Warsaw ghetto and brought up the possibility of leaving Vilna. Grosman, who was introduced to Schmidt by Tenenbaum, described a meeting that took place at Schmidt’s home, at
which she, Tenenbaum, and Esther Jaffe of Betar were present. At the meeting, orchestrated by Kovner, Tenenbaum and Betar leader Josef Glazman, “everyone spoke of getting out, going away, escaping. This was our supreme goal, and the main reason for our contacts with Schmidt.”15

Tenenbaum believed it was possible to get his comrades out of Vilna to Białystok, especially after he received a directive from Warsaw to set up a Dror base in Białystok on the lines of the bases in Ostrowiec and Częstochowa.16 On New Year’s Eve 1941, the date on which Abba Kovner read to a gathering of pioneers in Vilna his famous manifesto calling for an armed uprising against the Germans, Tenenbaum and Esther Jaffe visited Schmidt’s house to plan the escape of pioneers from Vilna to Białystok and Warsaw. Tenenbaum and Jaffe agreed that the number of “escapees” would come equally from the Pioneer Coordination Committee and Betar.17

It was probably at that meeting that Tenenbaum and Schmidt worked out the details of their plan to transfer fourteen members of Dror from Vilna to Białystok. The idea was that Schmidt would hide the fourteen members in his house for two days, until the coast was clear, and then drive them to Białystok, in early January 1942. Among the escapees were: Zvi Mersik, Tema Schneiderman, Zipporah Birm, Yitzhak Engelman, Hayyim Rodner, and Israel Margolis. Pessiah Midnik, Pessiah Zlotnik, Yehiel (Ilya) Scheinbaum, and others stayed behind in Vilna.18 Tenenbaum himself did not accompany his comrades but left Vilna on his own. His possession of forged Aryan papers in the name of Jozef Tamaroff enabled him to travel by train to Grodno, where he met with members of Dror and reported on the situation in Vilna before continuing on to Białystok.

Several days later, three members of Hashomer Hatzair in Vilna—Rivka Madejska, Sarah Develtov, and Yaakov (Yandje) Lebedz—who had not been part of Schmidt’s operation, arrived in Białystok. Before the war Lebedz had been a member of Hashomer Hatzair’s main leadership in Poland, and he was now a leader of the Vilna branch. Although Madejska and Develtov were sent to Białystok as a “pioneer force” to set up an underground there,19 Lebedz, it would seem, had different ideas. Korczak indicated that during debates in Vilna on strategy, Lebedz’s views differed from those of most of his comrades.20 Kovner also testified that Lebedz did not come to Białystok at the movement’s behest but rather for the same reasons as Tenenbaum and his comrades.21

At the end of January 1942, after the United Partisan Organization (FPO, Fareynikte Partizaner Organizatsye) was set up, Haika Grosman was also sent to Białystok to set up an active nucleus of Hashomer Hatzair there. Since Grosman was a native of Białystok and a leading Hashomer
Hatzair’s activist in Vilna, she was the natural choice. Her mission, as Grosman herself put it, was to set up an underground fighting organization in the Białystok ghetto, on the lines of the FPO that had recently been set up in Vilna.22

A document unearthed in the underground archive of the historian Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw ghetto reveals that Anton Schmidt was arrested in the second half of January 1942 after his ties with the Jews of Vilna were discovered. He was taken to Pawiak Prison in Warsaw, court-martialed, and executed on April 13, 1942.23 On December 22, 1966, Yad Vashem recognized Schmidt as a Righteous Among the Nations.

The Revival of the Youth Movements in the Ghetto

Some of the Jewish youth movements whose activities ceased under Soviet annexation started functioning again when news reached the ghetto that Jews were being liquidated in Lithuania.

Hashomer Hatzair

Hashomer Hatzair is the World Federation of Zionist Youth for Education to Kibbutz Life and Personal Fulfillment in Eretz Israel. The movement was founded in Galicia and Poland, in 1913–14, and included the Scouting Movement Hashomer and Tzeirei Zion. In 1916, the two movements merged and became known as Hashomer Hatzair. The movement developed its own unique educational program, combining the discipline of the Scouting Movement with an emphasis on personal example and the fulfillment of the ideals of aliya and kibbutz life. In 1927, the Second Convention of Hashomer Hatzair decided that aliya and kibbutz life were binding on all members of the movement.24

The three Hashomer Hatzair members who came to Białystok from Vilna in early January 1942 lived in a small attic apartment, at 11 Kupiecka Street, the prewar local headquarters of the movement. Zerach Silberberg, Gedalyah Shayek, and Ephraim Strikowsky, members of Kibbutz Bamivhan, who had fled Vilna after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, were already in Białystok. Their numbers increased with the arrival of refugees from Slonim, Grodno, and nearby towns who escaped to the ghetto during the first few months of the German occupation. These former members of Hashomer Hatzair, together with local pioneers, set up a kibbutz on Częstochowska Street, while members of the secretariat occu-
pied another room, at 6 Nay Velt Street. Thus, thanks to Silberberg, Shayek, Strikowsky, and local members, the Hashomer Hatzair movement in the ghetto was revived, and once again its members met to discuss social and ideological issues, and recruitment policy. The largest cell to form was the Scouts’ Corps, comprising about thirty-five graduates from Kibbutz Tel Amal.25

Shortly after her arrival in Białystok, Grosman arranged a meeting with Barash, with the avowed purpose of dispelling any illusions he might have had regarding the Germans’ real intentions. She also wanted to get a sense of Barash and enlist his support for the movement, without revealing its true goals.26 Right from the start, Barash took a liking to Grosman, treating her “as though we were old acquaintances.” 27 Over time, a close and lasting bond grew between them. In The Underground Army, Grosman recounted what Barash told her at that first meeting: “I don’t believe that what happened in Vilna will take place in Białystok. The Germans I know will not dare to act that way. . . . They need us. In any case, for the time being we can live in peace. I would like to tell your people about what is happening in the ghetto. . . . I will always know in advance if something is going to happen. Don’t do things on your own.”28

From that point on, Barash kept members of Hashomer Hatzair informed of events. For example, he told them what questions the Germans had asked him about the refugees from Vilna. He also informed them which Jews were in the Gestapo’s pay, such as Zelikowicz and his gang.29 Grosman, in her book, emphasized that Barash was particularly anxious to forestall ties between Hashomer Hatzair members and these agents provocateurs.

Although Grosman told Barash nothing about the FPO in Vilna or the true purpose of her arrival in Białystok, he was not deceived. As an ardent Zionist, Barash sympathized with the goals of the youth movements, but he was also wary of them because they did not share his belief in the ghetto’s ability to survive the war intact. However, being a wise and discreet man, Barash tried to avoid an ideological confrontation with them. He probably assumed that by showing them understanding and tolerance, conceding to some of their demands, and keeping them informed of the Germans’ intentions, a basis of mutual trust would be established in which the status quo in the ghetto would be preserved.

Barash went a long way toward meeting the demands of Hashomer Hatzair activists. For example, he granted the Vilna members legal status by placing them on the list of ghetto residents; he found jobs for them and provided them with permits that exempted them from curfew. For members who lived as Aryans outside the ghetto, he provided passes. And he registered Kibbutz Tel Amal as a soup kitchen.30
Like other pioneer movements in the ghetto, Hashomer Hatzair constantly consulted with the Warsaw and Vilna leaderships, which were at the time cut off from each other. Members asked advice from Warsaw and Vilna on routine matters as well as on matters of principle, including cooperation with other movements, some of which were considered bitter rivals. Contact was maintained via young female couriers disguised as Aryans who delivered information and instructions. They sometimes smuggled in propaganda leaflets or even weapons, at enormous personal risk. Grosman described the atmosphere in Hashomer Hatzair in Białystok during 1942 as follows: “They educated themselves, fashioned themselves. Their sense of mission spurred them on—their position forced them to be strong and humane at one and the same time. Their teachers were the movement and belles lettres. They read Musa Dagh and Mademoiselle Fifi. . . . We wanted to revive old dogmas in the light of the new reality. . . . We applied the old dogmas of Marx and Borochov to the new reality. This is how we educated ourselves.”

Hehalutz Hatzair–Dror

Hehalutz Hatzair–Dror was set up as the result of the merger of the youth division of Poalei Zion–SS and the Pioneer Youth Organization Hehalutz Hatzair. The Unification Convention of the movement took place in Józefów, in September 1938. At a clandestine convention in Lwów on January 1, 1940, its name was changed to Histadrut Hanoar Hehalutz–Sotzialisti–Dror (The Federation of Pioneer–Socialist Youth–Dror).

The main cell of the Hehalutz Hatzair movement in Białystok was Kibbutz Tel Hai, which had been inactive for more than a year. Kibbutz Tel Hai, one of five General Pioneer training farms in Poland, was set up in 1927 following the failure of the Fourth Aliyah. Its founders were members of the Hehalutz movement in Poland, and it was called Tel Hai after Yosef Trumpeldor who fell at Tel Hai on Adar 11, 1920 (the kibbutz was set up around the anniversary of Yosef Trumpeldor’s death). In late 1931, the kibbutz moved to Białystok, and disbanded a few weeks after the city’s annexation to the Soviet Union, at the outbreak of World War II.

The cell’s revival was due to the initiative of a group of Vilna members who arrived in Białystok in early January 1942, where they were welcomed by Yaakov Lipshitz, Peciner, and Mordechai Chmielnik, members of Poalei Zion–SS, who held key positions in the Judenrat’s Welfare Department. The Białystok ghetto seemed like a safe haven to the Vilna contingent, as Zipporah Birman described: “When we entered the Białystok ghetto, we
felt that we were entering Paradise. . . After days of *aktionen* and terrible massacres, after sleeping on the ground and suffering cold and hunger, Białystok was like a dream. . . . We could not believe our eyes. . . . The Jews in the ghetto were actually leading a relatively comfortable and normal life. The Judenrat was in control, and everything functioned smoothly, like a mini-State.”

Like Hehalutz Hatzair, the Vilna contingent of Dror organized itself into a collective that later grew into the kibbutz. After establishing ties with former members of the movement, they began working among the ghetto youth. Dror’s most prominent activists included Zvi Mersik, Hershel Rosenthal, Hanoch Żelaznogura, Zipporah Birman, and Tema Schneiderman, most of them graduates of Dror seminaries who had been involved in Dror even before the war. Chmielnik and other party members helped them find jobs in the ghetto. Their dream of setting up a kibbutz came true when they were given an abandoned two-story cottage on Smolna Street. Members of the group called the house “Chata” (Polish for “cottage”), and the name stuck. Other members of the kibbutz lived at 3 Jurowiecka Street, near the ghetto gate, in an apartment whose windows overlooked one of the main streets on the Aryan side. Soon, the number of kibbutz members rose to fifty. The standard of living in the kibbutz improved after a kitchen was installed. “Once again we tasted the pleasures of pioneer life,” recalled Birman.

One of Schneiderman’s jobs was to visit surrounding towns, searching for survivors of the massacres following the German invasion of the region in June–July 1941. Hershel Rosenthal and Bronka Vinizka also visited towns in the vicinity and arranged regular contacts with Dror members. They invited representatives to attend a conference for movement activists, scheduled for Passover 5702 (Spring 1942). In March 1942, Dror members held a large conference in the ghetto attended by members from Grodno, Jaszynówka, Knyszyn, and Dąbrowa, among other places. Present at the conference was Frumka Plotnicka from Warsaw, who gave an account of the situation in the Warsaw ghetto. Tenenbaum reported on the situation in the German-occupied Soviet territories, while Mersik, coordinator of Dror’s activities in the ghetto, spoke of the future. At the end of the three-day conference, Tenenbaum returned to Warsaw, his native town.

For the first few months, members of Dror in Białystok focused mainly on internal problems, such as work in the vegetable gardens, accommodation, legal aid, and help to refugees. As the kibbutz grew, the Białystok cell established ties with remote areas, while its couriers and refugees brought news from towns and cities throughout occupied Poland. Barash and Goldberg
could not praise the movement enough,\textsuperscript{37} almost certainly because it did not represent a threat to them at the time. The Dror pioneers celebrated seder night of Passover 1942 together with the Judenrat. At the seder, which was led by Rabbi Gedalyah Rosenman and Chmielnik, Plotnicka gave an account of the movement’s struggles, while Yakov Goldberg addressed the pioneers.

Later, however, after Plotnicka, Schneiderman, and Kozybrodska returned to Warsaw, and there was no further news of them, the Dror members lost heart. When news began arriving of the large \textit{aktion} in Warsaw in the summer of 1942, the members of Dror were driven to despair. Birman described their feelings: “We felt alone, abandoned. Our feelings were justified, for truly they had forgotten us. All of them left, some for good reasons, others for less good ones. They abandoned us in those terrible times, and forgot all about us. Yes, it hurt, but we did not give up.”\textsuperscript{38}

Lonka Kozybrodska had been arrested on the way to Warsaw in early June 1942 at Malkinia, the border post between the Bialystok District and the Generalgouvernement, and taken to Warsaw’s Pawiak Prison. While in prison, she managed to communicate with her ghetto comrades at 34 Dzielna Street. In November 1942 she was deported to Auschwitz, where she died of typhus on March 18, 1943, at the age of 29.\textsuperscript{39}

Throughout the summer of 1942, despite the relative calm that prevailed within the Bialystok ghetto, the Dror pioneers were plagued by a sense of abandonment and isolation, especially after the fighting front was set up without them.

\textit{The Bund}

The Bund was the first Jewish workers’ party, set up in Vilna in 1897, to improve the lot of the Jewish worker, in the spirit of socialism. The Bund was opposed to all Jewish national ideologies, and was one of the staunchest opponents of the Zionist movement. The Bund played an active role in “self-defense” and left a strong mark on Jewish community life in Poland in the second half of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{40}

Since most of the veteran Bundists in Bialystok were imprisoned by the Soviets, or fled, only a small group of activists remained. This group was divided on the issue of an armed revolt. While the Bundist youth believed that activism was the correct response to the Germans’ policy, the old guard was opposed to an armed uprising. The younger Bundists developed close ties with the Anti-Fascist Committee and made considerable inroads among the local youth. They, like the Bundist youth of Vilna, joined the fighting organization, despite the fact that it included youth from the
Zionist movement, which it opposed. One of Białystok’s most outstanding Bundist activists was Sholem Poportz, then in his early 30s, a former leader of the Vilna branch of the Socialist Youth Organization SKIF (Sotsialistisher Kinder Ferband). Poportz moved to Białystok in late 1939, where he headed a group of about a dozen young people, the most notable of whom were Herschel Floimenbaum and Niunya Brodsky. The SKIF activists were instrumental in promoting cultural activity in the ghetto. In late 1942, they set up a Jewish library (run by Shlomo Reznik) as well as a mobile library, with books that remained from the large Sholem Aleichem Library and Jewish school libraries.

The Bundist old guard, led by Yerahmiel Kostyn, the Bund’s leader during the Soviet annexation, were opposed to an armed uprising. Kostyn’s views were shared by Judenrat member Mordechai Rubinstein, a Bund sympathizer and former head of Białystok’s CYShO school. The relatively stable conditions in the Białystok ghetto lulled him into thinking that an armed uprising was not necessary. Moreover, Rubinstein was a member of the Judenrat, which, with the public’s backing, staunchly opposed an armed uprising.

**Betar: The Revisionists**

Betar is an acronym of Berit Yosef Trumpeldor, the youth organization of the Zionist Revisionists. Its aims were to educate youth in the spirit of territorial integrity of the homeland, with an emphasis on military training for self-defense. In 1923, the first branch of Betar was set up in Riga, and in 1925, Zeev Vladimir Jabotinsky established the Betar movement in Poland.

The Betarists in the Białystok ghetto exercised extreme caution in forming ties with left-wing movements. Their suspicions of these movements dated back to the 1930s, during the friction between the traditional Zionist Organization and Zeev Jabotinsky’s New Zionist Organization. The distrust between Betar and the Left peaked following the murder of Chaim Arlosoroff in 1933, and, at the outbreak of World War II, in the Soviet annexed territories, it developed into an out-and-out confrontation, when the Betarists accused the left-wing movements of cooperating with the Communist regime. The distrust between the Betarists and the left-wing movements was mutual. After the German occupation, members of Hashomer Hatzair in particularly resented the Betarists, many of whom were members of the Jewish police in the Vilna ghetto.

Itzhak Fleisher, who before the war had served as vice-president of Betar in Białystok, became the leader of Betar in the Białystok ghetto. He used his apartment at 5 Nay Velt Street as a center for Betar activity, and he was
helped by his wife Ida Birenboim, an ardent Betarist and secretary of the movement. Fleisher, together with his young second-in-command, Mathus, formed ties with other youth movements in the ghetto, especially with Dror.

Although the sources have little to say about Betar in Białystok (or in other places, for that matter), it is clear that it was a small movement that had difficulty in making inroads within the ghetto.44

Hanoar Hazioni

Hanoar Hazioni was a General Zionist youth organization within the World Zionist movement, founded in 1931 by the Union of General Zionist Youth Organizations that existed in various European countries in the 1920s. The movement educated its members toward personal fulfillment of pioneer and kibbutz ideals and was associated with the General Zionist party.45 The sources have little to say of the activities of Hanoar Hazioni in the Białystok ghetto. The historian Ber Mark writes that the members of this small disorganized group were graduates of the Hebrew High School in Białystok and that its main activists were the Hebrew teacher David Wronek and the Hebrew High School graduates Mottl Tartazki, Moshe Halperin, and Yehiel Zeifman, among others. Some members of Hanoar Hazioni were members of the Jewish police force in the ghetto. Tenenbaum wrote that they played a very active, if rather disorganized, role in education in the ghetto.46 Although the sources indicate that Shlomo Entin, a Hanoar Hazioni activist from Vilna arrived in Białystok in mid-1942, they do not specify the exact date of his arrival, because according to Grosman “he used to commute between Warsaw, Białystok, and Vilna.”47

The Establishment of Front A, Summer 1942

One of the reasons why Grosman was sent to Białystok in late January 1942 was to set up a underground fighting organization in the Białystok ghetto, along the lines of the FPO that had been set up in Vilna in January 1942 by activists of pioneer movements, under the Communist activist Yitzhak Wittenberg. These activists rose above their ideological differences and longstanding feuds to found a cohesive fighting organization, which incorporated Communists, Betarists, members of Hashomer Hatzair and Hanoar Hazioni, and later also Bundists.48

When Grosman came to Białystok, she brought with her a manifesto that had been proclaimed at the Conference of Pioneer Youth in Vilna on
December 31, 1941, as well as a letter from Wittenberg to Lolek Mintz, a Communist activist in Białyostok. Reports by members of the pioneer movements who came to Białyostok from Vilna, together with Wittenberg’s letter, indicate that preparations were under way for the establishment of a similar organization in Białyostok. However, the Communists in Białyostok were less flexible than their Vilna counterparts, and the establishment of a resistance movement in Białyostok proved to be a long and arduous process.

The Anti-Fascist Committee—which soon had several dozen members—was operating in the Białyostok ghetto by early 1942, and the establishment of a united Jewish resistance organization in Białyostok was largely dependent on the approval of its members. At the time, the Communist leadership was the only real political leadership to speak of, since under the Soviets most other youth movements had been banned and were only now beginning to be active again.

Shortly after her arrival in Białyostok, Grosman met with Mintz, gave him a detailed report of developments in Vilna, and handed him Wittenberg’s letter. In her memoirs, she described Mintz’s astonishment: “Wittenberg has joined forces with the Zionist movements, even the Revisionists?” Although Grosman emphasized the importance of unity in the common struggle, Mintz refused to commit himself on this issue before conferring with leaders of the Anti-Fascist Committee. The latter decided that “they could not begin to cooperate with movements with whom they had always been at loggerheads, without orders from above.” Mintz, who knew that Grosman was about to leave on a mission for Warsaw, asked her to deliver a letter to Joseph Lewartowsky, known as “The Elder.” Lewartowsky, a veteran Communist, was considered by his colleagues an authoritative figure whose word was law. A native of Białyostok, Lewartowsky had been sent to Warsaw in January 1942 to help revive the Polish Communist Party. After a short stay on the Aryan side of the city, he entered the ghetto in order to set up a Communist Party cell there.

While Grosman was in Warsaw, she met with Lewartowsky, and upon her return to Białyostok in the spring of 1942, she brought a letter from him to his comrades, urging them to open their doors to anyone who was willing to fight. Nevertheless, he admitted, Białyostok was a special case, since it had been under Soviet rule before the outbreak of war. He trusted the activists in Białyostok to come to the right decision on their own.

The Communists in Białyostok, cut off from occupied Poland, did not know whether the policy of the PPR was also binding on them. It was the non-Jewish Communist activists in Białyostok who clung to the Communist tradition of suspicion and isolation. This approach, which rejected co-
operation with elements other than known ideological allies, determined the Anti-Fascist Committee’s policy in Białystok and also explains why Hashomer Hatzair’s negotiations with the Communists in the ghetto was so fraught with difficulties.

The possibility of setting up an underground organization in Białystok without the Communists never arose, both because of the Communists’ strong standing in the ghetto and because the armed struggle was still not a top priority for Dror. Moreover, although a practical cooperation of sorts existed between Dror and Hashomer Hatzair, their different interpretations of the political situation made close cooperation difficult. Dror also suffered from the lack of a leader, with Tenenbaum away in Warsaw for most of 1942.

The next step was to find someone suitable who could set up the fighting underground in Białystok. This task proved to be problematic since Tenenbaum, the obvious candidate, was in Warsaw at the time. Grosman, who was in Białystok, was too busy working for the movement and, until the autumn of 1942, was mostly on the move. The leaders of the other movements, which were just beginning to reemerge from suppression, lacked the necessary qualifications. Finally, in April 1942, Edek Boraks, a member of the Hashomer Hatzair leadership in Vilna, arrived in Białystok to take over the military command of the emerging underground.

Only in August 1942 did Boraks succeed in setting up Front A—a framework that united the Communists, Hashomer Hatzair, and Bundist youth. News of a large-scale aktion in Warsaw and the rift within the Communist Party of Białystok in the summer of 1942 facilitated the establishment of the front.

The rift came about after Yudita Nowogrodzka, a Communist leader resolutely opposed to an armed uprising in the ghetto, was expelled from the organization. Nowogrodzka, then 35 years old, suffered from heart disease. The murder of her husband in one of the aktionen in Białystok during the early days of the German occupation, as well as the personal attacks against her both before and after the split, ruined her health. After she was expelled, she organized groups to escape to the forests and help the Soviet partisans there. She set up a new partisan organization, known as Yudita’s group, and worked tirelessly to achieve her goal. The Polish historian Szymon Datner, a member of Yudita’s group, wrote that the majority of Communists in the ghetto favored the partisan option. Even members of the old guard, such as Rivka Wyskowska (later Shindler), Adela Hertz, Mietek Jakubowicz, Leybush Mandelblitt, Velvel Wolkowysk, and others, supported Nowogrodzka, and when she was expelled from the organization, they resigned in sympathy.

The establishment of the front did not automatically signal an end to the
ideological differences among its constituent factions. While the Communists believed that the armed struggle was a universal struggle, rather than exclusively Jewish issue, members of the pioneer youth movements saw the ghetto as the main stage of the nationalist-Jewish struggle. As Grosman explained:

The Front gradually evolved, but mutual suspicion did not cease. Yoshka Kaweh was appointed instead of Leybush Mandelblitt [Communists] to coordinate activities. . . . As a member of the Communist old guard, he found it hard to cooperate with people who were yearning for Palestine. . . . His horizons were too narrow to encompass change. At meetings, we sensed the effort he had to make to transcend psychological barriers and relate to us as equals. As a result, even procuring arms became a disjointed and chaotic operation. Despite these difficulties, we made progress, especially in our common work projects. . . . In the final analysis, we always passed the test. Simply working together created its own kind of solidarity.59

The main problem was obtaining weapons. Members of Hashomer Hatzair naively believed that firearms could be obtained from the local Poles. However, the first weapons smuggled into the ghetto were actually German weapons that had been stolen, dismantled, and smuggled in piecemeal. Meanwhile, “grenade workshops” sprang up in the ghetto. Chemists manufactured Molotov cocktails and firebombs. Locksmiths manufactured rifle parts, brass knuckles, and knives.

The newly established underground also provided an illegal news service, since newspapers were banned in the ghetto (some German-language papers were purchased outside the ghetto and distributed on the black market)60 and ownership of a radio was forbidden in the ghetto.61 Only Jews who worked outside the ghetto, or as domestics for the Germans, heard occasional snatches of news on the radio. The members of the underground provided an essential service by assembling a number of wireless sets in the ghetto, which they hid in cellars. News was published in a special biuletyn that was read out loud at meetings of the front.

Deportations from Bialystok District

Once the Final Solution was adopted, the German authorities were divided over whether the needs of the German economy were to be taken into consideration in implementing it. German Secretary of State Erich Neumann, who represented Hermann Göring at the Wannsee Conference on January
In the first half of October 1942, the Gestapo in Białystok received a secret order from the Reich Main Security Office to destroy the Białystok ghetto and other ghettos in the district. Froese, who was in charge of ordnance in the Białystok District, feared the loss of his Jewish workforce. Dr. Brix, too, who had plans for the expansion of the munitions industry, feared that the evacuation of the district ghettos would paralyze the local military industry. Both Brix and Erich Koch argued that the Białystok ghetto should be left intact due to its industrial potential. The liquidation of the ghetto, they continued, would slow down military production, with negative repercussions on the front. In the second half of October 1942, Froese appealed to the military chiefs (OKW) in Berlin, while Brix appealed to the Reich Main Security Office, to spare the district ghettos. In the end, Berlin decided to spare the Białystok ghetto only.

In late October 1942, the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin instructed Dr. Altenloh, chief of Security Police and SD in the Białystok District, to transfer all the Jews in the district to a number of locations, ostensibly to prevent acts of espionage and sabotage. The true reason, however, was to facilitate the deportation of Jews to the death camps, although the details of this operation, which depended on the availability of trains and on coordination between the various death camps, had not yet been specified.

Since the district Security Police lacked the manpower to implement the order, the Gestapo, under Fritz Friedel, head of Jewish affairs in the district Gestapo, was enlisted. The Gestapo immediately called a meeting of regional commanders in Dr. Brix’s presence to discuss details of the imminent aktion. On Monday, November 2, 1942, the Gestapo, with the help of the local gendarmerie, surrounded and sealed all ghettos in the district. In a matter of days, Jews were evicted from their homes, rounded up in town squares, loaded on to wagons, and dispatched to five central locations: (1) Kielbasin (a former prisoner-of-war camp 12 kilometers from Grodno), for the Jews of Grodno; (2) Bogusze, for the Jews of Augustów, Grajewo, and the vicinity; (3) the military camp of Zambrów; (4) Wołkowysk, and (5) the military camp of the former Tenth Cavalry Battalion (near Białystok), for Jews from the Białystok area. On the same day, control of the district was handed to the Security police and SD, while the Gestapo and Schupo remained responsible for the Jews left behind in the ghettos.

A testimony written in late December 1942, found in Ringelblum’s Oneg Shabbat archive in the Warsaw ghetto, described the conditions in Kielbasin as follows:
In Kielbasin, snipers shoot continuously at the huddled masses. . . . The camp has no huts, sanitary facilities, or vital services. It is surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers, from which sporadic bursts of machine gun rain down. Frost, snow, and wind are our constant companions. There are no stretchers, let alone bunks, on which to lay our weary bodies. Women with babies, children, the elderly, the sick and others lie in the snow and ice. Gunshot reports and the groans of the wounded fill the air. Bloodstains bespatter the blanket of pristine snow that covers the earth. The Germans test their shooting prowess on babies in their parents’ arms. Corpses are splayed against the barbed wire . . . the remains of those who made a bid for freedom, and found a different kind of freedom when they were shot in their stomachs, chests or genitals. . . . Corpses, in the awkward poses of death, lie in pools of congealed blood.68

The six trains that left for Auschwitz on November 9, 14, 18, and 25 and on December 2 and 8, 1942, carried Jews from Skidel, Sidra, Lida, Ostrina, Grodno, Luna, Porzecze, and other places. The instructions regarding the deportation, issued by the Reich Main Security Office, which were sent to Altenlooh, described the operation as the “evacuation of Jews for work purposes.”69

The deportation schedule was held up, however, since at the time trains were being commissioned to bring supplies to the front in Stalingrad and to transport German soldiers home for Christmas and New Year. The German Railway Authority announced that between December 15, 1942, and January 15, 1943, it had no trains to spare for the deportation of Jews. Consequently, during this period, only two transports left the district, one from the assembly point near Białystok, on December 17, 1942, for Treblinka, and the second, from Augustów near Bogusze, on January 7, 1943, for Auschwitz.70 Subsequently the deportations resumed, although the shortage of trains persisted, prompting Himmler to write the following letter, dated January 23, 1943, to Dr. Albert Ganzenmüller, the Reich’s deputy transport minister:

I am writing to you about a very important issue: The deportation of all collaborators and gang members is essential for the safety of the Generalgouvernement [General District] of Białystok and the Russian territories. This means first and foremost the deportation of the Jews. . . . Therefore, I am asking for your help and support. In order to expedite matters, I must have more trains for the transports. I know that the Railway Authority is under enormous pressure, but I have no alternative but to ask you for more trains.71
The deportation of Jews from the Białystok district resumed in the second half of January 1943, beginning with the deportation from Zambrów and following straight after, on January 18, with the aktion in Grodno, where Ghetto No. 1 still stood. Most of the deportees were taken to Auschwitz. Two Hashomer Hatzair members from Grodno—Zila Shachness and Hasia Bilicka—who arrived in Białystok on the same day, reported that the aktion in Grodno was continuing. Two days later, Yocheved Taub arrived in Białystok and described how the Jews of Grodno were being rounded up in the large synagogue, and taken by truck to the railway station. On their way to the death camps, the trains passed through Białystok, a fact Tenenbaum mentioned in his diary entry for January 20, 1943.72

Between January 20 and 24, 1943, about 10,000 Jews were deported from Grodno to Auschwitz in five separate transports.73 On January 26, 28, and 30, the Jews of Sokółka, Wołkowysk, and Jaszynówka were deported. In late January 1943, about 10,000 Jews of the Pruzhany ghetto were taken in sleighs to the train station, some 12 kilometers away, and sent to Auschwitz in four transports.74

By late January, there were still 5,000 Jews left in Grodno. On February 14, 15, and 16, 1943, three transports, carrying about 3,500 Jews, left Grodno for Treblinka. The remaining thousand or so Jews in Grodno were evacuated to Białystok on March 12, 1943, accompanied by Kurt Wiese and Otto Streblov, who were in charge of the aktion in Grodno.75

In sum, between November 1942 and February 1943, about 100,000 Jews in the Białystok District were sent to Treblinka and Auschwitz, including 10,000 Jews from the Białystok ghetto who were deported between February 5 and 12, 1943. By March 1943, only 30,000 Jews were left in the entire district, all of them in the Białystok ghetto.76

Mordecai Tenenbaum

In late March 1942, Tenenbaum returned to Warsaw. From the moment of his arrival in Warsaw, he devoted all his energies to the movement and was among the leading figures of the Anti-Fascist Bloc that was established in Warsaw in April 1942. Tenenbaum was one of the founders and leaders of the Jewish Fighting Organization that was set up in Warsaw about a week after the start of the large aktion (late July 1942.)

In late October 1942, a new fighting organization was set up in Warsaw, which embraced most of the political movements operating secretly in the ghetto as well as the Revisionists and the Orthodox.77 Mordechai Aniele-
wicz, the leader of Hashomer Hatzair, was elected head of the organization, and Itzhak Zuckerman head of the Dror faction. We do not know how Tenenbaum felt about these appointments, or whether he himself had entertained hopes of being elected. If he ever discussed these aspirations with his close friends Zivia Lubetkin and Itzhak Zuckerman, they certainly gave nothing away. Tenenbaum himself was appointed “commandant” of Bialystok, as Zuckerman recalled in 1946:

During the meeting, we reviewed the situation and decided to make the best use of the short time available by carrying out operations not only in Warsaw but in all large Jewish localities too. To this end, we appointed commandants for isolated towns, and set up a special department for provincial towns. Mordecai Tenenbaum has been appointed commandant of Bialystok. He is familiar with the conditions there and is respected there. He still has enough energy to start from scratch, and enough resolve to set up a united Jewish fighting force in Bialystok.78

When Tenenbaum arrived in Bialystok on the evening of November 1, 1942, he found the ghetto already surrounded by German gendarmes, and he decided to continue on to Grodno. The following day, the aktion in the entire Bialystok District began, and the Grodno ghetto was sealed. Tenenbaum delivered a letter to his comrades in the ghetto, who managed to smuggle him in among a group of outside workers returning home. While escaping from the Gestapo in Grodno, he was injured and found shelter in the home of a local peasant woman. Zipporah Birman, a Dror activist living in Grodno at the time, described the ties Tenenbaum managed to establish with the Judenrat in Grodno: “There is no path other than the one leading to the forests, to the partisans. Our men are eager to set up their own partisan group. They are thrilled with the idea, and are just waiting for the word. Members of the party and the Judenrat have given us money for this purpose [emphasis added]. The aktion will not wait for us. The second ghetto has already been destroyed. All members survived, some with their families, some without. All of them are returning to the fold [literally, the Mother-Movement].”79

The first group to leave Grodno for the forest included members of Dror and of Hashomer Hatzair. Four members fell during this expedition. Only one, Lazer Reizner, returned to the ghetto. “The hopes we pinned on the forest,” wrote Birman, “have dissolved for the time being. . . . The failure of the expedition has shattered us. We have nowhere to turn.”80

Meanwhile, Tenenbaum threw himself into the task of raising funds and
arranging documents and travel passes for his comrades in Grodno. The more desperate they became, the more fervently he supported the idea of a counteraction (Kontraktsia). Birman pointed out that not everyone was willing to enter into a battle that meant certain death and that some still believed "that, despite the odds, several thousand might survive." In the end, they decided to smuggle the women out of Grodno to Białystok and leave the men behind to carry out the counteraction. Tenenbaum stayed in Grodno no longer than a few days. By the second week of November 1942, he boarded the train for Białystok.

Tenenbaum was born in Warsaw in 1916, the seventh child in his family. At the age of 14, he joined the General Zionist movement Hashomer Hakehila. When in 1934 Hashomer Hakehila, together with several other Zionist youth movements, was absorbed into Hanoar Hatzioni, Tenenbaum left the movement. In 1935 he joined Frayhayt (Dror). In the autumn of 1936, Tenenbaum became a student at Warsaw University’s Institute of Oriental Studies. In the year between September 1938 (when Dror merged with Hehalutz Hatzair) and the outbreak of the Second World War, Tenenbaum participated in the Hehalutz nationwide seminar in Zielonka (near Warsaw), worked on Kibbutz Shahariyyah in Baranowicze, joined a Hebrew teachers’ program in Vilna, and ran a seminary in Slonim. On the eve of the Second World War, he was one of Hehalutz’s most promising activists in Poland and a contributor to Unzer Yedies, (Our news) the ideological mouthpiece of Poalei Zion–SS.

During the mass exodus from Warsaw, a few days after the outbreak of war, Tenenbaum left home with a group of friends for Kowel, where hundreds of Dror kibbutz members were converging. In October 1939, Tenenbaum, together with his girlfriend, Tema Schneiderman, moved to Vilna, where he became a member of the Pioneer Coordination Committee. In order to connect with Jewish centers in occupied Poland, particularly after the German occupation of Vilna and the establishment of the ghetto, Tenenbaum obtained forged papers bearing the Tatar name, Jozef Tamaroff. These papers allowed him free passage on the Aryan side of Vilna. As news of the atrocities in Vilna and the environs came pouring in, Tenenbaum sent Schneiderman to Warsaw to inform the comrades of what was going on and to confer with them over future policy. In early January 1942, Tenenbaum, together with some friends, left Vilna for Białystok, and in March 1942 went on to Warsaw. He returned to Białystok in November 1942 and set up a comprehensive and cohesive fighting organization there. Right from the start, he made every effort to incorporate all potential factions into the organization. Those—like Haika Grosman—who knew...
him, pinned tremendous hopes on him: “His arrival heralds a turning point, the creation of a general front embracing all Hehalutz factions and all left-wing parties” she said.84

More is known about Tenenbaum than about any other youth leader of the period owing to the existence of a diary and letters he wrote in the Białystok ghetto, from January 13 on. For him, the diary served not only as a historical document but also as a way of expressing his thoughts and feelings, and maintaining contact with his comrades in Warsaw, from whom he felt so isolated. The diary and letters constitute an invaluable source of information on the history of the Białystok ghetto, the struggles that took place there, the moral and ideological dilemmas that arose. They also provide insight into Tenenbaum's personal opinions, thoughts, and aspirations. Although the diary was written in an elegant Hebrew, Tenenbaum reverted to Yiddish—the expressive Yiddish of eastern Poland that he had picked up in Vilna—when describing painful events. The diary testifies to Tenenbaum's fluency in languages and to his considerable erudition. Above all, it mirrors the anguish of a fighter who is aware that he will not long be in the land of the living, who is aware that he will never return to his movement or reach the promised land. The diary documents the turbulent human drama in which Tenenbaum was embroiled. It is the work of a leader torn between the wish to preserve life and the need to act. This is the diary's main value as a historical document.

From his arrival in Białystok, Tenenbaum began collecting historical data for inclusion in a secret archive he proposed setting up in the ghetto. Tenenbaum's work for the Oneg Shabbat archive, set up by the historian Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw ghetto, inspired him to set up a similar archive in Białystok. Tenenbaum, who for some time had realized that the Jews were doomed and understood that the main function of the ghetto underground was to defend the honor of the Jewish people, took it upon himself to document the suffering of the Jews of Białystok for future generations. With this in mind, he approached various people in the ghetto with a request to write their memoirs. His diary entry for January 13, 1943 reads: “I met with Chmielnik. He promised to write some chapters of his memories of the war years—particularly of the movement’s work. He asked me if we have found a safe hiding place. I told him that although we will not survive, our written testimonies shall be concealed in a safe place outside the ghetto.”85

The first documents written for the archive were testimonies of refugees from nearby towns who arrived in the ghetto at the beginning of the evacuation in November 1942. These documents are chronicles of the struggles of
the Jews in the Białystok District when faced with destruction. Tenenbaum was eager to collect such testimonies, as his entry for January 21, 1943, indicates: “I met with refugees from Grodno, and asked them to write about the destruction of this ancient community.” The material was collected by Zvi Mersik and Tenenbaum’s girlfriend, Tema Schneiderman, about whom Tenenbaum had the following to say: “She was our only ‘post office.’ She carried the trials and tribulations of her fellowmen in her soul. Whenever she came, she brought enough material to last our publication for months, as well as material for our archive. She was a walking encyclopedia of the tragedy and martyrology of Polish Jewry.”

Barash supported the idea of setting up an archive and promised to assign Mersik a special room for this purpose. At Tenenbaum’s request, Barash gave the archive copies of Judenrat notices and minutes as well as copies of German documents concerning the future of the ghetto. Barash also gave the archive important information about Treblinka, as Tenenbaum’s entry for January 29, 1943, indicates: “Barash gave me documents and photos found on clothes sent here from Tremblinki [Treblinka]. I wade through them all day, every day. I cannot stop for a minute. It feels as if my pockets are on fire. It’s monstrous, appalling.”

Among the important documents included in the archive were a number of chronicles written by the famous author and publicist Peysekh Kaplan, head of the Judenrat’s Education Department, and by an unknown author who was a senior official in the Judenrat’s Economics Department. The methods for collecting material generally resembled those used for collecting material for the Oneg Shabbat archive in Warsaw. Like it, the Białystok archive was hidden in special hermetically sealed metal containers, manufactured by the ghetto locksmiths, some of whom were members of Dror. The containers were delivered to Bronka Vinizka, a member of Dror who, since early January 1943, had been living in the Aryan sector of the city. She then delivered them to a local Pole, a leader of the Army of the Homeland (AK, Armia Krajowa), the main military underground organization in occupied Poland. The AK leader hid the containers in a shed in his courtyard, whose whereabouts were known only to Vinizka. After the war, most of the archive was retrieved. A large portion of it is still housed in the Zydowski Instytut Historyczny (ZIH, Jewish Historical Institute) in Warsaw. During the 1950s and 1960s, copies of some of the original documents were made for Yad Vashem. Today, at Yad Vashem, these photocopies and original materials are known as the Mersik-Tenenbaum Archive and filed under M-11. Tenenbaum’s diary was published in 1947 by Hakibbutz Hameuchad.
Before Tenenbaum’s arrival in the city, Zvi Mersik, the archive director, had been the living spirit behind Dror in Białystok. Mersik had been born in the town of Mielnica, near Kowel. He joined the local Hehalutz Hatzair branch, and in, 1938, was elected to the movement’s central committee. After the outbreak of World War II, he moved to Vilna, where he became one of the outstanding members of the Pioneer Coordination Committee. After his arrival in Białystok in January 1942 together with comrades from Dror, Mersik devoted all his energy to reviving the local Dror cell. The crowning glory of his achievements was organizing the ghetto youth to tend the ghetto’s vegetable garden.\textsuperscript{91} Sadly, at the height of his archival activities, Mersik was taken ill, and two weeks later, on January 28, 1943, he died. Tenenbaum’s entry for January 31 reads:

Mersik’s funeral took place at 12:00 a.m. Dozens of funeral notices were posted up, bearing the following announcement: “A pioneer of the people has fallen in the course of carrying out his public duties.” Białystok has never witnessed such a funeral. With funerals we are lucky. Hundreds of people attended, including all the Judenrat directors, headed by B[arash]. His head was cushioned on earth from the Holy Land. . . . Two weeks before he fell ill, I asked him to write about our work during the Soviet period. Sadly, it was otherwise ordained. Now I am the only one left.\textsuperscript{92}

After Mersik’s death, the archive was taken over by Gedalyah Petlok who, together with Tenenbaum, collected testimonies and original material of inestimable research value. As Tenenbaum’s conviction that the ghetto was doomed intensified, so did his concern for the safety of the archive, as his diary entry for February 3, 1943 testifies: “I do not know how this archive [shreybekhts] will reach future generations [tsukunftike doyres]. We have no option but to kill a German, scale the fence, and deliver this to Br[onka] outside the ghetto.”\textsuperscript{93} The archive is today an exceptional treasure of source material, providing rare insights into the period in general, and into the history of the Białystok ghetto in particular.\textsuperscript{94}

The Establishment of Front B, January 1943

In late 1942 and early 1943, the massacres in Vilna and other places in the East were no longer seen as isolated events. The Jews of Białystok had heard of the mass deportation from Warsaw (July–September 1942). Tens of thousands of Jews were being evacuated from the district. News of Tre-
blinka had already penetrated the ghetto, and some Jews had begun preparing hiding places, in case of an imminent action.

As Grosman related, upon Tenenbaum’s arrival in Bialystok, the pragmatic alliance between Hashomer Hatzair and Dror evolved into an ideological and strategic one. “We elected a joint management,” she explained, “and joint committees for military training, organization, production, arms, finances, and political affairs.” For this joint activity to be effective, it was essential for Dror to be admitted into the ranks of Front A, a move violently opposed by the Communists. Their rigid ideology proscribed cooperation in general, and cooperation with Dror in particular. Although the Communists reluctantly agreed to come to terms with Hashomer Hatzair, which they considered a radical left-wing organization, Dror’s ideology, based on the dogmas of Nachman Syrkin and Dov Ber Borochov, was anathema to them. The Communists were also suspicious of Dror’s closeness with the Judenrat and the Judenrat’s support of Dror. They were aware of the special relationship between Barash and Tenenbaum and of the support Dror members received from Judenrat members affiliated with Poalei Zion–SS. Moreover, they may have been displeased with Tenenbaum’s mission to set up a resistance movement in the ghetto, especially since some Communists, at least, favored the partisan option. These extreme ideological differences prompted the Communists to declare that there was no room for Dror in a united underground organization. Although contacts with the Communists continued, “these were limited to mutual compliments,” said Tenenbaum, and yielded no practical results. As Tenenbaum put it, “Their tactic is to ask a lot of questions, but give nothing away.” On February 2, Tenenbaum wrote the following about the Communists: “I get the impression that they are not so much concerned with revolutionary action within the ghetto, as with saving their skins by leaving the ghetto, finding hiding places, obtaining false papers, etc.”

In addition to direct contacts with Hashomer Hatzair and indirect contacts with the Communists, Tenenbaum began negotiating with members of Hanoar Hazioni, who were eager to join the underground. The latter were incorporated into operational cells, each of which consisted of five men, organized on a neighborhood basis. Tenenbaum encountered unexpected difficulties in his contacts with the Bund, whose leaders—Rubinstein and Kostyn—were prominent Judenrat officials and opposed an armed uprising on the grounds that “it was not worth endangering the lives of the thousands or hundreds who remained behind for the sake of a paltry victory.” In principle, the Bundists agreed with the goal of creating a united fighting force “to defend the honor of the Jews,” but “they did not believe it was pos-
sible to achieve anything.” Tenenbaum, who had hoped that the Bundists, with their revolutionary ideology, would support revolutionary action, was extremely disillusioned by his two encounters with Bund representatives and wrote scathingly of them in his diary: “Their entire behavior is far removed from the ‘revolutionism’ of the only party representing the Jewish workers, etc. They are frightened people.”

Grosman also referred to Rubinstein’s qualms, the lack of cohesion within the movement, and the Bundists’ tremendous apprehension, and concluded that “their tendency to compromise has undermined any vestiges of a proletarian tradition.” Both Tenenbaum and Grosman claimed that the Bundists in Białystok were influenced by the ideas of Maurycy Orzech, leader of the Warsaw Bund. Orzech, who saw the Jews as part of the Polish people suffering under the yoke of the German occupation, opposed the establishment of a separate resistance organization but favored incorporation into the Polish resistance. Another factor that no doubt shaped Rubinstein’s and Kostyn’s outlook was the relatively “comfortable” situation of the Białystok ghetto by contrast with other ghettos and the Judenrat’s view that the ghetto would survive the war intact.

Tenenbaum conducted spirited negotiations with Fleisher and Mathus of the Revisionists, who right from the start accepted all his proposals. According to Tenenbaum, members of Hashomer Hatzair objected to the presence of the Revisionists in the underground and simply wished “to exploit them, while denying them any rights.” Despite residual suspicion and bitterness from the past, Tenenbaum believed that the Revisionists should be treated as equals, and he managed to gain their trust. Tenenbaum described his meetings with the Revisionists as imbued by a spirit of “friendship and understanding.” Although they showed an active interest in ideological, organizational, strategic, and financial issues, “in practice, they had no real say.” After acrimonious negotiations, Tenenbaum’s view that they must be accepted as equals prevailed. “They must be allowed to assume management positions, to establish liaison with all technical sectors, and to be accepted as an autonomous body with full rights. We do not have to consult them on political issues, but as far as self-defense is concerned, they are our absolute equals.”

Tenenbaum’s diary reflects the difficulties he faced, both with members of his party (Poalei Zion–SS) and with members of Dror. As already noted, members of Poalei Zion–SS in the ghetto helped members of Dror who came to Białystok from Vilna, and close ties grew up between them. However, early in 1943, members of Poalei Zion–SS realized that Dror, which so far had refrained from joining the ghetto resistance (considering it a threat
to ghetto life), was now ready to join. This prospect ran counter to their outlook as Judenrat officials, and a rift grew up between the party and the youth movement. The meeting between Tenenbaum and members of his party on January 14, 1943, ended in a stalemate. Party members complained that they were not being consulted or informed of what was going on. Tenenbaum retorted: “When you share the responsibility with us, you shall be informed of every single step.” True to his word, Tenenbaum proposed a motion for a common initiative and concerted action, but the party representatives “were evasive. . . . They were just empty talking.”

The fact that by the second half of January 1943 the Białystok ghetto was the only one remaining in the entire district merely strengthened the Judenrat leadership’s belief that a fighting organization within the ghetto was not only unnecessary but actually dangerous. This belief was shared by members of Poalei Zion–SS who were members of, or associated with, the Judenrat, such as Chmielnik, Peciner, and Lipshitz. It followed that the good relationship between Tenenbaum and party members was contingent on Dror keeping a low profile. Once the party veterans discovered that the Dror “hotheads” were agitating to establish a united fighting front, their attitude toward Tenenbaum cooled. Nevertheless, one may assume that there were differences of opinion among party members regarding the establishment of an underground, especially in late January 1943 when it was clear that Białystok would not be spared.

Within Dror, too, uncertainty and dissension prevailed. “We have one trouble after another, within the family, within the kibbutz,” wrote Tenenbaum on January 18, 1943. A few days later, the kibbutz secretariat was invited to a General Assembly to discuss “social issues in the kibbutz, outbreaks of hooliganism and anarchy in the kibbutz, what to do with the ‘paskudniaks’ [Russian for “scum”]. To Hell! As if the external problems were not enough, we have internal problems too—problems from all sides.” The picture Tenenbaum painted here seems to indicate that Dror was torn between “fight” or “flight”: to stay and fight or to escape to the forest. Tenenbaum disagreed with members of his movement over this dilemma, and his diary entries reflect his disappointment and anger with them. At the time—January 1943—when news of the extermination of Jews in the district was pouring in, some members of Dror decided to abandon the ghetto for the forests. Tenenbaum, meanwhile, remained loyal to his beliefs, and he put all his efforts into organizing and training a fighting front for the day of reckoning that was fast approaching.

In late 1942, young people other than members of Yudita’s group began leaving the ghetto for the forests. The Krynki group left the ghetto under
its own steam in late December 1942 and early January 1943. This group comprised former members of the West Belorussian Communist Party in Krynki who fled to Białystok in 1941 after the German occupation, fearing that their Communist past would make them vulnerable. News that Jews had left the ghetto and were hiding in the nearby forests spread quickly and encouraged others to join them or the Soviet partisans who were already operating in the forests. On January 26, Tenenbaum wrote: “Tomorrow twelve lads will be leaving the ghetto to join the partisans. They came from the forests to take them away. Were they Communists? . . . The devil only knows.” The Revisionists also discussed the possibility of leaving for the forests. Tenenbaum reported on a meeting held with the Revisionists on January 24 to discuss the issue: “At first, they wouldn’t hear of it—they saw it as desertion—but now they have simply exchanged one form of extremism for another.” The same was true of Hashomer Hatzair: its activists began planning to send members into the forest on the eve of the imminent aktion. Tenenbaum considered this plan a betrayal of the idea for which he and his Hashomer Hatzair colleagues stood, as his entry for February 1, 1943, testifies: “I created a scandal for Hash[omer] Hatz[air] on the desertion issue. I asked them to give me one man—just one!—who would promise to stay with me till the end. I suggested Z[erach]. They suggested G[edalyah]. . . . I asked them to reconsider. They promised to do so.”

Ten days earlier, when news of the destruction of the Grodno ghetto reached Białystok, Tenenbaum was angry with Grosman and wrote in his diary: “At the end of the meeting—a painful incident took place. This ‘leader’ [Grosman], who was the first to flee from danger [Vilna], suggested sending a contact there [to Grodno]—immediately—i.e., to certain death. Pig! To leave the ghetto now, an hour prior to the aktion is tantamount to joining the transport.” Tenenbaum’s anger with Grosman was just one expression of tension between the movements that grew once it became clear that Białystok was doomed to destruction.

The fact that activists were leaving for the forests had an impact on Dror members, too. In his diary, Tenenbaum reported that “harsh words” were exchanged during the Dror general assembly of January 24, 1943. In his notes on the assembly, Tenenbaum outlined his position on this thorny issue. Unlike most of his colleagues, Tenenbaum was against leaving the ghetto. To understand the attitude of his colleagues, we must bear in mind that most had come to Białystok as refugees, without their families, including the large Vilna contingent that had arrived even before the idea of fighting had been conceived. Evidently not even Tenenbaum’s arrival in Białystok with the declared aim of setting up a fighting organization could
shake their belief in “safety at all costs.” They did not yet see themselves as under any obligation to defend the ghetto and were reluctant to participate in a fight that was doomed to failure. For them, the forests represented the only chance of survival. For Tenenbaum, on the other hand, escaping to the forest not only betrayed the ideal of an honorable death but also tarnished the movement’s image and paved the way for anarchy. He therefore tried to eradicate this belief—which ran counter to his entire raison d’être—and clung steadfastly to the idea of setting up a fighting underground inside the ghetto, along the lines of the Warsaw underground.

In his diary, Tenenbaum described the bad aftertaste the Dror assembly had given him: “They are contaminating the last days of our life—they are prepared to send members of the kibbutz [to the forests] in a way that defiles the pioneer’s honor.”119 Later during the assembly, however, after warning his comrades not to shirk their responsibility, Tenenbaum modified his tone: “We must be careful not to taint our image in these troubled times. It was a good assembly. In spite of everything, even the worst comrades have a sense of responsibility. We finished the meeting with a feeling that we had cleaned up our act. We all left the meeting feeling good.”120

The friendship that grew up between Barash and Tenenbaum is an interesting phenomenon in itself. Tenenbaum, who was acquainted with the heads of the Judenräte in the ghettos of Poland, testified that Barash was “an upright man. This is a big compliment for a Judenrat head—I know of only three upright Judenrat heads: Engineer [Adam] Czerniakow (who committed suicide during the aktion in Warsaw), Dr. [David] Brawer (Grodno ghetto, shot by the Germans), and B[arash]. The others are all despicable and therefore became ‘obmen,’ and power has made them even more despicable, turning them into lackeys of the Gestapo.”121

The friendship of Tenenbaum and Barash was sincere, based on mutual trust and assistance. While Barash kept Tenenbaum informed of German plans for the ghetto, based on reports by his German masters, Tenenbaum kept Barash up to date with developments in the underground. As Tenenbaum wrote: “When I told him we needed funds—he agreed to give me money. When I asked for a room for Mersik—he promised to see to it. We parted—as always—with a warm handshake.”122 Grosman, too, wrote: “Barash helped and supported the underground by supplying information and even money.”123

Barash understood the aspirations of the young men and women who saw themselves as part of the resistance movement. Ostensibly, he supported the idea of an underground and even helped its members obtain weapons.124 However, since he was convinced that the Jews of the Białystok
ghetto were indispensable to the Germans, he never really believed in the need for resistance. It was rather his desire to keep an eye on underground activity in the ghetto that made him court friendship with Tenenbaum, as he had with Grosman and presumably also with members of Poalei Zion–SS in the Judenrat. As he put it, he wished to warn Tenenbaum “of the danger he was courting: any slip–up could result in disaster.”

Grosman admitted “that Mordecai [Tenenbaum] got more out of Barash than I or any other comrade.” Presumably, Barash also managed to win over members of Hashomer Hatzair, by supporting them financially and keeping them informed about German aktionen in the district. “Barash is a decent guy” wrote Grosman. Even though the young people rejected Barash’s approach, they were not hostile toward him, simply somewhat suspicious of his motives, as Grosman pointed out: “We agreed that we had to make use of him. Barash, however, was too clever to comply, without getting something in return. We feared that Barash’s “concern” might tempt Mordecai into giving away too much. We suspected that if Barash were pushed to choose between a fighting Jewish underground and the Germans, in order to save the Jews, he would choose the Germans and betray us.”

Several of the meetings Tenenbaum held to plan the establishment of the underground were held in Barash’s office in the Judenrat building. In late January 1943, after arduous negotiations, a new fighting front—Front B—was formed, comprising Dror, Hashomer Hatzair, the Revisionists, Hanoar Hazioni, and a Bund faction that was not part of Front A. Members of Hashomer Hatzair who belonged to both fronts served as liaisons between them. Barash, in a diatribe to Grosman, lamented the fact that the Communists were not part of this front, thereby depriving him of total control over the activities of the underground: “Why are your forces so divided? Why don’t you attempt to gain control of all factions? If you and Mordecai represented all factions, I would be happier, since you are more responsible. In any case, I believe it is worth including the Communists in your work. They have some good people.”

Even though the leaders of Front B recognized the need to set up an alliance with the Communists—not only because they were well organized but also because of their ties with the left-wing Polish underground and with Soviet partisans—negotiations with them were at a standstill. “There were many obstacles, a lack of cohesion, and insufficient sharing of weapons, money and organization. . . . The motto of our lives . . . was: The merger of the two blocs into one fighting front,” reported Grosman.

Front B concentrated most of its activities in three main areas: the or-
ganization of comrades into underground cells (each with five members),
the manufacture and procurement of weapons, and maintenance of a clan-
destine archive in the ghetto.

Conclusion

Was it a premonition of imminent catastrophe that hastened the establish-
ment of Front B, or was the time simply ripe for its emergence? Either way,
one thing is certain. Shortly after its establishment, the residents of the
ghetto no longer entertained any illusion as to the fate that awaited them.
By the end of January 1943, it was quite clear to them that they, too, were
doomed to extinction.
Chapter 6

The First \textit{Aktion}, February 1943

In the Judenrat session of October 10, 1942, Ephraim Barash addressed the public as follows: “We do not know if Białystok will be spared a holocaust or not. . . . The Judenrat must keep its eyes and ears open. We must be on the alert. There are signs of an impending \textit{aktion} against the Jews of the district and the town. However, if it’s up to the local authorities, we can rest assured that no harm will befall us.”\textsuperscript{1} The next day, the Judenrat held an extraordinary session in the Linat Hazedek hall for factory managers, house managers, and senior policemen and firemen, among others. The public, hungry for information, turned up \textit{en masse} to this fateful assembly. Barash, aware that his message would be relayed to the entire ghetto population, opened the session with the following words: “At present, both Białystok District and town are in real danger. We must find ways of preventing, or at least curtailing, the danger. Unfortunately for us, Białystok has recently become the largest ghetto after Łódź. The enemy has us in its sights. Now, only a miracle can avert the danger.”\textsuperscript{2}

Temporary Postponement

The ghetto authorities, under Dr. Wilhelm Altenloh, chief of the Security Police (KdS), no doubt updated Barash regarding German plans for the future of the Jews in the district and town. Jewish and non-Jewish sources, including Mordecai Tenenbaum’s diary, Haïka Grosman’s memoirs, the testimony of Barash’s secretary Hadassah Shprung, Szymon Datner’s historical research, and comprehensive legal material show that Barash made every effort to forge ties with the local German authorities. Shprung’s testimony shows that throughout the ghetto’s existence, Barash frequently paid visits to Gestapo officials. Later, these same officials
would defend the ghetto. After a year of dealing with German officials, Barash knew which ones could be bought and which ones could not. On his visits to the authorities, he always made a point of bringing with him some valuable item, such as a diamond, or a gold coin. Sometimes he even brought a small but valuable Persian rug, which he spread on the floor of the commander’s office, upon his arrival at the Gestapo building.3

It was natural for Barash, as head of the Judenrat, to make connections with German officials. Although the local Germans were motivated principally by self-interest (concern for their political future), Barash, through his personal charisma, knew how to gain their trust and to exploit it to the ghetto’s advantage. He also made a point of keeping the ghetto informed of any new information he had gleaned from his contacts.

The question of whether Barash’s intercessions with the Germans alleviated the ghetto’s fate is difficult to answer. We know that Froese, the district inspector of the arms industry in the Bialystok District, and Brix, deputy head of the civil administration in the district, appealed to Berlin in the second half of October 1942 to spare the ghetto, after the security police in Bialystok received an order from the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin, in early October, to evacuate 12,000 Jews from the Bialystok ghetto.4 Fritz Friedel, whom Altenloh had appointed in October 1942 to run the Gestapo’s Department of Jewish Affairs (IVB4) in the Bialystok District, wrote in his testimony after the war that after receiving the order from Berlin, Altenloh told him that he was opposed to the deportation, since it would affect the ghetto’s military production. Altenloh stressed the fact that the deportation would have serious repercussions for the army, adding that the deputy head of the civil administration (Brix), and the district inspector of the arms industry (Froese) agreed with him on this point. Froese, he added, had even informed Berlin of his opinion.5 This testimony indicates that not only the local German authorities, but also central government agencies operating in the district, had a vested interest in the ghetto’s continued existence. At the time, thousands of Jews—some of them skilled laborers—were employed in the ghetto factories, which filled orders for large German firms. It was not surprising, therefore, that the ghetto industry came (indirectly) under the jurisdiction of the Arms Ministry.6

In his diary, Mordecai Tenenbaum described how Barash brought pressure to bear on the “good Germans” who were interested in the ghetto’s continued existence:

It’s all thanks to Judenrat chairman—engineer Barash. The trouble is that even if there is a “decent” German, he is afraid to stand up for the Jews (since
his friends would suspect him of taking bribes). This is where Barash comes in. He goes from one German to another saying: “You have nothing to fear—since they all think like you.” Thanks to him, local government officials have come out in our defense, so much so that sometimes an open conflict erupts between the “bad guys” and the “good guys.” The “good guys” have befriended the ghetto, not only because of the bribes (various gifts) they receive. Indeed, some of them have not received any bribes, and do not wish to receive any. They are guided by purely patriotic and objective motives—namely the ghetto’s leistungen [German for “achievements”]. Rumor has it that a general of the Rüstungskommando [Ordnance Corps] in Königsberg informed Berlin: “If you destroy the Białystok ghetto—I may as well close down my office in Königsberg—for I shall have no one to sew me coats and boots.”

The decision makers in Berlin decided to leave the Białystok ghetto intact for the time being. However, in early November 1942, control of the district ghettos was transferred to the Security Police and the Gestapo, which received instructions from Berlin to evacuate thousands of Jews from the district.

The akción in the Białystok District began on November 2, 1942. The Białystok ghetto was sealed, and Jews were no longer allowed to work outside the ghetto. The first three days of November proved an extremely anxious time for Barash and his associates, as his closing words at the Judenrat session of November 8, 1942, testify: “Let us hope that these last three nightmarish days will never recur. They were the worst three days in the ghetto’s history. . . . Today, even our new masters are interested in the ghetto’s existence. They themselves have submitted a plan to set up new factories. Over the past week, we have come a long way. The lives of many Jews in Białystok hung in the balance.”

Barash went on to say that they had decided to give up a few streets—“a plan we initiated, for it is better to lose a few streets than to lose people.” The Germans intended to use these streets to house 5,000 Poles or Belorussians from the Białowieża area (and the Belorussians were intended to replace Jewish labor as part of the plan to exterminate the Jews). The loss of these streets added to the ghetto’s congestion. In addition, the closure of schools meant that the streets were filled with children at loose ends, many of whom began selling cigarettes, shoelaces, saccharine, or rolls on the black market.

In the second half of November 1942, at the height of the akción in the district, the Judenrat undertook to ensure the safe return of the young Jew-
ish women who had been sent to Wołkowysk. The women, joined by local Jewish women who were eager to escape Wołkowysk, were all crammed into a train car. As they alighted at Białystok, news of their return quickly spread. According to Raphael Reizner, this news reinforced the feeling that the Białystok ghetto was safe. Moreover, the curfew on leaving the ghetto was lifted, and beginning November 19, 1942, Jewish workers who had worked outside the ghetto were obliged to report once again for work, near the ghetto gate on Czysta Street. Even when three workers from the oil factory were hanged on December 31 in the square opposite the Judenrat building for smuggling sunflower seeds into the ghetto, their execution was not perceived as a real threat or as an omen of things to come.

When the evacuation of the Jews in the Białystok District began, hundreds of refugees from the provincial towns began pouring into the ghetto. The Judenrat, fearful of the Gestapo’s response, published a notice prohibiting “nonregistered people from residing in the ghetto.” Despite the Judenrat’s ostensibly harsh approach, homes were found for most of the refugees, and they were absorbed into the factories.

Meanwhile, the local authorities continued to argue in favor of sparing the ghetto, as Tenenbaum wrote in his diary:

Since the second of November, there has been a continuous barrage of intercessions with Königsberg and Berlin. Under the initiative of the local authorities, a two-year plan was submitted to Berlin for the reconstruction of Białystok and its industry. The Jews would work for free. The authorities would supply the material, and the Judenrat the labor. An optimum productivity plan was submitted, whereby the ghetto factories would employ 23,000 people. . . . According to this plan—there would be full employment. No one would be evacuated. Orders have been received directly from the OKW [initials of the Wehrmacht] in Berlin.

Despite the ghetto residents’ fear that they might suffer a similar fate to that of other towns in the area, there were sufficient grounds for believing they might be spared. Yet surviving German documents indicate that during the district aktion, Berlin had made a decision regarding the Białystok ghetto. On December 14, 1942, Heinrich Himmler issued a general order for 35,000 able-bodied prisoners to be sent to a concentration camp and kept there until the end of January 1943, for reasons of “utmost importance to the war effort.” Following this order, the Gestapo head, Heinrich Müller, sent Himmler a confidential and urgent letter dated December 16, 1942, stating the following:
Concerning the transfer of able-bodied prisoners to the concentration camp, please note the following:
1. Overall number of Jews to be transferred: 45,000.
2. Transport to begin on January 11, 1943, and end on January 31, 1943.
3. Breakdown: The 45,000 Jews shall comprise: 30,000 Jews from the Białystok District, and 10,000 from the Theresienstadt ghetto. From Białystok itself, 5,000 able-bodied Jewish artisans, and 5,000 Jews who are not fit for work, including those over the age of 60.20

Müller’s proposal arrived in Himmler’s office the following day, December 17, 1942. Although Himmler ratified it, he pointed out that the Jews had to be sent to Auschwitz, since in January 1943, this was the only camp capable of absorbing 15,000 able-bodied Jews. The Reich Main Security Office in Berlin, responsible for carrying out Himmler’s order, sent a memorandum that same day to Gerhard Klein, from Department IVB4 in Białystok.21

Immediately after the above order reached the Gestapo in Białystok, December 1942, Altenloh again appealed to Berlin arguing that the Jews must not be deported from Białystok because all of them were working in factories vital to the war effort. Altenloh asked the Reich Main Security Office to reconsider its plan, arguing, as he had two months earlier in October 1942, that both Brix and Froese agreed with him. Thanks to his intervention, the deportation of the Jews of Białystok was once again postponed.22

From the above, we may infer that opposition by the Arms Ministry, as well as transportation problems (a shortage of trains, due to the fact that at the time most trains were carrying equipment to the front, or bringing back the wounded), led the Reich Main Security Office to adopt a lenient policy toward the deportation of the Jews from the Białystok ghetto. This exchange explains why, whereas Müller’s order concerning the deportation of the Jews from the Białystok District was implicitly obeyed until late January 1943, the deportation of Jews from the Białystok ghetto was stalled.

No doubt the reason why Himmler’s office in Berlin was pushing for the deportation of Jews from the Białystok ghetto was due to the ghetto’s size. Indeed, after the district had been purged of most of its Jews, the ghetto stuck out like a sore thumb, much to the aggravation of the architects and implementers of the Final Solution. Following a meeting with the German railway minister on January 15, 1943, Adolf Eichmann drew up detailed plans for the deportation of tens of thousands of Jews to Auschwitz and Treblinka from various places in the East between January 20 and February.
In “special resettlement (Aussiedlung) trains.” Between February 5 and 13, 1943, eight trains bearing the initials PJ (Polnische Jüden, German for “Polish Jews”) were assigned for the deportation of some 16,000 Jews from the Białystok ghetto. Three of the trains were bound for Auschwitz and five for Treblinka. On the same day, an alternative plan was submitted for the deportation of 8,000 Jews in four trains. These two alternative plans indicate that although by mid-January 1943 the German authorities had decided to deport Jews from the Białystok ghetto, they were still arguing over the scope of the deportation.

A few days later (probably January 20, 1943), the district governor, Erich Koch, reported that Berlin had discussed the possibility of substituting Belorussian workers for Jewish workers in the Białystok ghetto, “since the Belorussians are likely to remain here a while, perhaps permanently . . . and there is no need for them to live in crowded conditions like the Jews.” This proposal was closely linked to the regional purges of Belorussians, who were helping partisan groups in the surrounding forests. According to this plan, following the deportation of the Jews, the Białystok ghetto would be converted into a resettlement zone for the Belorussians from Białowieża. By this move, the Germans hoped to kill two birds with one stone: to starve the partisans in the forests of Białowieża, in particular the Soviet partisan units, and suppress the resistance movement in Białystok. The person entrusted with carrying out the transfer was Dr. Heinz Schwendowius, head of manpower for the War Industry in Białystok. At the same time, a request was placed with Arms Minister Albert Speer for the provision of building materials to erect accommodations for 40,000 peasants from Białowieża in the Białystok ghetto.

In its report for the first quarter of 1943, the German Ministry of Supplies stated that the deportation of Jewish workers during aktionen in the Białystok District had led to the closure of factories in Łomża, Krynki, and Bielsk. At the request of Froese, divisional inspector of the arms industry in the Białystok District, the authorities began transferring factories to other cities and importing thousands of Belorussians to replace the Jewish deportees. Although the German Labor Front (DAF) did its best to train the new workers, their lack of experience and difficulty in adapting to their new living conditions led to a sharp drop in production. In an attempt to remedy matters, the Foreign Department proposed that Jewish workers in key positions be kept on. The local Gestapo promised to look into the matter.

In a telegram sent on January 21 to Koch in Königsberg, Schwendowius referred to the appointment of German factory managers and the replace-
ment of Jewish workers by non-Jewish ones in the Bialystok ghetto. Having himself visited the military plants in the ghetto, Schwendowius was able to provide an accurate assessment of the economic damage their destruction would incur. He submitted his conclusions to Koch as follows: “The sudden and peremptory removal of the Jewish labor force from the city’s economic process would cause enormous damage, especially to its war industry. Dr. Altenloh intends bringing up the matter with Berlin.”

At his trial which took place in 1960 in West Germany, Dr. Altenloh testified that a large laundry concern in the Bialystok ghetto handled all the laundry for the Wehrmacht’s Eastern Front, and added that he had warned Berlin that if this concern were closed, they would have to send all their laundry to Hanover. Speer also supported sparing the military industries of the Bialystok ghetto, as the following letter to Himmler, dated February 1, 1943, testifies:

I have been informed that a large aktion is being planned for the Bialystok area, including the deportation of about 40,000 Jews from the Bialystok ghetto. These Jews will be replaced by a similar number of Belorussians from Białowieża, particularly petty farmers. It is essential that these farmers be removed from Białowieża in order to cut off supplies to the partisans hiding in the nearby forests. However, since the dwellings in the Bialystok ghetto are inadequate for this peasant population, a shortage of accommodation is inevitable. We shall need to build wooden accommodation to house 20,000 people. The problem is that the construction industry is so busy building cabins for the workers in the munitions industry and for the wounded, that no more building materials are available. Therefore, you will just have to make do with what there is, and erect the new buildings with existing materials.

Speer was no doubt deferring to Hitler’s injunction of January 8, 1943, ordering him to step up production of the arms industry and recruit 800,000 workers for the Wehrmacht. For Speer, the order was tantamount to a declaration of a state of emergency, as he wrote in his memoirs: “After the vacuum left by the losses on the Eastern Front, it was clear that any further reduction in the labor force would simply aggravate the problems the factories were already contending with. I found myself in a difficult position, for I knew I had to find ways of maintaining—and even upping—industrial production, especially within the arms industry.” After three months of foot-dragging, the German authorities finally decided to implement the aktion against the Jews of Bialystok in early February 1943.
Impending Destruction

The Jews of Białystok knew that the Jews in the district were being deported to Treblinka and Auschwitz and that their own fate hung in the balance. They had been told by refugees from other provinces how thousands of Jews had been taken to the death camps. These stories were corroborated by documents, photographs, and notes found on the clothes of victims, sent from Treblinka to the textile plants in the Białystok ghetto. When Barash gave some of these documents to Tenenbaum for his archive, the latter wrote in anguish: “The documents haunt me. . . . It feels as if my pockets are on fire.”

The Jews of the ghetto knew of the impending aktion two weeks before it began. On January 21, Tenenbaum wrote in his diary, “There are rumors that the ghetto will be closed on the first of February.” A few days later he wrote: “A terrible feeling pervades the ghetto. All around us everything is burning. Soon, the fire will reach Białystok . . . and we are hardly prepared. Another two weeks and we shall be saved [we shall be ready to respond]. We shall be prepared for the day of reckoning.” During those two weeks, Tenenbaum worked feverishly to organize a fighting front and draw up contingency plans in the case of an aktion. Although attempts to obtain weapons came to nothing, the underground did have some success in manufacturing homemade grenades, prompting Tenenbaum to declare: “We shall be both prepared and protected.” Nonetheless, when he informed the leaders of the underground that the aktion was only days away, he was extremely disappointed by their reaction: “They are petrified. All of them without exception—especially the Shomrim [Hashomer Hatzair]—are talking and talking. This is the reason for our impotence.”

Tenenbaum became even more incensed after Haika Grosman decided to leave the ghetto at its darkest hour. As he wrote on January 31, 1943: “H. [Haika Grosman], who has never stopped holding forth on the importance of self-defense, honor, and the like, on behalf of Hashomer Hatzair (which for one-and-a-half years has paid lip service to these ideas) is leaving—it’s getting too hot—the ghetto tomorrow morning. I have written them an official letter demanding a meeting with the leadership.”

As tension mounted, the leaders of the underground met on January 29 to finalize plans. They all agreed that the torching of the Judenrat building would be the signal to revolt. “It is easier,” Tenenbaum claimed at the meeting, “to open fire when the first Jew is taken away, than to let thousands be killed to save the rest, for who knows how long.” This view was also shared by the Fronts A and B.
Tenenbaum, who had misgivings about the uprising, decided to share them with Barash at a meeting held on January 31 at Barash’s home, at which some members of the Judenrat were also present. Since Tenenbaum knew that Barash would oppose his plan, it is not clear what he expected from Barash. Tenenbaum described the meeting as follows: “I raised the issue . . . of determining the point of retaliation. I myself am prepared to go along with the decision to retaliate as soon as the first Jew is led to the slaughter. But if there is—and there must be—another opinion, let us decide here and now how big a sacrifice we are willing to make to prevent the death of the majority.”

On the face of it, we see here a certain amount of ambivalence from Tenenbaum who, only three days earlier, had firmly resolved to counterattack as soon as the first Jew was led away. And yet, such ambivalence was prompted by deep concern for the fate of the ghetto residents who, unlike his comrades, were undefended. “What’s so hard to bear is the responsibility for the thousands of people who are still alive in the Białystok ghetto . . . whichever way you look at it, it’s a bad situation [in Yiddish, azoy iz shlekht un azoy iz biter].”

This terrible conflict—between the need for resistance and the knowledge that such resistance meant certain death for many of the ghetto’s residents—tormented Tenenbaum throughout this period. Although he considered it his duty to lead the armed revolt, he found the burden of determining the fate of tens of thousands of Jews too onerous to bear on his own. His decision to turn to Barash was almost certainly dictated by the need to share with him the burden of that fateful decision. Nor should it be forgotten that not only did Tenenbaum admire Barash for his wisdom and experience; he also saw him as the underground’s only source of succor, both financial and otherwise. This sentiment was all the stronger, since at the time, in late January 1943, Tenenbaum was feeling cut off from headquarters, his girlfriend Tema Schneiderman and his close friends who had stayed behind in Warsaw. Since Barash, as yet, had no clear idea of when the aktion would begin, or how extensive it would be, the meeting was adjourned for three days, on the assumption that by then Barash would have a clearer picture.

On the same day (January 31), Haika Grosman of Hashomer Hatzair announced her intention of leaving the ghetto the following morning. Although in her memoirs, Grosman does not specify why she left the ghetto at such a fateful moment, it seems she was ordered to find accommodations for key members of the underground from Grodno who were living as Aryan women. In support of this theory, Grosman described a meeting with Edek Boraks two days before the aktion, after she had already left the
ghetto, in which Boraks begged her not to abandon her comrades from Grodno on the Aryan side. For the duration of the aktion, Grosman lived outside the ghetto.

On February 1, 1943, a railway timetable was published in Kraków, signed by the director general of the eastern railways, whereby between February 9 and 13, five special passenger trains were to transport Jews from Białystok to Treblinka. Berlin had decided, for the time being at least, to evacuate only about 10,000 Jews from Białystok. Rolf Günther—Eichmann’s henchman—was dispatched to Białystok in order to quash opposition by local officials, such as Dr. Altenloh. Friedel, in his testimony, explained how immediately upon arrival in Białystok (no later than February 2), Günther informed Altenloh that he was under instructions from Kaltenbrunner, head of the Reich Main Security Office, to review the situation in the ghetto and purge it of terrorist gangs and underground organizations. This explanation was, however, simply meant to distract Altenloh from the true reason for Günther’s visit: to personally oversee the selection of Jews to be deported from the ghetto and to determine the scope of the deportation, as instructed by Berlin.

As the date of the aktion approached, the ghetto population prepared for it as best as it could. Finishing touches were put on hiding places. “A new city was built in cellars, attics, and hollow walls.” Tenenbaum himself inspected the central bunker—35 meters long, 1.5 meters wide, and 4 meters deep—dug by members of Dror at 7 Chmielna Street. Tenenbaum described it as “a real underground catacomb, equipped with ventilation, water and electricity.” The bunker was also used by Barash to hide gold, valuables, and foreign currency belonging to the Judenrat.

On Tuesday February 2, the ghetto population was alarmed to see Richard Dibus of the Gestapo and Yitzhak Marcus, head of the Jewish police, repairing all holes and cracks in the ghetto walls. “The women bought up all the bread in the shops. The shops looked like after a pogrom. People are taking food into the shelters,” wrote Tenenbaum.

Some of the shelters were built as underground tunnels leading outside the ghetto. Some were installed with electricity and could accommodate 100 people or more. David Klementinowsky described the conditions in a tunnel, dug a few weeks before the aktion, that hid twenty-four people. “People crouched in the sand. It was impossible to stand up. It was filthy, because the floor was a dirt floor. But the most difficult thing was to keep quiet. We were constantly afraid that a child might cry, because we knew that above us, the evil monster lurked.”

Once the permits of Jews working outside the ghetto were confiscated,
the entire ghetto population realized that they were doomed. On Wednesday, February 3, Hershel Rosenthal, a Dror activist, came to Tenenbaum’s house to inform him that none of the Jewish workers had been allowed out of the ghetto. Tenenbaum immediately summoned the neighborhood commanders of the underground and ordered them to prepare for battle. Instructions were given to deploy cells, take up positions, and distribute the hundreds of liters of sulfuric acid in readiness for use. Finally, Tenenbaum arranged to meet with Barash, to finalize plans regarding the timing of the uprising.51

On the same day, the appearance of Froese, Brix, Klein, and other officials in the ghetto gave the impression that the Germans had not yet reached a final decision regarding the aktion. The various contradictory rumors that spread throughout the ghetto only added to the confusion and panic.52 Despite the uncertainty, preparations for the uprising continued, and a list of occupants of the Dror bunker was drawn up, described by Tenenbaum as follows: “Barash and his family, all the “luminaries of the generation,” the party leadership and also, unfortunately, the wealthy scum, the directors, etc. In actual fact, most of our men will not be using the shelter: They will either be working in the factories or—when they begin taking away the factory workers, too—will be launching a counterattack.”53

On the following day, February 4, no Jew was allowed to leave the ghetto for work, and the exit passes of those who had turned up at the ghetto gate, as usual, were confiscated. Reluctantly, the Judenrat began to draw up lists of Jews who were to be deported, as ordered by the Germans. “First, the underworld, followed by families with no means of support.”54 Although some factory managers urged their employees to take cover in the factories, most of the workers refused, not wishing to abandon their families.55 The streets emptied of people, as the rumor that the Germans were intending to deport a quota of 10,000 Jews spread through the ghetto like wildfire. “People are hiding,” Tenenbaum wrote. “The panic is growing. Yet another committee has put in an appearance in the ghetto. They are asking for people, addresses. A raised voice is enough to send everyone into panic. The atmosphere is electric. The shadow of death is approaching. People are suspended between a mountain of despair and a sliver of hope.”56

In preliminary talks held on the evening of February 4, several hours before the start of the aktion, Barash informed Tenenbaum that the Germans had originally intended deporting 17,600 Jews but had later reduced this number to 6,300 in three transports of 2,100 people each. He added that the Germans were intending to use the Judenrat’s lists to deport the unemployed and that the factory and Judenrat workers were safe for the time being. Although a final decision from Berlin was imminent, one of the gen-
eralas of the committee that had visited the ghetto that afternoon—a member of the Gestapo in Königsberg—intended to intercede on the ghetto’s behalf upon his return to Königsberg. According to Barash, even Friedel opposed the liquidation of the ghetto. Klein, he added, had promised that he would not allow more than one transport through. Barash, who was familiar with the German tug-of-war over the ghetto’s fate, was not deceived for a moment, but was convinced that the three transports would proceed as planned and would be carried out on three successive days.57

For unknown reasons, Barash decided to divulge this information to Tenenbaum only, and not to those attending the meeting held immediately after their talk. After his talk with Barash, Tenenbaum realized that he could no longer delay making a decision regarding the underground’s response. “I asked him if they had ever lied to him outright. He said that so far they had not, but that there were arguments within the Gestapo itself over what to do with us, and that ‘the defense’ [those in favor of preserving the ghetto] was very strong.”58

It was during this time of crisis that the friendship between Barash and Tenenbaum reached a peak. The mutual trust they felt encouraged Barash to tell Tenenbaum things he had not revealed even to those closest to him. It is possible that Barash managed to convince Tenenbaum that the Germans would keep their promise of deporting no more than 6,300 Jews. In any case, Tenenbaum shared Barash’s opposition to an immediate show of resistance, although for different reasons. For whereas Barash believed that the minority had to be sacrificed for the sake of the majority, Tenenbaum believed that under the prevailing circumstances (divisiveness within the underground, shortage of weapons), any attempt at immediate resistance was tantamount to suicide.

In the Judenrat’s general session that took place immediately after the meeting, Barash delivered a short announcement, after which Tenenbaum stated: “If the aktion is limited, as promised—we shall not react, but shall sacrifice 6,300 Jews in order to save the remaining 35,000 (the situation on the front is such that a radical turnabout could occur any day). If, however, they decide to expand the scope of the aktion and force us to take to the streets, or if the streets spontaneously decide to resist, we shall have no choice but . . . to take the initiative.”59

Once the meeting was over, Tenenbaum immediately returned to his kibbutz and ordered his Hashomer Hatzair and Revisionist comrades to evacuate their comrades and the ammunitions dump from the area where the deportation was to begin—namely, Polna, Białostoczańska, Czysta, and Żytinia Streets. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of these streets began leaving
the area in search of hiding places. Many ghetto inhabitants were unable to sleep that night, for fear of what the following day would bring. Tenenbaum wrote: “It’s a quarter to two in the morning. Hundreds of people are wandering through the streets of the ghetto. Panic abounds. People are going into hiding. Every little sound startles them. The Jewish police are expressing their reluctance to join in the aktion and are threatening to throw away their hats at the first opportunity. All our girls have been sent down to the bunker (February 4, 1943).”

**Aktion in the Ghetto**

On Friday, February 5, 1943, at 3:30 a.m., about eighty armed members of the Gestapo, Schupo, and Kripo entered the ghetto and marched toward the Judenrat building. Within seconds, they surrounded the neighborhood designated for deportation and opened fire. The Germans ordered the Jewish police to round up the Jews, and when the latter refused to obey, they were savagely beaten. “The Germans threatened to kill ten Jewish policemen if they disobeyed orders.” Despite these orders, some of the police did manage to go into hiding, leaving the Germans to do their own dirty work. All in all, apart from a group of refugees who were occupying the synagogue on Nay Velt Street, the Germans had a hard time tracing the Jews on the Judenrat’s list.

In their frustration, the Germans did not limit themselves to a single area but spread throughout the ghetto. The Jews were roused from their sleep and led to Jurowiecka Street and thence to the assembly point outside the ghetto. Anyone who refused to go when ordered was peremptorily shot. The number of deportees was marked in chalk on the ghetto gate. The Jewish workers who were hiding in the factories watched helplessly as their fellows were led away.

Despite several hours of searching, the number of men, women, and children rounded up by the Gestapo was far less than the stipulated quota. The Germans, therefore, began seizing anyone they could get hold of. Possession of a work permit no longer provided immunity. “The Germans are going from house to house, combing cellars, attics, stables—breaking locks and doors. They are afraid to enter the houses themselves, and send the Jewish policemen in first,” recorded Tenenbaum. Among those arrested in the carpentry shop was Yandje Lebedz, who managed to jump from the train. Later, with the help of his Hashomer Hatzair comrades, he returned to the ghetto.
When the Germans came to deport Itzhak Malmed, a refugee from Slonim who lived on Kupiecka Street, he threw sulfuric acid at them, injuring one in the eye. The enraged German opened fire indiscriminately, killing a German and injuring another. After consulting with Altenloh and Lothar Heimbach of the Gestapo, Günther, Eichmann's aide and a commander of the aktion, gave the Judenrat a few hours to hand over Malmed, failing which 100 hostages would be executed. True to his word, when the Judenrat failed to hand over Malmed within the prescribed time, 100 deportees were taken to the Praga Gardens and shot.66

Friedel testified that the Germans adopted a tougher approach because “the Jews rebelled,”67 no doubt a reference to Malmed’s solitary act of resistance. Despite these stricter measures, by morning the Germans had managed to round up only 500 Jews. However, by the end of the day, they had greater success. The Germans took the Jews to Jurowiecka Street, out of the ghetto gate on Fabryczna Street to Polska Street, and thence to the Industrie Banhof (Industrial Station).68 By evening, the aktion was over for the day, and the Germans left the ghetto. By the end of the first day of the aktion, some 2,000 Jews had been evacuated, while hundreds of corpses lay strewn in the ghetto’s houses, courtyards, and streets.

That night, tens of thousands of people in the ghetto remained in hiding, unaware that the Germans had left. Despite the severe shortage of sleeping place, sanitary facilities, and food, no one left the hiding place that first night. A particularly poignant dilemma in the bunkers was how to stop babies crying: give them a sedative, or hold a pillow over their heads? According to Peysekh Kaplan, about 50 babies suffocated to death in this way during the aktion.69

The next day (Saturday, the Sabbath), the Germans entered the ghetto at 6 a.m. and ordered the Jewish police (those not hiding) to enter the houses and round up the Jews. It was obvious that, after the Malmed incident, the Germans were afraid of Jewish resistance. “The Germans are patrolling—there are five Germans to one or two Jewish policemen. Most of the policemen have gone into hiding,” reported Tenenbaum.70 In some cases, the Germans threw grenades at houses or used police dogs and water and gas hoses to force the Jews out of their shelters,71 but with little success.

At 8:00 a.m. the Germans left the ghetto, only to return some two hours later, with Ukrainian and Belorussian reinforcements and some reluctant Jewish firemen and policemen. The firemen were ordered to climb on to the roofs of the houses, break into attics, and demolish hollow walls where Jews might be hiding.72 However, they refused to cooperate, and most of the ghetto Jews remained undetected. “Even the factories are almost empty,”
said Tenenbaum. “There are no people around, either by day or by night—Białystok has become a ghost town.”

Even the factories were no longer really safe. A raid on one of the factories on Kupiecka Street uncovered a number of Jews without work permits, who were immediately taken away to the transport. Anyone who tried to resist was shot on the spot. Those hiding in the factories—particularly the children—suffered terribly from hunger. Members of Front B, who had organized hiding places in the factories in advance, were better off, for they had arranged for their comrades to bring them food. At night, when the coast was clear, the latter loaded bread and food on to a wagon and made the rounds of the factories, delivering food to their comrades and other people. Grosman also wrote that Tenenbaum organized food for all those hiding in the factories. By the end of the second day of the akció, the Germans had succeeded in rounding up no more than 1,000 Jews.

That Saturday night, shortly after the Germans left the ghetto, there was a mass exodus to the factories. All people who had a work permit moved into the factories, spurred by the rumor that the Germans were not deporting factory workers. The following day (Sunday, and therefore a respite from the akción), the exodus to the factories intensified. The hospitals, which like the factories were also considered a safe place, were filled to capacity within hours. Although Jews without work permits also tried to enter the factories, they were ejected by bona fide workers who considered them a risk. After Barash obtained permits for the workers’ families, too, thousands more people jammed into the already overcrowded factories. A factory that formerly had a capacity of 350 men working in three shifts now held thousands of people. Each work station was occupied by two or three workers and their families. Judenrat officials, Jewish policemen and firemen, and their families, also took refuge in the factories.

The factories were so overcrowded that there was hardly room to move. Food was scarce, and sanitary facilities inadequate. People slept on the floor, rising at 3:00 a.m. each day, to give themselves plenty of time to get ready before the German onslaught on the ghetto at dawn.

In a meeting with Tenenbaum, Barash confessed that he “hardly had any contact with the Germans. They come and do what they want, without informing him.” On the second day of the akción, the Judenrat, at the authorities’ behest, put up a notice announcing a reward of 10,000 Reichsmarks for anyone able to assist in the arrest of Malmed. The Germans also ordered Barash to bring his family (who were hiding in the Dror bunker) to the Judenrat building, presumably with the intention of holding them hostage until Malmed’s capture. About two days later, Malmed was
handed over to the Gestapo. During his interrogation, he asked to be allowed to commit suicide, but his request was refused. He was hanged outside the house where he carried out the attack, on Monday, February 8, at 8:00 a.m. “His body was left hanging . . . for seven days . . . The Germans did not allow it to be taken down.”

On the same day, about 300 Germans entered the ghetto to continue the aktion accompanied by a delegation that had come to supervise the operation. Among the members of the delegation was Froese, who gave his assurance that the factories would be spared, and Klein, who promised that Friedel’s arbitrary and cruel behavior would cost him his job.

The factory inmates soon realized that they had to organize life in the factories to minimize the risk of discovery. Certain areas of the factory, including attics and stairwells, were therefore designated as living areas for mothers and children, while the factory area itself was cleared for work. A minimal work schedule was organized. Outside the factories, meanwhile, Jews were being rounded up, and those hiding in the factories once again witnessed the tragic sight of their fellows being led to the transports or being shot to death. Bodies piled up in the streets of the ghetto, and Barash had to instruct the Hevra Kaddisha to take on additional workers to cope with the extra work. Hundreds of Jews volunteered to help carry the corpses to the cemetery on Żabia Street, where women and men were buried separately in mass graves.

By the end of the third day of the aktion, no more than 700 people had been rounded up. After nightfall, when the Germans left, some of the workers in the factories returned home, despite the bitter cold, to bring food for their families. Wherever they went they found broken-down doors, and ransacked apartments. The entire ghetto looked like the aftermath of a pogrom.

Barash appealed daily to the Gestapo to free prominent members of the community, such as the historian Abraham Samuel Hershberg, the former president of the community Abraham Tiktin, or the physician Dr. Aharon Beilin, but in vain. They were taken to Auschwitz even before the first two days of the aktion were up. Hershberg, the author of Pinkes Białystok (Białystok Journal), was 84 at the time and ailing, and when the Germans came to take him away, he begged them to shoot him. The Germans, however, refused, and dragged him from his home, together with his daughters. When Hershberg fainted on the way to the assembly point at 48 Kupiecka Street, he was kicked in the face by a Gestapo officer, loaded on to a wagon, and taken to the railway station. A similar fate befell other great historians, such as Meir Balaban, of the Warsaw ghetto, Simon Dubnow of the Riga ghetto, and Ignacy (Yitzhak) Schiper who perished in Majdanek.
Some Germans refused to participate in the deportations and kept up ties with the factories. Kaplan, in his chronicle, wrote that Germans who had a vested interest in the factories behaved as if it were “business as usual.” Some of them were eager to confirm orders that had been discussed prior to the aktion, moves that were interpreted by the factory workers as a sign that the factories’ days were numbered. Others placed new orders, which were interpreted as meaning that the factories were under no immediate danger. Some Germans placed private orders for themselves and families. During the aktion, some factory managers, often joined by Judenrat officials, turned up at the gate on Jurowiecka Street to intercede on behalf of their workers’ families. These intercessions resulted in the release of no more than several dozen people during the entire week of the aktion.

As the days went by, the aktion took on a rhythm of its own. The Germans entered the ghetto at dawn, rounded up Jews, and took them away to the transports. At night, the ghetto residents came out of hiding, distributed food, and prepared themselves for the next day’s onslaught.85 Tenenbaum’s diary informs us that about 13,000 people hid in the factories, and “another eighteen to twenty thousand ‘simply vanished’ off the face of the earth.”86 Vered wrote in his memoirs: “We emerge at night, to hunt for food in abandoned houses, taking anything we can lay our hand on, even water. We are dying of thirst. . . . Shortly before dawn, we return to the bunker, where we spend yet another day of fear, worry, and tension. . . . People have caught colds and we beg them to leave before their coughs give us away. We beg them to leave. They threaten to report us if we kick them out. Even among ourselves, the informers descend to using the lowest tactics.”87

According to Tenenbaum, on Tuesday February 9, a telegram came from Berlin instructing the local Gestapo “to save the factories and workers with work permits.”88 The Germans continued hunting down Jews but with “20,000 Jews in hiding—it is impossible to find them,” wrote Tenenbaum. “The Germans cannot reach the Jews who are hiding in basements, and attempt to drown them by hosing the cellars. The Jews lift their children above their heads to try and save them. The Germans managed to dislodge only two people. The remainder survived.”89

The Germans, aware that they were having less success in rounding up the Jews with each successive day, tried a new tactic—encouraging people to inform by granting them immunity from deportation. Each informer would be issued with a document stating “Dieser Jüden verräter ist befreit von Transport” (This Jewish traitor is exempt from the transport).90 Dozens of people chose to save their lives by becoming turncoats: “Three
soldiers go by led by an old woman—a *mayserte* [Yiddish for “informer”]. Five Germans are led by a young lad—a *moyser* [“informer”]. They make a beeline for places no one would have suspected of hiding people, and expose their wretched inhabitants.”

This tactic, which resulted in the exposure of hundreds of Jews, caused a moral degeneration in the ghetto. The same tactic was used by the Germans in the Warsaw ghetto, during the April 1943 revolt, when Jews were spared in return for betraying their fellows. The few dozen informers in the Bialystok ghetto were responsible for hundreds of deaths, and the Germans were well pleased with the results of this tactic.

Looting was another phenomenon that ate away at the moral fabric of the ghetto. People left their hiding places at night, entered abandoned apartments, and took food, property, and silver. Most of the looters were members of the underworld, but some were honest people driven to this extreme by poverty and hunger. The Judenrat put up a notice threatening heavy penalties for looting, but the temptation was too great, and few heeded the warning. Although only about fifty people succumbed to looting, the damage they caused to the morale of the ghetto was far in excess of their numbers.

The rumor was now circulating that the Germans’ latest success in rounding up the Jews had prompted them to extend the *aktion* for another few days in an attempt to round up the requisite quota of Jews. As the ghetto population became increasingly demoralized, suicides became common. Uncertainty concerning the end of the *aktion* produced despair. Some Jews obsessively calculated the number of deportees in an attempt to assess when the *aktion* would end.

This uncertainty was dispelled on Thursday, February 11, when Dr. A. Kanaris, chief of Security Police and SD in East Prussia, arrived from Königsberg and informed Barash that the *aktion* was about to end. True to his word, the following evening (Friday, February 12), the *aktion* in Bialystok came to an end, about a week after it began. The Jews, however, unable to believe that the nightmare was over, were afraid to leave their hiding places. It was only the following morning (the Sabbath) that people dared return home. Tenenbaum provided a tragic portrayal of the sight that met their eyes. Unlike the rest of the diary, which was written mostly in Hebrew, this entire entry was written in Yiddish, a sign of his anguish:

Two phenomena, unique to the Białystok ghetto, are worthy of note: the steadfast refusal of the Jewish police to participate in the deportation, and the fact that the entire ghetto population went into hiding. The refusal of the Jewish police to cooperate was almost certainly spontaneous. No doubt they were eager to shake off the stigma that clung to them after the deportation to Pruzhany and to dispel rumors spread by refugees from Grodno and other places concerning the collaboration of the Jewish police with the Gestapo. There is no evidence that Barash or Marcus tried to influence the police to cooperate with the Germans, for fear of a negative backlash. Even though he knew that the policemen’s refusal to cooperate could endanger the entire ghetto, Barash could not bring himself to persuade the police to betray their fellows. He, himself, cooperated with the Germans only as a last resort. The heroism of the policemen and firemen was stressed in the writings of Kaplan, Tenenbaum, and others. “They refused to inform or collaborate,” wrote Tenenbaum. “They did not act holier than the pope. On several occasions, the policemen risked their own lives in order to save dozens and hundreds of Jews in hiding places. . . . In other ghettos, the policemen were given a kontingent [quota]. They were told that if they failed to provide the requisite quota of people, they would be killed. This was not the case in Białystok.”

During the entire week of the aktion, 10,000 residents of the Białystok ghetto were deported in five transports: The first two trains left for Auschwitz on February 5 and 6, and the three others left for Treblinka between February 8 and 12. Once the aktion was over, the following postscript was scribbled on a public notice in the ghetto: “Feb. 5–Feb. 12, 1943—aktion in Białystok. Treblinka. 10,000 Jews deported. 900 shot.”
The Underground

On January 14, 1943, members of Dror and Hashomer Hatzair met to discuss contingency plans for the imminent aktion. At that point, when the extermination of Jews in the district was at its height, none of them had the slightest doubt regarding the ghetto’s fate. However, opinions were divided concerning the correct strategy to be adopted: Should they wait until the first 10,000 Jews had been deported before taking action, or retaliate as soon as the first Jew was led away? The comrades were unable to reach a consensus on this issue. Hashomer Hatzair, which had already begun sending members out to the forests, clearly favored the latter option. “The order of the day is passive resistance: Not to go willingly to the slaughter, but to flee, hide, swallow poison (potassium cyanide).” Dror, on the other hand, was more hesitant, having, according to Tenenbaum, “learned little from what had happened to other cities.” Although the majority favored immediate retaliation, no decision was reached at the meeting, the tacit understanding being that the final decision would be taken once the aktion began, depending on the conditions and the public’s response.

When rumors spread that the ghetto was about to be sealed, Boraks, the head of Front A, and Tenenbaum, head of Front B, met to discuss contingency plans. Boraks agreed to draw up a plan of action for Tenenbaum. Shortly before the meeting, after visiting the weapons laboratories in the ghetto, Tenenbaum was dismayed to discover that the weapons stock was totally inadequate and that production was proceeding very slowly, due partly to the difficulty in obtaining spare parts. “At such a rate,” he said, “the Messiah will come first. . . . ‘Hashatz’ [Hashomer Hatzair] youth are experts at argumentation and can discuss minutiae for one-and-a-half hours. When it comes to action, however, they are useless.”

Both Grosman’s memoirs and Tenenbaum’s diary indicate a lack of logistic cooperation between the two fighting fronts, and to a smaller extent even between Hashomer Hatzair and Dror. Suspicion among the various movements existed even when it was obvious to all that time was running out and that a common strategy was vital. The different factions even refused to meet together to discuss strategy. For example, on February 2, 1943, a mere two days before the aktion, Gedalyah Shayek of Hashomer Hatzair sought to postpone a meeting due to take place that evening, because he objected to the presence of the Betarist Mathus. Reluctantly the other members decided to meet without Mathus, only to discover that the Communists—who, at the time, favored the partisan option—had boy-
cotted the meeting, too. The meeting ended with an agreement to start the uprising as soon as the Germans set fire to the Judenrat building. Preparations for an uprising were evident, and according to Tenenbaum, the pogotowie bojowe [Polish for “state of alert”] continued. It was clear to everyone that a retaliatory strike was inevitable.

Several hours before the aktion, when Barash and Tenenbaum realized that the Germans were not intending to liquidate the entire ghetto, the attitude of the two fronts toward a countercoup changed. Like the Warsaw, and later also the Vilna underground, the Białystok underground decided to refrain from a retaliatory strike until it was clear that the Germans intended to destroy the entire ghetto. Unlike the situation in the Warsaw and Vilna ghettos, however, the Judenrat in Białystok was partner to this decision. Although Tenenbaum reiterated in his diary that the underground would strike as soon as the first Jew was deported, in reality he was ambivalent over this issue. After Barash informed him that the deportation was to be partial only, he changed his mind. Only if the aktion were extended beyond the original quota of 6,300, or if the “street were to rise up and defend itself spontaneously” would the underground take action.

It seems as if Boraks, the commander of Front A, agreed with Tenenbaum on this point. Certainly there is nothing to indicate otherwise. On the contrary, the fact that the underground offered no resistance on the first day of the aktion seems to support the idea that the two leaders agreed. According to Grosman, however, neither Boraks nor members of Hashomer Hatzair agreed with Tenenbaum’s decision to wait but favored being prepared for an immediate—albeit futile—strike, in the knowledge that this was their last chance to defend themselves honorably. In assessing Grosman’s opinion, it should be noted that during the week of the aktion she was in the Aryan part of the town and not in the ghetto. Moreover throughout the aktion members of the Front A did not start an uprising. Grosman’s testimony was culled from secondhand sources (via Zerach Zylberberg-Ziskind, a member of Hashomer Hatzair, who reported to Grosman after her return to the ghetto), and therefore its accuracy is questionable. Another possibility is that the core leadership of Hashomer Hatzair, under Boraks, while openly espousing an immediate strike, secretly decided to wait. However this may be, the testimonies of Yaakov Makowsky and Eliyahu Vered, both active members of Hashomer Hatzair, corroborate the evidence that there were no preparations for an immediate strike on the eve of the aktion. Makowsky, for example, claimed that each member of the underground was in his own house when the aktion began, and those who were armed (with Molotov cocktails, metal rods, and the like) knew that they were to
use their weapons only if they themselves were deported. Vered recalled that immediately before the aktion, he and the four other members of his cell were ordered to go into hiding. Both escaped to the surrounding forests immediately after the end of the aktion and were among the few members of Hashomer Hatzair in the ghetto to survive. The members of the Hashomer Hatzair leadership had two hiding places: on Smolna Street, where Boraks hid with eight other members and ten Communists, and on Fabryczna Street, which sheltered a group led by Franek. Gedalyah Shayek, a Jewish policeman, served as a liaison between the two groups.

On the afternoon of February 8, four days after the start of the aktion, the members of Front B held a meeting also attended by members of Hashomer Hatzair. Although the sources are silent regarding the purpose of the meeting, it was no doubt called to discuss strategy for the remainder of the aktion—namely, to refrain from counterattacking unless the Germans extended the scope of the aktion. At the meeting, Tenenbaum urged Hashomer Hatzair members not to endanger themselves unnecessarily but to move into the factories for the time being. The latter, however, refused, arguing that the relative safety of the factories undermined the fighting spirit essential for a successful resistance operation. Tenenbaum disagreed. The people in the factories, he countered, were also plagued by sleeplessness, hunger, and fear and could be recruited to the cause, if and when the Germans came to evacuate the factories. These powerful arguments notwithstanding, the members of Hashomer Hatzair abided by their decision, little knowing that they were signing their death sentence.

The following day, the Germans raided the hiding place of the Hashomer Hatzair cell on Fabryczna Street. It all happened so swiftly that the members had no time to react, but were marched away, with their hands raised, to the assembly point on Jurowiecka Street. Nine members of Hashomer Hatzair were deported that day. Tenenbaum wrote that he drove the remainder to the factories in a delivery cart. His frustration and anguish at his inability to save the lives of the nine comrades are evident in the following passage: “We stood and saw [here Tenenbaum is speaking figuratively; he did not actually see how his comrades were led away] how our friends were led to their death. We knew that none of them would reach Treblinka. They would jump, they would be shot—they would do anything to avoid being taken there. (They shouldn't have heeded our decision [not to rebel]. . . . We should have all decided [to rebel]).”

Tennenbaum’s ambiguity regarding an immediate response is once again evident. Although in principle he believed in the armed struggle, he kept postponing it, only to be subsequently assailed by pangs of conscience, es-
especially after the arrest of the Hashomer Hatzair leadership. His loss was rendered more intense by the fact that Hashomer Hatzair was the movement closest to him ideologically. This painful episode inevitably affected his subsequent strategy choices.

The remaining members of the Hashomer Hatzair leadership did not fare much better. Distraught by the loss of their comrades, they abandoned the factories that night, to link up with Boraks’s group. The next morning (February 10), however, Boraks’s hiding place was also discovered, and eight more members of Hashomer Hatzair were arrested. Again there was no time to react, although some had grenades. The members of a Communist division, led by Lolek Mintz, who had also refused to take shelter in the factories, were arrested, too, after Frieda Feld and her friend Bluma threw grenades at the Germans who came to deport them.

Grosman reported that Gedalyah Shayek appealed to Barash to try and obtain the release of his comrades. According to her, Barash was not convinced that Shayek was a bona fide representative of Hashomer Hatzair and wanted Grosman to reassure him on this point. When Shayek replied that such reassurance would be difficult, as Grosman was living outside the ghetto, Barash replied that it was too late anyway, since the comrades had been removed from the ghetto. Since it is inconceivable that Barash would have refused to release the members of Hashomer Hatzair had it been within his power to do so, he was undoubtedly speaking the truth.

Even after the deportation of the Hashomer Hatzair leaders, Tenenbaum failed to reach a decision concerning the start of the uprising. The participants in the workers’ assembly held on the sixth day of the aktion (February 10) decided that the deadline for a counter-coup was Saturday (February 13). The few remaining members of the Hashomer Hatzair leadership were transferred to the factories, where they were joined by their comrade Yentl, who returned to the ghetto after jumping from the transport. She described how the comrades let the girls jump first, to give them a better chance of escaping. Presumably, all the comrades jumped, but apart from Yentl, only Shlomo Yudkowitz and Yandje Lebedz returned to the ghetto. The fate of the others is unknown.

Throughout the aktion, the fronts put up no resistance, apart from sporadic clashes between individuals and the Germans. Neither Boraks nor Tenenbaum, for different reasons, was in a position to launch an armed uprising. Although this aktion was the underground’s first opportunity to put theory into practice, it failed to do so. Divisiveness, lack of coordination, the absence of a comprehensive strategy, and above all a serious shortage of weapons eclipsed any chance for retaliation. Finally, the capture of the
Communists and Hashomer Hatzair leadership delivered the death blow to the ghetto underground.

Szymon Datner, who lived through the February aktion, summarized this ignominious chapter of the underground’s history as follows: “Self-defense did not bring the desired results . . . due to disunity, divisiveness and the lack of a concerted plan. The youth groups in their shelters waited in vain for the order to resist. The news that the Germans were sparing the factories and the workers who were hiding there with their families did not help matters. Some organizations ordered their members to hide in the factories and to take up arms only if the Germans attacked the factories. Those acts of resistance that took place were isolated and uncoordinated.”122 The following testimony by one of the ghetto residents, taken from the Białystok underground archive, corroborates Datner’s account:

The question everyone is asking is, Where are the rebels? Where are those who were supposed to launch an uprising against the Germans? We feel despair mixed with bitterness and shame . . . and a strong sense of disillusionment with the fighters who are out to save their own skins. Is this how they defend our honor and our lives? Is this the result of all their frenzied activity? Where are these Zionists? Where are all the “pioneers” and “Shomerim”? Why are they silent now? Where are the “Red Heroes” with all their fanfare? How are they not ashamed before the real heroes at the front?123

Tenenbaum, tormented by a sense of failure, did not try to deny his part in these events. Two days after the end of the aktion, he informed his friends from Dror: “We are responsible for failing to react. Those who come after us will judge us—perhaps favorably, perhaps unfavorably. They should know that we were not guided by weakness, but rather by our concern for the fate of 10 percent of Polish Jewry.”124 In a similar vein, Tenenbaum wrote in a letter to his sister Tamar in Palestine in late February: “The first aktion has taken place. Ten thousand [were deported]. We did not react. All we managed to do was save our comrades. For had we thrown our grenades, no one would have been alive to tell the story. Our chance will yet come. We shall yet throw them.”125

Although Tenenbaum could pride himself on the fact that all his comrades survived the aktion, he was wracked by feelings of guilt over what he felt was a crime of omission. Nonetheless, he still argued that there was no point in resisting, due to the shortage of weapons, and perhaps also in the hope that “any day, given the current situation at the front and in the country—deliverance might come.”126 It is important to bear in mind that
at the time Tenenbaum had not abandoned the idea of resistance in principle. On the contrary, the akction, perhaps more than any other calamity, strengthened his feeling that the end was nigh and that an armed confron-
tation was inevitable.

As the akction progressed, the underground was forced to reconsider its aims. While some members upheld the decision to fight to the bitter end, others began considering the possibility of joining local partisan groups. For a while, some of the fighting fronts had advocated joining the partisans
in the forests. The extermination of the Jews in the Bialystok District and
the aktion in the ghetto reinforced the conviction that this was the best op-
tion. As information about partisan activity filtered into the ghetto, there
was growing enthusiasm for escaping to the forests, where, as well as saving
their own lives, the fighters could carry out acts of sabotage and attack the
retreating German forces.

As time passed, and ties evolved between the ghetto and the partisan
groups, escaping to the forests no longer seemed an impossible dream.
Growing enthusiasm for this option hampered the already difficult task of
the fighting fronts. Once the underground decided to launch the uprising
only when the ghetto was threatened with total destruction, the timing of
the uprising effectively became contingent on German plans. Moreover, the
underground leaders had to assess whether the deportation was part of an
overall liquidation plan or whether it was, as the Germans claimed, only a
partial operation that did not involve the murder of Jews.127

The aktion and its aftermath therefore intensified the dilemma of
whether to “carry on waiting” or escape to the forests and join the partisans.
In a nutshell: ghetto or forest? The minutes of the General Assembly of the
Dror collective and activists, which took place some two weeks after the
aktion, on February 27, 1943, reveal this dilemma.128 Tenenbaum opened
the assembly with the following moving comments: “We are surrounded by
the dead. We know what took place in Warsaw: No one was left alive. The
same is true of Będzin and Częstochowa, and so it seems, every other place.
We are the last to survive. It is not a particularly comfortable feeling to
be the last. It is a special responsibility. Now is the time to decide how to
act tomorrow.”129

Tenenbaum’s assumption that the Bialystok ghetto was the last to re-
main was, albeit understandably, mistaken. Since ties with other ghettos in
Poland had been severed, Tenenbaum assumed that his comrades in War-
saw, from whom he had not heard for two months, had perished. In a letter
he wrote in late February 1943, Tenenbaum informed his sister Tamar (who
arrived in Palestine in 1941) that Itzhak (Zuckerman), Zivia (Lubetkin), and
Frumka (Plotnicka) fell, and that no one was left of Hashomer Hatzair. He mentioned his girlfriend Tema, who fell in the Warsaw revolt (January 1943), adding that “in a few days (or weeks) I will be joining her.” It was this feeling of doom that guided Tenenbaum when he raised the question—revolt unto death or escape to the forests—for discussion at the assembly. The participants in this stormy, tragic debate were divided. Some felt it their duty to stand by the ghetto, come what may, while others expressed a wish to escape to the forests. Tenenbaum was caught in the crossfire. His position about joining the partisans was clear. Only a few days before, on February 19, he had harangued members of Hanoar Hazioni, who also wished to join the partisans, in no uncertain terms:

What will you gain by escaping to the forests? You will not find an organized partisan movement capable of fighting the enemy—here. Such a movement exists, but a few hundred kilometers to the East. The “partisans”—here—are weak. They are escaped prisoners, corrupt and demoralized men. Their only fight is with the peasants over bread and milk, or with the villagers for unruly conduct with the peasant women. Our mission is revenge. True, in the forest we can actually carry out acts of revenge, rather than restrict ourselves to token acts of desperation. From a political-strategic viewpoint, diversionary tactics [attacking enemy forces] and sabotage outside the ghetto—burning bridges, severing telegraph wires, etc.—are definitely superior. But we are too weak to undertake this kind of work. Had we a hundred square kilometers of forest and several hundred armed lads devoted to partisan work, we might have managed. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Even if it were—we would not have abandoned the ghetto. It would have been tantamount to betrayal. . . . Our doctrine is to perform our national duty from within the ghetto, not to abandon the elderly! Let those who remain [alive]—if any—arm themselves and escape to the forests.

In a discussion with his comrades, however, Tenenbaum no longer described escaping to the forests as an act of national betrayal, no doubt due to his reluctance to impose his point of view, particularly in view of the sensitivity of the issue. Some comrades, such as Yehezkel Tikotzki, Dorka Tzaref, and others, called for a collective act of resistance at all costs, in order “to add a chapter of glory to the history of Jewish Białystok and of our movement.” Others, such as Sarah Kupynski, Ziporah Birman, Ethel Sobol, and Yocheved Weinstein believed that as many as half of them could be saved by escaping to the forest: “That will be our hour, our history . . . to remain alive—that is our mission.” Yet others, such as Fanya
Sitch, Hanoch Żelaznogura, and Hershel Rosenthal, supported both views simultaneously: while they did not object to joining the partisans, they believed that their first duty was to launch an uprising in the ghetto, once it was threatened with total liquidation. Afterwards, “if anyone manages to get hold of the murderer’s weapons and escape to the forest—so much the better.” Given the disparity of viewpoints, Tenenbaum found it hard to develop a solution that was acceptable to all, so the decision he adopted at the end of the debate was vague and equivocal: “We shall do all within our power to smuggle as many people as possible out to join the partisan struggle in the forest. However, anyone who is in the ghetto during the forthcoming aktion must respond as soon as the first Jew is deported. . . . Above all, it is important not to detract from the movement’s image and honor, right to the very end.” Tenenbaum’s equivocation may have been prompted by his desire to prevent dissent among his men, in the belief that when the time came, he would win over his opponents to his point of view.

The “ghetto versus forest” polemic, which raged in Białystok even before the aktion of early February was taken up again later by members of Hashomer Hatzair. Although, as a rule, they agreed with Dror, on this issue Hashomer Hatzair sided with the Communists, who after the aktion devoted all their energies into smuggling their members out to the forests. The members of Hashomer Hatzair were swept along on the tide of their enthusiasm, and only a week after the aktion, Yaakov Makowsky and Eliyahu Vered of Hashomer Hatzair escaped to the forest, together with five Communists, including two of their leaders, Rivka Wyskowska and Moyshe (Marek) Buch.

After the Aktion

On Saturday, February 13, 1943, a day after the end of the aktion, the Germans erected a gallows near the Judenrat building and hanged three Jews for looting empty apartments. On the same day, the ghetto Jews began hunting for informers. The hunt continued for about a month: “They are hunting down informers and beating them to death. One has only to point to an informer, for hundreds of people to set upon him. . . . They have already hanged three informers and lynched another three. They are thrown on to wagons while still breathing and taken to the cemetery. The police turn a blind eye to what’s going on.” The Judenrat also condemned the informers, and on February 19, it published a list of thirty-five ghetto residents “who in those dark days, looted empty or abandoned apartments.
Most of them received two to eight weeks in jail, or open-ended prison sentences, and had their work permits permanently confiscated. Among those arrested were the Yudowsky brothers, who moved to Białystok after the akšion in Slonim. Rumor had it that even in Slonim they had been Gestapo agents. In Białystok, they were exempt from wearing the yellow patch and roamed freely through the city, terrorizing both the Jews and the Poles. During the akšion, the Yudkowsky brothers denounced Jews to the Germans and took every opportunity to extort money from the Jews. Klementinowsky wrote that after the akšion, Yaakov Feyerman, of the underground shot one of the brothers, but only wounded him. The incident, which created a furor within the Gestapo, was exploited by the Judenrat to show up the Yudkowsky brothers in their true colors. The Germans arrested them and their families, and later shot them.

The property of Jews who had been deported was collected by the Judenrat. Cows and horses were handed over to the hospital and Judenrat Supplies Department. Furniture was stored in warehouses, and bedding and household utensils were distributed among the needy. For the first three days after the akšion, the Germans allowed only Barash and Goldberg to leave the ghetto to obtain food for the ghetto population. Gradually, as their vigilance relaxed, and as the Judenrat once again asked for ghetto residents to report for work, life began to return to normal. The Germans removed certain areas—sections of Fabryczna and Gieldowa Streets—from the ghetto and added others (principally areas containing factories) so that Jews’ factories situated outside the ghetto were now located inside it. However, they could not completely prevent Jews from working outside the ghetto, since certain jobs (railway work and garbage collection) necessitated leaving the ghetto. As a result, the smuggling of vital commodities into the ghetto once again resumed.

The main question that preoccupied the ghetto population after the akšion was when would the akšion resume? On the day after the akšion, the Białystok Jews learned that Jews were still being deported from Grodno. Thus, it is not surprising that the rumor spread that the akšion in Białystok would resume on February 28. This rumor was denied by Klein, who claimed that the Poles were spreading the rumor in order to get the Jews to sell all their gold and silver, and thereby trigger a currency devaluation. Rather than setting their minds at rest, however, his words made the Jews more anxious. Kaplan explained that the optimists believed the respite would last a month, while the pessimists believed it would last only a few days. The arrival of twelve Jews from the Grodno ghetto, who corroborated the rumor that Dr. David Brawer, head of the Grodno Judenrat, had been
murdered, and that the remaining Jews had been deported, merely added to the general sense of panic.\textsuperscript{145}

Alongside this growing anxiety, however, were signs that life in the ghetto was settling down. Military production swiftly expanded, and the notices put up by the Judenrat asking for sewing machines, motors, horses, and textile experts also generated a faint hope that things might not be quite as bad as they seemed.\textsuperscript{146} True to its ethos, immediately after the \textit{aktion}, the Judenrat set about expanding the factories. With Barash’s approval, the factory foremen put up signs declaring the factories to be Wehrmacht property, in the hope that these labels would improve their chances of survival. Again Barash had to contend with widespread reluctance to work outside the ghetto, since many of the deportees had been “outside” workers. To solve this problem and meet the quota of workers demanded by the Germans, the Judenrat stamped the work cards of those who worked outside the ghetto with a ghetto factory stamp.\textsuperscript{147}

\section*{Conclusion}

As leader of the Judenrat Barash did his best to instill optimism and hope into the hearts of the Jews. The fact that the Judenrat retained its standing even after the \textit{aktion} was unique to Bia\l stok. In Warsaw, for example, after Czerniakow’s suicide and the collapse of the Jewish police, the Judenrat never recovered. On the contrary, its weakness was all the more apparent in the newly reformed ghetto, where the functions it had hitherto fulfilled were no longer relevant. After the \textit{aktion}, the Jews in Warsaw transferred their allegiance from the Judenrat to the Jewish Fighting Organization, which had made itself a name during the Warsaw uprising as a force to be reckoned with. In the Bia\l stok ghetto, however, rather than undermining Barash’s status, the \textit{aktion} actually strengthened it. The ghetto population saw that the Germans had stood by their promise not to deport the workers and their families who were hiding in the factories. In Bia\l stok, the Jews allowed themselves to be swept along by Barash’s conviction that after this partial \textit{aktion} the Germans would leave the ghetto alone. Barash won public support for his belief that the ghetto was indispensable to the Reich’s war efforts. If anything, the public’s faith in Barash increased after the \textit{aktion}.

Barash’s cultivation of the German authorities paid off: immediately after the \textit{aktion} he was kept informed of decisions regarding the ghetto’s future. A German document dated February 20, 1943 (a week after the end of
the aktion), describes a meeting that took place the previous day with the KdS commander in Bialystok. The meeting, called ostensibly to discuss the ghetto’s new borders and fences, shed light on the authorities’ plans for the ghetto’s future. At the end of the meeting, the following decisions were adopted:

During this meeting, the deputy commander of the KdS declared that a further deportation of the Jews [from Bialystok] is out of the question. In our estimation, 30,000 Jews will remain in the ghetto until the end of the war. From now on, we must take this economic fact into consideration, since it is our belief that the Reich Main Security Office will agree with this view of things. Thus, a new picture arises concerning the work force and economic productivity [in the ghetto].

1. Although the ghetto’s borders have changed, its overall area has not.
2. Factories situated within the ghetto will continue to employ Jewish workers.
3. Irrespective of future peace arrangements in the city, it is essential, for both political and security reasons, that the 4,000 or so Jews employed in factories outside the ghetto be forthwith transferred to factories inside the ghetto.

This proposal awaits the final approval of the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin.

This document provides some insight into how, once again, the ghetto’s fate became a subject of controversy. The document’s emphasis on economic productivity seems to indicate that the authorities wished to avoid the destruction of the ghetto. Since the document was found in Tenenbaum’s underground archive, Barash presumably gave it to Tenenbaum after receiving it from a German official. This official was almost certainly Gerhard Klein, with whom Barash had a good relationship and who was also considered a “good” German, as both Grosman and Tenenbaum testified. Klein’s statements both before and during the aktion lend credence to the hypothesis that it was he who handed the document to Barash, as proof that other German officials also believed the aktion was over and that the ghetto would be spared. The fact that Barash handed over the document to Tenenbaum indicates that their relationship had not been affected by the aktion. This document may explain why Tenenbaum kept putting off the moment of action, rather than prepare for the inevitable confrontation, or why he made no attempt to challenge Barash’s views. In any case, there is no doubt that it was this document that motivated Barash to begin rehabilitating the ghetto. And as Grosman put it: “In the ghetto, life once again be-
came routine. In all the region only Jewish Bialystok remained. . . . Once again Jews went to work every day at dawn and wearily returned at dark. Once again there were the long lines along the sidewalks on the Aryan side, coming back with hidden milk and lard, alcohol and beer. Spring smiled at us, but we were imprisoned."
Chapter 7

The Interim Period, March–May 1943

Mordecai Tenenbaum’s diary for the month of March 1943 provides a comprehensive picture of his contacts with Ephraim Barash, of German plans for the ghetto’s future, and of developments within the under-ground. The picture is completed by the memoirs of Haika Grosman and of other survivors, enabling the researcher to reconstruct the events of the time against the background of everyday life in the ghetto, following the first aktion.1

Everyday Life

The notices put up by the Judenrat during the first week of March reflect its attempts to create the impression that life in the ghetto was returning to normal. They urged people to work, pay water rates and electricity rates and chimney-sweeping bills, and keep their apartments and yards clean. Despite the authorities’ attempts to confine Jewish labor to the ghetto, there was still a demand for Jewish labor outside the ghetto.2 This demand may have been part of the local authorities’ plan to keep the ghetto functioning until the end of the war. The demand for Jewish labor was no doubt also the result of Germany’s worsening military situation and problems in military production. From late 1942, as the situation deteriorated, the need to recruit all available manpower intensified. That the Belorussian peasants transferred to Bialystok found it hard to adapt to their new conditions and lacked the professional expertise of their Jewish predecessors were also factors in the growing demand for Jewish labor.

The local police were instructed to see to it that all Jewish labor was kept within the confines of the ghetto. On March 5, 1943, the Judenrat received official instructions to reset the boundaries for the ghetto. After this was
done by the Judenrat’s Housing Department, the ghetto’s area was smaller than ever. Tenants who were rehoused had to sign a guarantee that they would leave their apartments in good condition and leave all fixtures behind, including doors and faucets.³

A German certificate dated March 10 explains why the authorities decided to reset the ghetto’s boundaries:

A new approach has emerged. The Gestapo and Schupo want all 4,000 Jews working outside the ghetto to be transferred to factories within the ghetto, for security reasons and for reasons connected with counterespionage. There is no longer any need for Jews to work outside the ghetto. The ghetto has been given new boundaries in order to economize on the number of guards and to prevent acts of sabotage and the like. The local security police, however, intends leaving the ghetto as such intact. Before the month is up, the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin shall issue a final decision on the matter.⁴

The real reason behind this order, however, was almost certainly the Germans’ wish to restrict partisan activity in the area and to ensure the continued employment of Jews in the ghetto, an issue that was taken up by the authorities in Berlin later the same month.

On March 13, 1,148 Jews, the last survivors from the Grodno ghetto, arrived in Bialystok. “The new arrivals,” wrote Tenenbaum, “included Jewish police (informers and paskudniaks [scum]) and their families, members of the Gestapo’s domestic staff, and several hundred others who had somehow managed to survive the previous akcienen.”⁵ Tenenbaum immediately arranged to meet with Barash to warn him that the new arrivals were Gestapo agents. It soon became clear that the Jewish policemen from Grodno, led by Noach Srebrenik, intended carving out key positions for themselves in the ghetto with the help of their German “patrons.” Tenenbaum, who had been notified of the situation by members of the Grodno Dror, advised Barash “to publicly discredit them, and to bar them from positions of responsibility in the ghetto.”⁶

An original testimony dated March 17, discovered in the underground archive, reflects the anger the ghetto public felt toward the police from Grodno who had collaborated with the German police and denounced Jews. Their behavior in Bialystok was not much better. They ate and drank extravagantly and pestered Barash to find them jobs within the local police force, but Yitzhak Marcus, the chief of the Jewish police, insisted they hand in their uniforms. The community leaders from Grodno were, morally speak-
ing, not much better than the police. They tried to use their money to buy special privileges and demanded both a semi-autonomous enclave within the ghetto and representation on the local Judenrat. Barash refused, however, to give in to their demands.7

The refugees from Grodno were required to register with the local police. After they were deloused, the Judenrat’s Welfare Department8 supplied them with their basic needs, such as beds, tables, bedding and clothes, using items that had been left behind by the deportees of the February aktion. Some later found employment in the ghetto factories.9

The Grodno refugees exerted a strong influence on the ghetto population, as the following passage illustrates: “Not only the wealthy, but also the poor, have begun feeling that they have to sell all their possessions in order to pamper to their physical desires. They think only of today, since no one knows what the future will bring. They have thrown caution and thrift to the wind. . . . Suddenly, there is a universal craving for good food. . . . The motto is: live for the day.”10

Abraham Broide, one of Grodno’s most dynamic community activists, arrived in Białystok in the second half of March 1943 after escaping with two others from Treblinka, where he had spent about seven weeks. His testimony, transcribed by two members of the underground in a booklet entitled “Treblinka Death Camp,” revealed for the first time the truth about the camp.11 The document not only served as a historical testimony for the underground archive, but helped catalyze the Białystok underground into action. Bina Kaczelsky, a young member of the underground who transcribed the text, was so shocked that, after handing over the clean copy, she committed suicide. Broide joined the Białystok underground as a member of Kibbutz Tel Hai, and perished during the liquidation of the ghetto.12

The resumption of smuggling activities, which enabled ghetto residents to obtain basic foodstuffs, and news of the Germans’ defeat at Stalingrad, together produced a substantial improvement in the ghetto’s morale after the aktion. According to Felicja Nowak, in March 1943 life in the ghetto returned to normal. Her claim that the ghetto was divided into two camps—optimists and pessimists—has been corroborated by other survivors. The optimists believed that the ghetto would be spared, while the pessimists were convinced that it was doomed.13 This dichotomy was an inherent feature of life in the interval between the February aktion and the ghetto’s final destruction in August 1943. In the end, however, optimism prevailed. The relative calm, a brighter economic situation, and thriving industry dispelled any lingering doubts. The majority believed that the ghetto would survive.
German defeats on the Eastern Front, which kindled hopes of a swift end to the war, also contributed to the feeling of optimism. During March 1943, air sirens were frequently heard in Białystok, followed by the roar of Soviet planes. Tenenbaum wrote that although there were no air raids, the Germans became nervous and stepped up security and street patrols in the city. The ghetto residents were ordered to observe blackouts when the sirens went off. Various testimonies describe bomb explosions heard in the city and leaflets thrown from planes. Grosman wrote that “the next day there were whispers in the ghetto that Soviet planes had come during and night and dropped bombs on nearby army concentrations. Others said that the Germans were conducting maneuvers. Some even had seen with their ‘own eyes’ the destroyed Gestapo building as they marched past outside the ghetto.”

Barash, who believed that the aktion had satisfied the Germans’ bloodlust, continued trying to convince Tenenbaum of the same, but in vain. Tenenbaum refused to be convinced: “There are no more illusions. A year ago, we pinned our hopes on the factories. Now . . . our only option is defense. Our great plan is . . . to mine the ghetto. All the main streets. . . . Everything is ready, from a theoretical and tactical point of view. . . . Hundreds of Germans will be killed. We will force them to resort to artillery and aerial backup to capture us.”

Tenenbaum added that Barash’s cooperation was required to implement the plan to mine the ghetto. He tried to convince Barash by arguing that even if the ghetto was safe for the time being, his strategy—which required time and detailed planning—could still be a contingency plan. Barash remained unconvinced. However, not wishing to antagonize Tenenbaum, who was his primary source of information on the underground, he stalled: “As long as there is life . . . there is hope,” wrote Tenenbaum. “He promised me an answer early next week. He will call me, as soon as he knows more.” This passage seems to imply that Barash promised to inform Tenenbaum as soon as he was notified of German plans to liquidate the ghetto. Since, however, Barash believed that an uprising would have disastrous consequences for the Jews, it is doubtful that he intended to keep his promise to Tenenbaum.

Tenenbaum, who probably realized that Barash was simply playing for time and had no intention of supporting the plan to mine the ghetto, also wished to avoid a direct confrontation with Barash, on whom he had grown dependent. Nevertheless, their conflicting views on this plan soured their relationship. From this time on, their increasingly divergent positions ruled out friendship and what started off as a mild disagreement gradually developed into a total rupture.
Following the conversation about mining the ghetto, Tenenbaum informed Barash of the underground’s plans to send people out to the forests and of progress in collecting historical material for the underground archive. “He asked why I hadn’t included the Judenrat in the list of ‘heirs’ (along with the Jerusalem College, the Zionist Organization, etc.) . . . He gave me more material for the archive. I described our dire financial straits—he promised to help us. (Friedel told him that he had liquidated three companies of our Jewish partisans—in the forest—one near Skidel).”19 Barash also gave Tenenbaum financial support and told him that the fateful meeting in Berlin to decide the ghetto’s fate was fixed for March 22.20

Meanwhile, Berlin was asking the authorities in Bialystok for yet another report pending its final decision on the ghetto’s future. The local authorities, in turn, called a meeting for March 16, in the Branicki Palace, to which Barash was also invited. In his diary Tenenbaum reported that Barash asked him to prepare a survey on the ghetto for the meeting.21 Barash also kept Tenenbaum informed of the squabbling among the authorities in Königsberg, Berlin, and Bialystok over the ghetto’s future, as the following diary entry indicates:

Party members in particular [in Königsberg] demanded the total liquidation of the ghetto. Their attitude is . . . immediate destruction. The members of the Wehrmacht’s Rüstungskommando . . . favored preserving the status quo . . . Some of the “good guys” proposed total segregation of the ghetto from the Aryan world, with the ghetto public working inside the ghetto only. The party members argued that there was no reason why the many skilled artisans and experts in Bialystok be kept there. They could be taken to various labor camps [?], and the remaining inhabitants destroyed. Unable to reach a decision, they turned to Berlin. They say that Göring himself will have to decide the matter. The Wehrmacht has decided that if Berlin decides to liquidate the ghetto . . . they will come up with a new proposal, namely the transfer of the entire ghetto (inhabitants, factories and institutions) to Nowe-Siolki, to the Wehrmacht’s barracks, as a military labor camp.22

Barash also informed Tenenbaum that he had given suitable “gifts” to the OKW (the army) and the Military Supplies Division in Berlin and made much of his connections with key personalities in the Wehrmacht. By so doing, Barash, as well as trying to ensure Tenenbaum’s continued allegiance, was no doubt also trying to convince himself that he was in control.

The presence of Brix and other like-minded people at the meeting in Branicki Palace reinforced Barash’s optimism. He intended, he told Tenen-
baum, to encourage the participants to speak out at the meeting. His plan was to approach each of the participants before the meeting and allay their fears by assuring them that they all shared similar views: “Don’t be afraid of so-and-so, he thinks exactly like you.” But Barash’s efforts were in vain. The representatives of the local authority were afraid to come out in support of the continued existence of the ghetto, and the matter was referred to Berlin. Bitterly disappointed, Tenenbaum wrote in his diary that the outcome of the meeting was far worse than he had expected. The meeting may also have deepened the rift between Barash and Tenenbaum, causing the latter to focus even more intensively on underground activity.

The local authorities’ reluctance to reach a clear-cut decision on the ghetto’s future was also due to rumors of the imminent establishment of the Ostindustrie (Eastern Industry Ltd.). The Ostindustrie, which was officially set up on March 13, 1943, incorporated the factories of the Bialystok ghetto.

The Ostindustrie

In early 1943, Germany’s worsening military and economic situation not only intensified infighting within the German hierarchy but also affected the implementation of the so-called Final Solution to the Jewish Problem. Although the biological weakening of the Slavic people and the total destruction of the Jewish people were fundamental tenets of Nazi ideology, the defeats the Germans suffered on the Eastern Front and the subsequent turning point in the war forced them to consider the economic importance of the Jews for the war industry. Two meetings on this issue took place in Berlin in early 1943, attended by members of the SS and the Gestapo. In an order issued on January 13, 1943, Heinrich Himmler instructed the director of the Institute of Statistics to prepare a report and deliver a lecture on the Final Solution of European Jewry. The first meeting, presided over by Adolf Eichmann, was convened by Ernst Kaltenbrunner (head of the Reich Main Security Office after the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich) for early February 1943. Among the issues raised at the meeting was that of the Jews in the large ghettos (Łódź and Bialystok), and the transfer of Jews in the Reich and in other European countries to the camps in Poland.

In January 1943, Oswald Pohl, head of SS Economic and Administration Office, sent Dr. Max Horn and some aides to Warsaw and Lublin to assess the potential for comprehensive economic development under the SS. This survey was commissioned as part of the plans to set up the Ostindustrie and was followed by a second meeting, on February 13 in Berlin, presided over
by Pohl, to discuss the economic implications of the Jewish Problem. Among other things, the participants discussed the logistics of the proposed Jewish labor camps. One of the key personalities at the meeting was Odilo Globocnik who, together with Dr. Horn, was Himmler’s candidate for the directorship of the Ostindustrie.

The participants at the meeting were not informed of the true reasons for the establishment of the Ostindustrie. Even Horn was kept in the dark, as witnessed by the fact that he asked Pohl whether the Jewish problem was to be considered a political-security or economic issue in the proposed camps. He likewise asked what criteria would be used in determining the transfer of Jews to the new camps. Since the SS was keen to be the direct beneficiary of Jewish assets and labor within the Ostindustrie, Pohl chose not to disclose the true nature of the proposed camps. He was also careful not to refer to the looting that had followed upon Operation Reinhard (the liquidation of Polish Jewry in the camps of Belżec, Sobibor, and Treblinka). All he was prepared to say was that the Ostindustrie would receive the requisite industrial equipment and raw material from the Reich Ministry of Economic Affairs.26

In the meeting, it transpired that the Ostindustrie was meant to operate throughout and even beyond the Generalgouvernement and that one of its functions was to act as the umbrella organization of all labor camps—both present and future—in the Lublin district. Initially, the Ostindustrie was based on the labor camps already under Globocnik’s direct control. The idea was to transfer the “forces of production” in the Warsaw ghetto to the newly established labor camps. Indeed, Horn’s report of March 13, 1944, states that in February 1943, he received an order from Pohl to transfer all production forces from Warsaw and Białystok to camps in the Lublin District.27 Thus even though Białystok belonged to a separate administrative unit outside the Generalgouvernement, it was, as early as February 1943, included in the Ostindustrie plan.

The Ostindustrie also set its eyes on the textile plants in the Łódź and Białystok ghettos. The fact that the Germans focused on Białystok rather than on Łódź was probably connected with Himmler’s plan of October 1942, to make the Białystok District jüdenrein. Accordingly, the inclusion of the Białystok ghetto in the Ostindustrie was meant to kill two birds with one stone: to contribute to the SS industries, and to purge the region of Jews.

As early as January 31, 1943, Globocnik signed an official contract with Walter Tebens, a factory owner (shoppim) in the Warsaw ghetto. The contract stated that, at Himmler’s order, as of February 1, the SS in Lublin would transfer all the munitions factories in Warsaw, which were operated
by Jews, to camps in the Lublin District. To facilitate implementation of
the agreement, the SS, via the ghetto’s factory owners, tried—with some
success—to induce the Jews to voluntarily abandon the Warsaw ghetto. In
the second half of February, the first two transports of Jews left Warsaw
for the labor camps of Trawniki and Poniatowa. Some of these workers re-
turned to the ghetto and confirmed the presence of factories and workers’
accommodation in the labor camps. The Jews in the “shops,” however, in-
fluenced by the Jewish Fighting Organization in Warsaw and rendered
skeptical by their experience, did not trust the Germans’ promises. Only a
handful left for the newly established labor camps in Lublin. Ultimately, the
attempt to transfer equipment, raw materials, and workers from the War-
saw ghetto to the Lublin area failed.28

This failure probably accounted for the decision to postpone the trans-
fer of factories from the Białystok ghetto to the jurisdiction of the Ostin-
dustrie. Horn’s letter of February 26, 1943, to his commander Hochberg—
stating that the Ostindustrie was not developing as quickly as planned and
that the transfer of factories from Białystok would be postponed to June
1943—confirms this hypothesis. In any event, the evacuation of the ghetto
was postponed to August 1943. To make use of the machinery from the
Warsaw ghetto factories, Horn proposed establishing a brush factory and
millinery workshops in Trawniki; bag factories and large textile-recycling
plants in Poniatowa; and mechanical workshops, metalwork factories, and
wooden clog factories in Lublin itself.29

Arms Minister Albert Speer, and military personnel with industrial in-
terests who were opposed to the transfer of workers, tried to prevent the
establishment of the new SS camps, but in vain. On March 13, 1943, the Os-
tindustrie was officially established in Berlin. The posts of director-general,
deputy director-general, manager, and deputy manager were taken up by
Oswald Pohl, Georg Lerner, Globocnik, and Dr. Horn respectively.30 In a
letter to Himmler dated April 5, 1943, Speer turned down a request for raw
material to build new camps for the Ostindustrie on the pretext that there
was a shortage of manpower to build the camps, since he saw the establish-
ment of these camps as a manipulative ploy by rival factions who put their
personal interests (reaping the rewards of Jewish labor) before those of the
German war economy.31

The Warsaw ghetto uprising and the measures adopted by SS com-
mander Jürgen Stroop to quell the uprising destroyed any hopes Pohl and
Globocnik may have had of transferring machinery and raw material from
Warsaw to camps in the Lublin District. With Warsaw out of the running,
Globocnik immediately arranged for the transfer of industrial manpower
from other ghettos, in particular the Białystok ghetto, to the newly established labor camps.

The Underground

In the second week of February 1943, just after the aktion, the Gestapo, alerted by suspicious Poles, arrested some Jewish young people with forged Aryan papers and imprisoned them in the Gestapo building in Białystok. Most were members of Hashomer Hatzair or Communists working for Front A. Despite being horribly tortured, they refused to betray their comrades or their Polish accomplices—“seventeen persons, all young and stubborn, proud and close-mouthed,” wrote Grosman. During the following weeks, the members of Front A put all their efforts into trying to obtain the release of their imprisoned comrades. Wagon drivers and prison workers were recruited to infiltrate the prison compound. One of the Yudkovsky brothers was even persuaded to bribe Dibus and the prison governor. When the members of the underground asked Barash to help finance the rescue operation, they received, according to Grosman, “the finest present we could from Barash: a gold watch with artistic inlay.” All their efforts, however, proved abortive: a few days later they discovered that all fourteen youths had been shot in Nowosióki, a mass murder site in the Białystok District, and buried in a collective grave.

The February aktion in general delivered a serious blow to Front A by killing many of its Communist and Hashomer Hatzair members. As the organization recovered, however, it began recruiting new members, especially workers from the ghetto factories. Soon the number of fighting cells grew. Nor was Front B idle. It began preparing for battle together with the Bundists, whose motto was “defense not only in theory but in practice.” The underground’s activities at the time were focused on two main areas: sending members out to the forest, and obtaining weapons.

Partisan Activity in the Forests

The fighting fronts, which by their very nature operated under a cloak of total secrecy, found it hard to recruit new members. Meanwhile, the aktion had persuaded many young people that escaping to the forests was the best solution. The more resourceful among them obtained weapons and joined the partisan units in the East. Pawel Kożec explained that the young people spent weeks planning their escape to the forest. In October 1942, he him-
self managed to join a group of Jewish partisans from Wysokie-Litewskie (near Brześć), hiding in the nearby forests. Later, he returned to the ghetto to help some of his friends escape. Usually, each group of escapees comprised two to four people, one of whom served as a guide.

After the aktion, even members of Hashomer Hatzair began to consider the partisan option. Although the movement still believed in fighting in the ghetto, after the aktion the core leadership, headed by Haika Grosman and Zerach Zylberberg-Ziskind, made no attempt to prevent members escaping to the forests and even provided those who wished to do so with weapons. Yaakov Makowsky, the first member of Hashomer Hatzair to leave the ghetto (on February 19, 1943), was followed in March and April by Eliyahu Vered, Shlomo Goldman, Syomka Kushniev, and Aaron Lach, among others. Some of them, such as Makowsky and Kushniev, found life in the forests too dangerous (particularly after one of their comrades fell), and returned to the ghetto. On March 28, Makowsky made another attempt to reach the forests, this time with seven Communists, including Rivka Wyskowska, Nioma Shuster, Mula Nisht, and others. The testimonies of Makowsky and Lach indicate that no other members of Hashomer Hatzair left the ghetto. The fact that so few people escaped to the forest was due both to the serious shortage of weapons, and to the fact that most members still supported the idea of an uprising within the ghetto. The shortage of weapons was not peculiar to the Białystok ghetto, as Abba Kovner, a leader of the Vilna ghetto underground, later testified: “When we get hold of weapons . . . we do not know how to distribute them. Should we give them to those leaving for the forests, or keep them for the day of reckoning in the ghetto? The day of reckoning is the day of the uprising.”

Tenenbaum’s diary shows that despite his objections, Front B also made arrangements, in March 1943, to send members out of the ghetto: “Final preparations are under way,” he wrote, “for sending out companies to the forest (our members, members of Hashomer Hatzair, Hanoar Hazioni, the Revisionists). Our main concern is to provide them with weapons. . . . They are being drilled in the use of arms, and first aid.”

In contrast with the forests of Białowieża, where a member of Front B fell into Gestapo hands, Hershel Rosenthal and Israel Margolis of Dror returned from the forests of Knyszyn full of enthusiasm. Bronka Vinizka, a member of Dror, claimed that Rosenthal was welcomed as a hero after he returned with weapons from the forests. However, Rosenthal’s failure to gather information on the partisan groups operating near Białystok was a great source of disappointment to Tenenbaum.
Although the available sources do not specify the names of members of Front B who left for the forests, one may assume that, for all their enthusiasm, only very few left—fewer even than members of Front A—no doubt owing partly to the difficulties encountered by some Dror members in the forests. Also, the fact that Fritz Friedel had destroyed three companies of Jewish partisans in the forest, one of them made up of Tenenbaum’s men, discouraged other Dror members from leaving for the forests.41

Most groups leaving for the forests, such as Yudita’s group, were made up of Communists. After the *aktion*, the few dozen young people in Yudita’s group worked feverishly to get their comrades out to the forests. At the time, small Soviet-controlled partisan groups had already penetrated the forests around Białystok. These included escaped Russian prisoners and a few Jewish refugees from the Białystok District. These groups focused mainly on sabotage operations and on killing Polish collaborators. Members of these groups also taught members of one of Yudita’s groups the principles of survival in the forest and the importance of weapons. As a result, the leaders of Yudita’s organization placed enormous emphasis on weapons and ordered all members to obtain weapons or spare parts. Accordingly, the members stole army uniforms from the ghetto factories and used them to buy weapons from the partisans.

Srulke Kot, a member of Yudita’s group, wrote that the group “bought” eight guns in exchange for a radio and several sets of uniforms. These guns enabled more people to leave the ghetto. Potential escapees trained in the use of these weapons in a house on Czysta Street, led by a Russian instructor, who also taught them ways of communicating with other partisan groups, obtaining food, and carrying out sabotage operations.42

In April 1943, a cell of Yudita’s group, led by Berel Wasserstein, walked into a German ambush near Lipowa Most. After their guide was killed, the remainder of the group was forced to retreat to the ghetto. Szymon Datner, a physical education teacher at the Hebrew High School of Białystok, and a member of Yudita’s group, left his wife and two daughters in the ghetto, intending to return for them later. Unfortunately, he never made it in time, and they perished along with all the other Jews of Białystok. After the war, Datner came to Palestine to visit his sick father. Upon his return to Poland, he became a senior researcher at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and a professor of the Polish National Academy of Sciences. 43

Another group of sixteen young people belonging to Yudita’s organization, which left the ghetto in the evening of May 23, ran into German sentries near the ghetto fence on Jurowiecka Street. In the subsequent exchange of fire, a German sentry was killed. The young people returned to
the ghetto unharmed. Following the incident, a curfew was imposed on the ghetto for several days. The succession of German commissions of inquiry that passed through the ghetto added to the already permeating tension. The incident also lowered the morale of the fighting fronts, as Grosman described:

The underground cells were mobilized and put on a state of emergency. Gedalyahu and I ran around for hours, trying to find out what had happened that night. We had a terrible feeling that we had lost command over what was being done in the ghetto. We had no control over underground forces that found arms, and acted independently causing great damage. Anarchy seemed to be negating all our plans and efforts.45

Tenenbaum also referred to the incident in a letter dated May 25, 1943, to his friend Vinizka, which was delivered to her home on the Aryan side. “Afterwards, there was pandemonium, but that was nothing compared to what followed. By morning, all hell was let loose. And we expect worse. . . . Don’t come on Wednesday . . . you’d better wait till things calm down.”46

Barash told Grosman how, in an attempt to prevent the Germans from meting out collective punishment, he had tried to convince them that the soldier had not been shot by Jews: “He had produced ‘facts’ that the man had been killed by an armed group of Poles who had sought to enter the ghetto to carry out a robbery,” wrote Grosman.47

In his talk with Grosman, Barash also raised the issue of divisiveness within the underground. Why, he inquired, was it impossible for Grosman and Tenenbaum to gain control over the various factions?48 For Barash, a single united underground under the leadership of Tenenbaum and Grosman, whom he trusted, was by far the best scenario. Although Tenenbaum and Grosman shared this aspiration (albeit for reasons of their own), the Communists’ refusal to compromise thwarted any attempt at unification.

With the help of Nahum Ablewicz and Yoel Kissler, the last members of Yudita’s group left the ghetto on June 10, 1943.49 Although most members of the underground stayed behind, many of them still hoped to escape to the forest once the ghetto uprising was over.

The Need for Weapons

A series of daring operations were launched in an attempt to obtain weapons. In April 1943, members of Hashomer Hatzair in Grodno who had taken refuge in Bialystok arranged a meeting between Grosman and
Jan, a wealthy Polish farmer who owned a flour mill in Grodno. Jan worked for the underground in Grodno and offered his house, on the Grodno-Białystok road, as a meeting place for members of the underground. According to Grosman: “He helped devotedly, and was not deterred even from the difficult tasks of hiding Jews.” Jan hid fifteen Jewish members of the Grodno underground in his home until they could make their escape to the forest. Grosman asked Jan to help them obtain weapons, and ordered Lonczik, a young Jew hiding with Jan, to let her know as soon as the mission was accomplished. When Lonczik informed Grosman that the weapons had arrived, Kudlaszek—a high-ranking German official in the regional textile industry and a supporter of the Anti-Fascist Committee—drove Grosman to Grodno. Upon their arrival, Grosman discovered that the consignment was not yet ready. Kudlaszek drove back to Białystok, promising to return two days later to bring Grosman back. The following day, Jan managed to obtain an old French rifle, while Grosman got hold of fifteen hand grenades (only ten were functional) from Jan’s brother Michael. Two days later, Kudlaszek, true to his word, came to fetch Grosman and drove back to Białystok as planned.

Kuba Rogozinska, a Hashomer Hatzair stalwart and member of Kibbutz Bamivhan, worked as a foreman in the Judenrat factories that repaired weapon parts. An experienced and skilled technician, he was rescued from the Wołkowysk transit camp in late 1942 and, with Grosman’s help, brought to the Białystok ghetto together with his girlfriend. Rogozinsky’s factories were a beehive of underground activity. During the night shift, many members of the underground repaired the defective weapons that the underground had obtained from a variety of sources. Rogozinsky, with the help of the Communist engineer Kowaldo, worked day and night to manufacture a homemade grenade with an explosive force far greater than that of the ordinary industrial grenade. The grenades were tested at night in one of the ghetto’s parks, with the help of the policeman Gedalyah Shayek, a Hashomer Hatzair activist. In March 1943, after the completion of the two hundredth grenade, Tenenbaum wrote the following in his diary: “Although our grenades are good as fire bombs, they are less effective as assault weapons. What is missing in quality, however, will be made up for in quantity.” Tenenbaum reported that during March, four guns, fifteen grenade fuses, and one rifle were smuggled into the ghetto.

Even after the aktion, the youth movements refused to coordinate their efforts to obtain arms. Weapons were collected separately and assembled in absolute secrecy inside the ghetto itself. Dror activist Bronka Vinizka describes how the first weapons obtained were lifted from a German depot...
outside the ghetto that repaired impounded weapons. Members of the underground who worked in the depot made a copy of the keys, entered the warehouse on two occasions, and smuggled out spare parts. Weapons that were smuggled into the ghetto were repaired in Dror’s small workshop on Jurowiecka Street, where a number of devoted Revisionist locksmiths expertly assembled rifle and gun parts. Elsewhere in the ghetto, at 3 Czysta Street, Tenenbaum set up a secret grenade workshop, presided over by two experts—Grosman and Ferber, who also tried to invent explosives suited to ghetto conditions. A number of young Dror women were employed in this workshop.  

Vinizka, who lived as an Aryan outside the ghetto and worked for the German Railway Authority in the city, was responsible for obtaining weapons for the underground. She used the mobility afforded her by her work to buy guns and grenades from Polish peasants in the Grodno area. Vinizka smuggled the weapons back to Białystok in large loaves of bread. She also stole ammunition from her workplace, which she then handed over to Rosenthal, a fellow comrade, who smuggled them into the ghetto, piecemeal.

In May 1943, two Betarists from Grodno, Nomberg and Finkelstein, who jumped off the train on the way to Treblinka and joined the underground in Białystok, were caught smuggling weapons into the ghetto, and killed. Datner referred to two members of Yudita’s group—Rubin Levin and Natek Goldstein—who stole weapons from German warehouses on Sienkiewicza Street. Datner also recounted that two Jewish boys from Grodno were caught smuggling on the outskirts of Białystok; one was shot dead, while the other committed suicide.

The enormous effort invested in acquiring weapons paid small dividends. For one, the underground had very little money and was reduced, on occasion, to confiscating property from the rich as a means of obtaining funds. In April 1943, a group of young Communists from Front A overpowered the guard and raided the Judenrat’s main warehouse at 6 Nay Velt Street in the dead of night, stealing several barrow loads of foodstuffs. Reizner wrote that the proceeds from the sale of the stolen goods were used to purchase weapons. Although Barash knew who the culprits were, he decided to turn a blind eye to the whole incident.

In the second half of May 1943, a tremendous explosion rocked the ghetto, felt even in “the houses at the other end of the ghetto.” It transpired that the source of the explosion was the grenade workshop on Czysta Street, where a grenade had accidentally exploded, destroying the house and burying two members of Yudita’s group in the rubble. A German
Commission of Inquiry, headed by Richard Dibus and Gerhard Klein, was appointed to investigate the matter. Once again, Barash had to invent a convincing explanation, as he explained to Grosman two days later:

Once again I managed to avert disaster. I succeeded in persuading them that the explosion was caused by children playing with a solitary grenade left behind by the Soviets. I convinced them that the apartment in which the explosion occurred had been formerly occupied by two Soviet officers and that their “legacy” had caused the death of the two children. I glossed over the details. I really had to work hard at it this time, but it paid off . . . . Even Klein was taken in . . . . You have no idea what trouble you caused me this time. What am I to do with your lot? Yet I must protect you, for without you . . . where would we be?62

As in the previous incident when a German sentry was killed, Barash’s primary concern was for the safety of the ghetto, even if this meant covering for the fighting organizations. Nevertheless, Barash was upset by their exploits, which, he believed, were endangering the ghetto public. Grosman and Tenenbaum’s inability to control the underground did not help matters, and the gap between Tenenbaum and Barash grew. Although Barash had the authority to punish anyone who disturbed the peace, he had a soft spot for the ghetto youth who bravely upheld the ideal of an uprising and was reluctant to use this prerogative.

The underground was unable to ignore these events, and in late May 1943, Hashomer Hatzair and the Communists decided to reinstate Yudita’s group into Front A, after their representatives agreed to the resumption of ties between them.63

Attempts to Unite the Underground

The February aktion highlighted the friction between the two fighting fronts as well as the lack of coordination between their constituent movements. Even at such a time, when the fate of the ghetto hung in the balance, the leaders of the underground movements failed to rise above their ideological and personal differences and set up a single united front to deal with the new reality.

In March 1943, a meeting was held between the Communists and Tenenbaum, at the Communists’ initiative: “Their ‘tone,’” wrote Tenenbaum, “rather than victorious . . . was subdued, the tone of the weak nego-
tiating with the strong.” They proposed setting up a joint body to work toward the “establishment of a ‘mass’ Jewish movement dealing with partisan and defense issues,” while barely on touching the issue of defense in the ghetto:

I had the impression that all these years had taught them nothing. That they were unable to transcend the narrow confines of their party politics. For them, we are synonymous with the Judenrat. . . . I told them that we do not want to be held responsible for the Judenrat’s work, which must, objectively speaking, serve the enemy, that our ties with the Judenrat are simply “functional,” and that we exploit the Judenrat for our own purposes. We spoke of setting up a “mass” movement. What is needed, I said, is weapons, not men. I proposed we coordinate intelligence and liaison work. . . . And cooperate as fully as possible on all matters relating to the ghetto’s defense. I made our position clear—that even if we were able to get all our men out to the forests, we would not do so. We would not leave the ghetto without an organized defense.

Tenenbaum left the meeting feeling that, as far as the Communists were concerned, nothing had fundamentally changed: “Although we—the coordinators and founders—now have the General Zionists (Hanoar Hazioni), Hashomer Hatzair, the Revisionists, the Bund, and the Collaborators [Communists], in practice nothing has changed. We still shoulder the main burden.”

The various traumas Tenenbaum experienced—especially the loss of his Hashomer Hatzair comrades who had, until the end, embraced the ideal of fighting inside the ghetto—no doubt shaped his subsequent ideology and actions. His meeting with the Communists left him feeling that they were unlikely to change their attitude toward his movement, and that they had no intention of working for the uprising. He therefore felt that the task of preparing for the uprising fell solely on him. Despite the enormous responsibility, Tenenbaum never shirked his duty or forgot the reason that had brought him to Bialystok in the first place. Nevertheless, the circumstances of Tenenbaum’s life—the death of his girlfriend Tema Schneiderman, his isolation from his friends in Warsaw, his sense of responsibility toward the members of his movement, and his inability to mold the underground into the kind of organization he would have wished—made him depressed and affected his effectiveness as a leader. He sought solace in his diary. His unwavering loyalty to the underground existed alongside his belief that he and his comrades would soon be facing a “beautiful death.”
Two letters written by Tenenbaum at the time express his loneliness and bereavement as well as his sense of impending doom. The first letter, written in late February 1943, was a farewell letter to his younger sister Tamar, who had emigrated to Palestine in 1941:

On January 19, [1943] . . . a section of our kibbutz on Zamenhof Street [Warsaw] defended itself for two days. . . . Since then, there hasn’t been a word. Only silence. That can only mean one thing: She [Tema] has fallen. . . . In a few days (or weeks) I shall be reunited with her. With her death, we have all died. . . . No trace of us will remain. Itzhak [Zuckerman] is no longer, Zivia [Lubetkin] is no longer, Frumka [Plotnicka] is no longer. Of Hashomer Hatzair, no one is left.68

The second letter was written in April 1943 and sent to the Zionist Executive, care of the Secretariat of the United Kibbutz Movement. “If it had to be like this,” wrote Tenenbaum, “history will judge. With these lines, I wanted to establish a memorial, however inadequate, for those dearest to me, who are no longer with us . . . who have spent months preparing for a beautiful death.”69

While Tenenbaum was grappling with his own private demons, some members of Hashomer Hatzair demanded a stocktaking. “After numerous failures, and the rising toll of victims, a voice of discontent has risen from the far reaches of our camp, demanding that we abandon some of the principles of our life struggle.”70 The conflict revolved not only around the issue of “fight versus flight,” an issue that was common also to the ghettos of Vilna, Kraków, and Częstochowa. But now a new element arose: members were demanding accountability. Grosman, for example, was taken to task for failing to ensure the safety of Jewish women living as Aryans outside the ghetto and for abandoning the ghetto at its most difficult hour. When she subsequently offered to resign as courier for the movement, no one demurred.71 In practice, however, Grosman’s network of connections both inside and outside the ghetto, and the lack of a suitable substitute, made her too valuable to be easily discarded. On the contrary, she, together with Zylberberg-Ziskind and Gedalyah Shaye, formed Hashomer Hatzair’s leadership. This leadership undertook to reinstate the alliance with the Communists and, according to Grosman, to lay the basis for a joint front.72

Grosman and Zylberberg-Ziskind met one spring day of 1943 with Communists Yoshke Kaveh and Daniel Moszkowicz to discuss an alliance. Grosman wrote that she was surprised to see Daniel Moszkowicz at the meeting: “Daniel’s appearance was a surprise, since he had not previously
come to political negotiations. . . . We knew his views concerning the anti-fascist united front. We realized that his views were not like Yoshka’s. Daniel was more flexible than his comrade. His opinions were not shaped by prejudice; he was more open to the sounds of the new times. Daniel was an activist, but not one of those who formulated the party’s political direction.”

In their attempt to win over Kaveh and Moszkowicz, Grosman and Zylberberg-Ziskind stressed the importance of turning the underground into a broad-based national movement. The cooperation between Hashomer Hatzair and Tenenbaum, taken for granted by Grosman and Zylberberg-Ziskind, did not escape the Communists’ notice. Grosman and Zylberberg-Ziskind were careful not to mention Dror and other movements by name, in order not to rake up skeletons from the past that could prove counterproductive. At the end of the meeting, the two parties reached an agreement: Kaveh and Moszkowicz, while not actually rejecting the idea of a Jewish fighting organization whose main allegiance was to the ghetto, put loyalty to their party first. Grosman’s memoirs imply that the meeting with the Communists was a turning point for the underground, a day on which the dream of a united front began to take on substance: “We shall no longer oscillate between Front A and Front B,” she wrote. “From now on, the ghetto and the Jewish masses shall be the vanguard of our struggle.”

Grosman’s enthusiasm, however, based more on wishful thinking than on reality, betrayed a certain degree of naïveté. In practice, the Communists still refused to cooperate with Dror, and each movement acted independently of the other on tactical and operational issues. Hashomer Hatzair, for its part, was unable to find a new leader of Edek Boraks’s stature. Tenenbaum continued running from one faction to the other, almost despairing of the possibility of realizing his goals. And the smaller movements lacked both leaders and influence. All these factors accounted for the lack of unity within the underground until the eve of its final destruction.

The Non-Jewish Population during the Occupation

The German authorities in the Bialystok District planned to destroy as many villages as possible, to reforest the region, and turn it into a giant natural hunting reserve. Himmler’s Generalplan Ost (Eastern master plan) aimed at resettling about 10 million Germans in the East, including in occupied areas of Poland, the Baltic countries, and Belorussia, among others, within thirty years after the war. The plan provided for the deportation and resettlement of 80–
85 percent of the inhabitants of Poland, 64 percent of the inhabitants of the Western Ukraine, and 75 percent of the inhabitants of Belorussia. The remaining inhabitants would be allowed to stay on, after first being “Germanized.” As Himmler put it so succinctly, “win them or kill them.”

Despite countless delays and amendments to the proposed plan, the enslavement and suppression of the non-German elements in Bialystok was a major part of German policy in the district. Koch, head of the civil administration of the district until July 1944, declared in 1942 that: “In future, the Poles will remain alive only by virtue of their inferiority and absolute dependency.” This policy of discrimination found expression in industry, agriculture, economics, business, and accommodation, as well as in work and salary conditions.

Throughout the German occupation, Koch’s policy deprived the local population of political, national, and social rights and basic health services. All Polish schools were closed, and cultural centers were declared of limits. The police and officials used coercion and terror, and sometimes even collective punishment, to keep the people in place. Field courts-martial and forced labor camps were set up, and thousands of young people were sent to work in Germany. Hostages were taken from the factories as an incentive to workers to increase their output and refrain from acts of sabotage. The District Lands’ Authority drew up plans for the establishment of farms in areas that were not earmarked for reforestation. The authorities exploited the multiethnic composition of the population in the district to their own advantage. They fanned the flames of Belorussian chauvinism and Polish nationalism in a policy of “divide and rule.” To this end, they published a German newspaper in Polish (Nowy Kurier Bialostocki) and expanded their network of Polish Gestapo agents.

The Polish population suffered economic hardships throughout the war. Polish property was confiscated, and Poles were forbidden to engage in any independent economic activity. The majority of the Polish intelligentsia—with the exception of members of the liberal professions and a few civil servants—were unemployed. Consequently, most of the local population spent their days struggling to survive. Workdays were lengthened, holidays were shortened, and workers became totally dependent on their mostly German employers. Salaries were extremely low, ranging from 35 to 80 Reichsmarks per month, an amount impossible to live on. Even though the Germans introduced a fixed price system and rationing, the Poles were still unable to afford basic commodities and were reduced to starvation. In desperation, many workers began manufacturing goods illegally, using raw materials stolen from the factories, in the small workshops that grew up in the
city during the occupation. Corruption among German officials ensured the circulation of goods on the black market. Food and other basic commodities, such as cloth, soap, and the like, were smuggled in from the surrounding localities. In late 1941, the authorities allowed the Poles to open a number of private shops in Białystok, but six months later the shops were appropriated and handed over to the German Association for the Handicapped. When black market prices soared, bartering was introduced, a system also adopted by the Jews who worked outside the ghetto.80

Right from the start of the German occupation, Koch issued an order forbidding the ownership of houses or land. The Germans also collected mail, water, electricity, and housing taxes, which remained around the pre-war level. The city’s economic distress bred a substratum of crooks and thieves. The deterioration in the city's social and moral fabric was even more apparent after June 15, 1943, when young men aged 17 to 21 were made to serve two years of forced labor. Drinking and gambling became widespread. A refusal to work was considered a serious offense, punishable by death. The German police even snatched people off the street in a bid to recruit workers for the forced labor camps in Germany.81

According to data published by the Polish Government-in-Exile in London in February 1943, about 200 of Białystok's inhabitants collaborated with the Germans during the occupation. Data from the same source published on September 15, 1943, show that out of a total non-German population of 63,400, 49,000 were Poles, 11,540 Belorussians, 1,956 Russians, and the remainder a combination of Ukrainians, Tatars and other small ethnic minorities. As part of Koch’s plan to annex the Białystok District to East Prussia, after the planned ethnic and racial cleansing, the authorities applied a policy of selective extermination of the non-German population in the district. The first legal step toward implementation of this policy was Koch’s order of April 12, 1942, permitting attacks and reprisals against the civilian population and the establishment of a field court-martial. July was a busy month for the German merchants of death. On July 8, 450 inhabitants of the city were executed, and 400 members of the intelligentsia arrested. On July 10, more than 100 citizens were executed. On July 13, more than 1,000 elderly people, women, children, and teachers, were taken to a spot outside the city and shot.82

The only testimony to these atrocities was the large collective graves in which the victims were buried. Even these were short-lived. As part of Operation 1005, a group of Jewish laborers from Białystok were ordered to cover up all traces of the mass graves of the tens of thousands of civilians who were murdered by the Germans in the district. Waldemar Macholl,
The Polish Resistance Movement

Right from the start of the German occupation, a host of Polish underground organizations sprang up, united by their bitter experience of the Soviet occupation. These organizations were intended to prepare their forces for a Polish uprising against the Germans. The proposed uprising comprised three stages: organizational work, preliminary fighting, and the uprising proper.

During the German occupation, four underground organizations operated in the Białystok District. One was the Armed Fighting Organization—Army of the Homeland (ZWZ–AK, Związek Walki Zbrojnej—Armia Krajowa). By the end of the occupation, this organization, which was subordinate to the Polish Government-in-Exile in London under General Władysław Sikorski, had an estimated 30,000 members in six regions and fourteen subdistricts of the province of Białystok. The second organization, the pro-Fascist right-wing Armed National Force (NSZ, Narodowe Siły Zbrojne), which murdered Poles and Jews indiscriminately, had a following of 7,000 in the district. The third organization was the National Military Organization (NOW, Narodowa Organizacja Wojskowa). The fourth organization, the Peasants’ Battalions (BCH, Bataliony Chłopskie), had some 10,000 members. In time, all these organizations merged with, or accepted the authority of, the ZWZ–AK (hereafter AK). An estimated 50,000 Poles—a large number given the district’s ethnic diversity—were one way or another involved in underground activity in the Białystok District.

Since the AK in Białystok intended on extending its operations throughout the district, it was forced to expand its intelligence network, augment its weapons arsenal, and streamline its training program. The AK command, for economic and organizational reasons, was unable to undertake large armed sabotage operations in Białystok itself. Most of its activity was restricted to small acts of sabotage and intelligence work. The AK was heavily involved in propaganda activity, and its offices in the city provided the city’s population with information on the situation at the fronts, political and national problems, and decisions of the underground leadership. The AK also launched an anti-Soviet propaganda campaign, in accordance with the policy of the Polish Government-in-Exile in London, as part of its plan for a Polish takeover after the war.
The underground section of the People’s Army (AL, Armia Ludowa) and the People’s Guard (GL, Gwardia Ludowa) operated in the General-gouvernement and in the areas annexed to the Reich, but not in the Białystok District. These organizations were subordinate to the PPR (Polish Workers Party), which in turn was subject to the dictates of the Communist Party in Moscow. Since the Białystok District had been annexed to the Soviet Union in 1939, the Soviet Union considered it Soviet territory and therefore off-limits to Polish underground organizations.

In addition to the AK, a Soviet underground and Soviet partisan movement existed in the Białystok District, subject to the Communist Party of Belorussia and the Belorussian partisans respectively. These organizations, which operated mainly in areas inhabited by Belorussians, attacked not only the Germans but also the Polish underground, in preparation for a Soviet takeover, after the liberation.85

The Soviet underground, set up by the Anti-Fascist Committee in Białystok in late 1941, comprised Jewish Communists from the ghetto, German anti-Fascists, and a relatively large group of left-wing revolutionary Poles. Among its outstanding Polish activists were Tadeusz (“Antony”) Jakubowski (captured in January 1942), Władysław Niesmiałek, Franciszek Kujawa, and Felix Lorek.86

Thus, three ethnically distinct underground movements operated in and around Białystok during the German occupation: a Soviet group, a Polish group, and a Jewish group (the ghetto’s fighting fronts).

On April 2, 1943, Tenenbaum, on behalf of the Warsaw Jewish National Committee, appealed to the Białystok branch of the Leadership of the Civil Uprising (Kierownictwo Walki Cywilnej)—the AK’s civil authority, subordinate to the Government-in-Exile in London—for weapons for the Jewish underground.87 Although Tenenbaum knew that the AK leadership begrudged the cooperation between the Jews and the Soviet partisans and was hostile toward Jews and Soviets alike, he hoped that the precedent of Warsaw would motivate them to help him, even if on a limited scale. His desperation, which led him to grovel before the AK leadership, is evident in the following excerpt from his diary:

> We know that you, like us, adopt an uncompromising attitude toward the Germans. The question of the Soviets, however, remains an open issue. . . . I could—had the times and conditions been different—prove to you, Sirs, that all the organizations represented by the Jewish National Committee were disbanded and persecuted in the Soviet Union. Their leaders were exiled to Siberia, and their former members were viewed with suspicion by the
authorities. . . . A Pole has other ways of serving his country. He could wait until the . . . order is given by the Republican government. We, however, cannot afford to wait, for each day brings us nearer to death. We cannot afford to delay. Sirs, this is not the time to hold a political “debate.” As citizens of the Republic we turn to you, to the representatives of Free Poland. Two hundred hand grenades and a few dozen firearms are not crucial to the revival of the Republic. They are, however, crucial to the fate of the second-largest ghetto in Poland.

Itzhak Zuckerman, in an monograph he wrote in 1947 in honor of Tenenbaum, confirmed the arrival of Tenenbaum’s letter at AK headquarters in Białystok. He went on to explain that many weeks after the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Henryk Wolinski, AK director of Jewish affairs in occupied Poland, returned Tenenbaum’s letter, assuring Zuckerman that the AK in Białystok had forwarded the letter to the AK’s Supreme Command in Warsaw. Zuckerman added:

We immediately did everything within our power to ensure that the Supreme Command, via its Białystok branch, offer the Jews swift and generous assistance. In a special meeting with the deputy of Kanar, the commandant of the AK in Warsaw, I was informed that a special car carrying weapons would be delivered to the Jewish fighters in Białystok, since the local branch was not only short of weapons but also, he felt bound to admit, suspicious of the ghetto. . . . In the subsequent meeting, I was told that the consignment of weapons had arrived safely in Białystok. Only after the war did we find out from ghetto fighters who had survived that they never received such a consignment.

Although Tenenbaum’s request definitely reached AK headquarters in Warsaw, we do not know if it was ever passed on to London. What we do know is that the AK never established ties with the ghetto underground or sent it the promised consignment of weapons.

German Anti-Fascists in Białystok

According to the historian Szymon Datner, only about a dozen lives were saved in Białystok by the few Poles who hid Jews in their houses during the German occupation. However, a sizable group of German anti-Fascists in the city helped the ghetto and Soviet underground movements and mem-
bers of the underground living on the Aryan side of the city. These Germans, who belonged to the Anti-Fascist Committee in Białystok, supplied weapons, medicines, contour maps, compasses, and important intelligence information to the underground. The group’s main activists were Artur Schade, Otto Busse, Otto Beniske, Alexander Bohle, Kudlaszek, and Kurt Wiese.

Artur Schade, a weaver by profession, was born in 1901. Apparently even in his youth he sympathized with communism, and he joined the Nazi Party only in order to escape being sent to the front. In his memoirs he wrote that in late 1941, after discovering that there was a need for skilled laborers in German companies in the occupied Eastern Territories, he volunteered his services in Białystok, in order to establish contact with the Communists there and participate in the struggle against Nazism. This move was interpreted by the Germans as a sign of loyalty to the Nazi regime, and upon his arrival in Białystok in January 1942, Schade was appointed manager of Kombinat No. 4, a conglomerate of thirteen textile factories in the city. These factories employed mainly Poles, including Jewish workers who belonged to the recently established Anti-Fascist Committee. After lengthy talks with his foreman Berel Kizelstein, a left-wing Socialist and former Bundist, Schade decided to join the local Anti-Fascist Committee. Kizelstein introduced Schade to Jakubowski. After swearing allegiance to the underground, Schade was introduced to other Germans who belonged to the organization. Their assignment was to summarize German-language broadcasts from Moscow and London and issue communiqués that the underground then printed out as leaflets and distributed in the city.91

Schade’s assignment was to obtain night passes, travel permits, weapons, ammunition, and any other military equipment for members of the underground and to communicate with the commanders of the partisan units in the area, extracting from them information on proposed operations. He was also instructed to keep jobs in his factories open for members of the underground and, together with other German members of the Anti-Fascist Committee, to draw up a comprehensive list of all German institutions in Białystok, their security arrangements, and a report on their employees. In his memoirs, Schade described how the Germans in the Soviet underground in Białystok were instructed to obtain intelligence information about the Gestapo, the gendarmerie, army units in the area, and the military airfield Krywlany—an important strategic site in the city.

Schade faithfully obeyed instructions throughout the occupation and gave access to his apartment, complete with printing press, to Jewish members of the underground, for printing leaflets, among other things. He
bought weapons and ammunition from German soldiers returning from the front and stored them in his house. He traveled to Königsberg to buy maps, compasses, batteries, and lamps for radio equipment. Schade took it upon himself to personally deliver weapons, ammunition, medicines, and underground journals to the ghetto, in order to waylay suspicion.\footnote{92}

Survivors of the Bialystok ghetto who came into contact with Schade confirmed Schade’s devotion to his Jewish friends both in the ghetto and on the Aryan side of the city. Mina Dorn, Schade’s maid, recounted that on the eve of the February aktion, Schade hid three Jewish families in the attic of his home, where they stayed throughout the following week. He brought them blankets and hot food cooked by himself. Schade gave Dorn a work permit for Haika Grosman that bore his official stamp. When the final evacuation of the ghetto began in August 1943, Dorn was offered shelter in Schade’s house, where she stayed for many months. Schade kept up ties with Grosman even after the ghetto’s destruction and continued to help both Jewish women who remained in the city with Aryan documents and Jewish partisans in the nearby forests.\footnote{93} On the eve of the city’s liberation in July 1944, Schade left for the forest with the intention of joining the Soviet army. After the war, he became an official member of the Communist Party and was one of the founders of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In the summer of 1995, Schade was acknowledged by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

Otto Busse, after being wounded in the first month of the war between Germany and the Soviet Union, was transferred from East Prussia to Bialystok, where he worked as a painting contractor for a civil division of the Wehrmacht, and ran an artist’s atelier. A veteran anti-Fascist, Busse joined the Anti-Fascist Committee in Bialystok. His studio at the corner of Lipowa and Częstochowska Streets soon became a meeting place for members of the Soviet underground. Busse threw himself heart and soul into underground activity. He helped distribute underground journals, delivered various materials to the organization, and hid weapons and military equipment for partisans in his home.\footnote{94}

About forty Jews who worked for Busse outside the ghetto spoke of his humanity, his sympathy for the Jewish people, his opposition to the Nazi regime, and his help in supplying the ghetto with food. After the destruction of the ghetto, Busse concentrated on helping the Jewish partisans in the nearby forests and on providing arms for the Jewish women who were living as Aryans in the city, such as Hasia Bilicka and Haika Grosman of Hashomer Hatzair, Anya Rod and Lisa Tzepnik of the Communists, and Bronka Vinizka of Dror.\footnote{95} Busse made his home available to Jews en route
for the forests, helped arm them, and used his ties with German police and officials in the civil administration to gain important information on German maneuvers in the area, which he then passed on to the partisans. He imparted details of the Germans’ anti-air defense plans to the Jewish couriers serving as liaisons between the city and the forests and personally delivered weapons, medicine, maps, and the like, in his car, to the partisans in the forests.  

After the war, Busse was captured by the Soviets and was sentenced to five months of forced labor in Kiev. Upon his return to West Germany, he found himself ostracized and destitute. Grosman and Bilicka helped him move to Israel where he currently resides in Nes-Am. On June 25, 1968, Busse was recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

Knowledge of Kudlaszek is derived mainly from Grosman’s memoirs and from Pawel Kożec’s testimony. Grosman wrote that Kudlaszek, a high-ranking official in the regional textile industry, related to Jews “in the same way he related to gentiles.” It was through Schade that the ghetto underground got to know of Kudlaszek. Kudlaszek helped Grosman deliver weapons from Grodno to Białystok, drove a number of Jews to the forest in his car, and allowed members of the Jewish underground residing outside the ghetto to use his office as a meeting place.  

Much less is known about Beniske, Wiese, and Bohle (married to a Jewish woman), who were also members of the Anti-Fascist Committee in Białystok and helped the Jews. Two weeks after the ghetto’s destruction, Ludmilla Baginska and her son Tadeusz took in the Rabinowitz couple, who were hiding in the ghetto. During the occupation, Tadeusz had worked with Rabinowitz outside the ghetto, and proved to be a friend in time of need. Yad Vashem recognized Baginska and her son as Righteous Among the Nations.

It was thanks to the enormous assistance offered by these righteous gentiles to individual Jews and members of the underground that a few Jews of the Białystok ghetto survived. The behavior of these Germans was truly exceptional, both from a humanitarian point of view and from a statistical point of view. The existence of a group of Germans who aided the underground during the German occupation of Poland was extraordinary.

**Conclusion**

From March to May 1943, life in the ghetto was tempered by a blend of anxiety and hope. The struggle for survival did not cease even after the *aktion*, and life in the ghetto returned to “normal” surprisingly quickly. Hundreds of ghetto residents who had previously ignored Barash’s exhorr-
tations to report for work learned their lesson from the February deportations. The factories, which were now perceived as a sanctuary, were besieged by the workers and their families. The ghetto’s entire working population was employed in the factories, with their insatiable need for manpower.

In April 1943, at Barash’s request, Tenenbaum prepared a report for the Gestapo on the February deportation and on the employment situation in the ghetto. The report stated that after the aktion 28,000 Jews remained in the ghetto, of which 17,080 were employed in factories in and outside the ghetto. The children, the elderly, and the disabled accounted for another 11,000. Since the Judenrat made a point of underreporting the number of ghetto residents to the German authorities by several thousand, the real figure was probably nearer 31,000, including the 1,100 refugees from Grodno.

During these critical months, the public soup kitchens worked overtime to supply the public with food. A number of restaurants were also opened on an unofficial basis. The Judenrat’s Supplies Department opened a few shops in the ghetto, where food items could be bought with vouchers. Several dozen private shops also opened, which sold goods at reasonable prices. On Lag Ba’Omer 1943 (the thirty-third day of the counting of the Omer, traditionally a date on which many marriages take place), more than thirty weddings were celebrated in the ghetto.

The economic situation of the ghetto improved from March through May due to efficient organization within the ghetto and an increasing number of orders for industrial goods. Barash knew that a healthy economy not only bred optimism, but also bolstered the public’s faith in him. He therefore did all within his power to satisfy the basic requirements of the local Jews and reinforce their feelings of economic security. The fact that he kept his promises, even during the February aktion, enhanced his reputation as a devoted leader, and even the cynics began to believe that there was hope. Paradoxically, just when one might have expected the ghetto public to sink into total despair, it began to believe that it might be spared after all. The underground continued to strive to accomplish its goals, despite internal friction and difficulties in obtaining weapons. Its impact on the ghetto, however, was minimal, due both to the clandestine nature of its work and to the fact that the entire ghetto population supported Barash. Ironically, the overall feeling in the ghetto on the eve of its destruction was that things were back to normal. As Grosman put it: “April passed and May came, with its high hopes. It was Spring again, and then Summer—the Summer of 1943. February’s blood was washed away in the spring rains and the sun dried the puddles. The ghetto was quiet. Every day workers went to their shops and factories; every day Jews went out humbly to serve the Germans.”
German sources confirm that by April 1943, when the evacuation of the Warsaw ghetto was at its height, plans were beginning for the final liquidation of the Bialystok ghetto. Indeed, the destruction of the Bialystok ghetto was part of a master plan Heinrich Himmler devised in May 1943. The decision to implement this plan was expedited by a number of factors, the main one being developments within the Ostindustrie in early June 1943.

Plans for the Final Evacuation

In *The Nazi Extermination Policy*, Artur Eisenbach claimed that Himmler was eager to take over the Bialystok ghetto, with its large industrial potential, in order to strengthen the ailing Ostindustrie. The German security forces were still busy putting down the last shows of resistance in the Warsaw ghetto when Himmler ordered the liquidation of the remaining ghettos. The situation at the front, the growing strength of the partisans, and fear that the Bialystok ghetto might, like the Warsaw ghetto, stage an uprising, made Himmler anxious to complete the job as soon as possible. These “security” considerations drove him to stress the urgency of the matter to Adolf Hitler. Opposition by the Arms Ministry and the army to his plans for exploiting the Jewish workforce, made Himmler even more anxious to obtain the Führer’s backing.

Himmler presented his arguments to the Führer on June 19, 1943. Hitler agreed to the plan, setting a time limit of three to four months for the completion of the evacuation. Himmler’s secret order of June 21, 1943—stating that all Jews remaining in the ghettos of the Eastern Territories were to be transferred to concentration camps—was issued to the commander-in-
Chief of the SS and Police in the Eastern Territories. The order also stated that as of August 1, 1943, Jews would not be allowed to be taken out of concentration camps for work purposes. Although the order applied basically to the Soviet-occupied territories (Reichskomisariate Ostland and the Ukraine), in view of developments and partisan activity in the East, it may also have included the Białystok District.

As part of an overall plan to revive the Ostindustrie, a meeting was held with Alfred Krüger on June 1, 1943, to discuss the transfer of Jewish property—machinery and raw materials—to subsidiaries of the Ostindustrie. At the meeting it was also decided to send a large number of Jews to work in the Ostindustrie’s munitions factories in Lublin. The machinery and raw materials for these factories were to come from the Warsaw ghetto, which had just been destroyed, and from the Białystok ghetto, which would soon be evacuated. On June 21, 1943, Odilo Globocnik sent a memorandum to Himmler reporting that the transfer of Jews from Białystok to Lublin was about to begin and that a new labor camp would be set up in Lublin to absorb the Jewish workforce.

In his testimony, Fritz Friedel also emphasized that the plan to destroy the Białystok ghetto gained momentum in June 1943. These developments confirm that the decision to evacuate the Białystok ghetto formulated in February 1943 would be implemented according to Himmler’s general plan. Gaining control over the ghetto was part of the Ostindustrie’s efforts to take over the remainder of the Jews in Poland (excluding Silesia). The aim was to gain supply contracts for the army that had been given to factories in the Białystok and Łódź ghettos and thereby to increase the income of the SS-owned Deutsche Wirtschaftsbetriebe. In a memorandum Globocnik sent Himmler on June 21, he complained that the economic potential of the camps was not being fully exploited, due to a shortage of equipment and raw material: “After we gain control of the Białystok ghetto and perhaps also the Łódź ghetto, our output is certain to rise,” he stated. The purpose of this memorandum was to pressure Himmler to speed up the transfer of the workforce from Białystok to Lublin.

On July 1, 1943, Martin Bormann issued an order transferring exclusive responsibility for the Jews in the Eastern Territories to the various police divisions. On July 3, Himmler issued a directive empowering the Gestapo to implement Bormann’s order. On July 13, 1943, a meeting in Berlin discussed plans for the occupied Eastern Territories. Among the issues raised was the fate of the Białystok ghetto and the replacement of the Jewish workforce there. Gauleiter Erich Koch and Dr. Herbert Zimmermann were present at this meeting.
Zimmermann, an attorney by profession and commander of the security police (KdS) in Bialystok, favored the ghetto’s continued existence, albeit for personal motives. Until his appointment in late May 1943, Zimmermann had served as Wilhelm Altenloh’s deputy and head of Gestapo operations for the district. It was he, among others, who in January 1943, drew up the plan for the partial destruction of the Bialystok ghetto. It was also he who accused Altenloh of being too liberal toward the Jews. These accusations persuaded Himmler to send a committee of inquiry to Bialystok in the spring of 1943, to investigate Altenloh’s activities. The committee concluded that Altenloh was not efficient enough, and he was transferred to Paris and replaced by Zimmermann.

Developments on the Eastern Front and growing Soviet partisan activity in the area, triggered Berlin’s decision in mid-July 1943 to transfer the means of production from Bialystok to the Lublin District. This decision was tantamount to a death sentence for the Bialystok ghetto, for without raw material and means of production the ghetto lost its raison d’être.

Himmler, eager to make use of Globocnik’s expertise, appointed him commander of Operation Reinhard and political director of the Ostindustrie camps in Lublin. Himmler’s choice of Globocnik, his immediate subordinate, to oversee the deportation to Lublin was also partly dictated by his fear of an uprising in Bialystok. Globocnik was chosen for his natural skills and substantial experience and also because local opposition to the evacuation of the ghetto (a situation unique to the Bialystok ghetto) made it hard to find men willing to carry out the task. During his stay in Lublin, Himmler completed two important missions: the destruction of the Bialystok and Łódź ghettos and the completion of the financial accounts of Operation Reinhard. Meanwhile, Globocnik’s position as SS commander for the Lublin District was taken over by Jacob Sporrenberg.

Globocnik began preparing for the destruction of the Bialystok ghetto in late July 1943, after receiving orders from Berlin to evacuate the ghetto, transfer the workforce to Lublin, and send the remaining inhabitants to extermination camps. In his trial in Germany in 1967, Lothar Heimbach, chief of the Gestapo in Bialystok from January 1943, testified that Globocnik arrived in Bialystok on August 2 or 3 and informed him that the ghetto was about to be destroyed. Heimbach added that Otto Helwig, Brix, and Zimmermann were aware that their efforts to save the ghetto had failed. At the same trial Helwig testified that Himmler had sent a letter to him and Koch in early August 1943 stating that Berlin had decided to destroy the ghetto, despite opposition by local commanders. Helwig went on to say that Himmler had written a second letter informing him that Globocnik had
been given the authority to carry out the assignment. Helwig added that Globocnik arrived in Białystok about fourteen days before the evacuation and arranged a meeting with him, Brix, and Zimmermann, to discuss how to carry out the *aktion*.11 During the meeting Brix inquired into the purpose of the evacuation, and asked Globocnik if the Jews were to be sent to extermination camps. Globocnik, anxious to pacify the local authorities, reassured them that the Jews of Białystok were to be transferred to large labor camps in Poland, to work in factories set up by the Reich Ministry of Economic Affairs to help the war effort. The purpose of the evacuation, he explained, was to boost the inadequate manpower resources in the labor camps in Lublin. The Jews were needed there more than in Białystok.12

Globocnik's answer was not a total lie. The SS Economics Office was indeed planning to send the Jews of Białystok, after preliminary screening, to the Majdanek concentration camp and labor camps in the Lublin District, such as Trawniki and Poniatowa. The SS planned to send the Jews of Warsaw and Białystok to work in the factories, thereby swelling the coffers of the SS Economics Office, whose largest concern was the Ostindustrie.

To gain control of Jewish property, Globocnik had to contend with Koch, the district commander who, as early as September 1941, had appropriated the property of the local Belorussians, Poles, and Jews. Even when the ghettos in the Białystok District were transferred to the authority of the Sipo and the Gestapo, Koch still managed to retain control of all Jewish property in the district. It was only after Himmler ordered the remaining Jews to be sent to the concentration camps and their property to be transferred to Oswald Pohl, the head of the SS Economics Office, that Globocnik was finally able to wrest possession of Jewish property in the ghetto from Koch.13

It is safe to assume that even at the planning stage, Globocnik and Zimmermann took into account the possibility of resistance similar to the Warsaw ghetto uprising. The experience of SS commander and police general Jürgen Stroop, who had put down the Warsaw ghetto uprising in what amounted to a military operation, was something Globocnik wished to avoid at all costs. Therefore his visit to Białystok was also of an exploratory nature, to determine whether the Białystok ghetto was likely to offer resistance. Unlike Stroop, whose goal had been the total destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, Globocnik's goal was to ensure the safe removal of all vital raw materials from the Białystok ghetto. The impression Globocnik gained from his visit was that things were calm in the ghetto and that the ghetto residents felt secure in their belief that their economic contribution to the war effort would protect them from harm. Probably the fact that the
Białystok ghetto was much smaller than the Warsaw ghetto also convinced Globocnik that it could be destroyed more easily. On the other hand, the news of the revolt in Treblinka that broke out on August 2 during Globocnik’s short visit may have influenced him toward greater caution. Before beginning the evacuation proper, Globocnik planned to remove raw materials, machinery, and goods from the ghetto factories. In his testimony, Friedel corroborated that Globocnik ordered the local security police to seize the factories first, so that, in the event of a revolt, they would already be in German hands.

Zimmermann, who in light of developments no longer supported the ghetto’s continued existence, informed Globocnik that his forces were not adequate to handle the evacuation. Globocnik therefore contacted SS headquarters in Berlin and received permission to assign Police Regiment 26 as backup for the local security forces. This regiment, comprising three battalions and Ukrainian volunteers, had been fighting the partisans in the Carpathian Mountains and was on its way to another mission when it was detailed to help carry out the evacuation in Białystok.

After his exploratory visit, Globocnik returned to Lublin where he ordered Georg Michalsen, deputy commander of the Lublin unit, to leave for Białystok and, together with Zimmermann and the local security police, to prepare for the evacuation of the ghetto. Michalsen was an experienced man, having participated not only in Operation Reinhard but also in the deportations from Warsaw, Zamość, and other places. Accordingly, Michalsen arrived in Białystok between August 10 and 12, 1943, together with Obersturmführer Magel, commander of Police Regiment 26. Major Magel, one of whose tasks was to inspect the ghetto factories, was highly impressed by them, as he remarked to Heimbach. After fixing the start of the evacuation for August 16 at dawn, Michalsen and Magel discussed with Zimmermann and Friedel the methods they would use, how much backup they would need, and which area would serve as an assembly point for the Jews prior to deportation. They agreed that while Michalsen would supervise the operation, Magel, together with the local security police, would be responsible for implementing it. Both Michalsen and Magel then returned to Lublin, where they met with a dozen or so SS men, including Helmut Walter Classen, Hübscher, and Hanlett, who were assigned to help with the evacuation. On the night of August 14, Michalsen and Magel returned to Białystok, together with the SS men, to put the final touches to their plan.

On Sunday evening August 15, Michalsen informed Zimmermann, in the presence of Heimbach, Richard Dibus, and other police commanders, that after the Jews were led to the prearranged assembly point, Globoc-
nik’s men would carry out a “selection” of able-bodied Jews, who would be taken to Malkinia, the train station nearest to Treblinka, together with the other Jews. However, unlike the other Jews, for whom Treblinka would be the final destination, the able-bodied Jews would continue to Lublin and Auschwitz. Five factories were also to be transferred from Białystok to the labor camps of Lublin. Finally, the local security police would be responsible for evacuating the elderly, the sick, and infants.

Unlike the February evacuation, preparations for the final destruction of the Białystok ghetto were such a well-guarded secret that even Barash had no idea what was going on. Whereas the February deportation had been carried out by local Germans who kept Barash informed of developments, the final deportation in August was implemented by senior officers of the central command with whom Barash had no time to form ties. Moreover, fearing a Jewish revolt, the perpetrators of the akcja decided it would be best not to divulge their plans, at least until they had entered the ghetto. Zimmermann himself felt that the element of surprise was critical and ordered that Barash be informed only at the last minute. As well as being kept a secret, the akcja was planned down to the last detail and was assigned to carefully selected experts who would carry it out swiftly and efficiently.

On the night of August 15, 1943, the three battalions of Police Regiment 26 barricaded all approaches to the ghetto in a tight ring formation that precluded any attempts to escape. The liquidation of the Białystok ghetto had begun.

Preparations prior to the Evacuation

The last two letters Aunt Nadzieja sent Menahem Rivkind, her nephew in Brody, give us some insight into life in the ghetto during its final days. In a letter dated June 26, 1943, Nadzieja wrote: “Things are much the same. Sometimes a little better, sometimes a little worse.” Referring to plans to hide among the Poles on the Aryan side, she wrote that she doubted “they will want to help, and despite considerable effort, no place has yet been found.” In her last letter, dated July 6, 1943, she wrote:

Here everything is much the same. We work and live. You ask about my child [that is, the ghetto]. Not much to report there, although over the past few days there has been some improvement. The doctors [ghetto leaders] believe that the child will get better. If we can rely on their opinion I don’t know, but that’s all we have. As for moving to the sanatorium [the Aryan side], there is
nothing doing at the moment. To arrange it, you need people with lots of energy, and such people are few and far between. I don’t even know if it will help. . . . Perhaps later, but I have my doubts. . . . It’s not that easy.  

A month after writing this, Rivkind’s aunt was evacuated with all the Jews of Białystok and sent to the death camps, where she perished.

In the second half of July 1943, a rumor spread through the ghetto that the Germans were planning to destroy one of the two large ghettos left in Poland (Łódź and Białystok), and that an important committee was about to visit Białystok to decide its fate. Reizner wrote that after the committee’s visit (a reference probably to Globocnik’s visit, in the first week of August 1943), Barash informed his colleagues that he was no longer optimistic. It was around this time that the representatives of all the underground factions decided to set up a united front. Yudita’s group was reinstated in the Communist movement, thereby dissolving the internal tensions between the various blocs and enabling them to close ranks. In a letter to Bronka Vinizka, a friend and member of his movement who lived on the Aryan side of the city, Mordecai Tenenbaum wrote: “At long last we have reached an agreement with Andrzej [a reference to the Communists, after Andrzej Schmidt, a leader of the Communists in the Warsaw ghetto]. We shall live at peace like one family, in all respects. After an hour of discussion, he had to accept our—my—proposals and demands.”

After the merger, Tenenbaum was appointed commander of the underground, and the Communist Daniel Moszkowicz, his deputy. The first meeting of the heads of the united underground took place on July 29, 1943. In another letter to Vinizka, dated August 3, Tenenbaum wrote: “At long last, the first ‘session’ of the enlarged, united parliament etc.—is to be held on Thursday, with pomp and ceremony. As to the chairman, well they think that I would be suitable etc. to wield the chairman’s gavel. I’m warning you, though, to avoid any salutes, congratulations, or the like. I can manage nicely without that, thank you.”

Surprisingly, despite the rumors that were circulating through the ghetto of an impending calamity, Tenenbaum makes no allusion whatsoever to any plans for an uprising. This is not so surprising, however, if we bear in mind that for several months Tenenbaum had been suffering from a sense of despair, loneliness, and grief at the death of his comrades and close friends in Warsaw whom he was convinced had perished. Paradoxically, by the time the two fighting fronts were united in late July 1943—an event Tenenbaum had wished for almost since his arrival in Białystok in November 1942—his motivation, energy and hope abandoned him.
Nevertheless, once members of the underground got wind of the impending visit by a German committee, they lost no time in making preparations for the uprising. Their primary objective was to protect the factories. To this end, they urged all members of the resistance cells in the factories to persuade the workers to join them in preventing the Germans entering the factories. If this effort failed, their backup plan was to set fire to the factories and take to the streets.\textsuperscript{26}

Globocnik's visit to Bialystok and the merger of the two underground blocs merely intensified Barash's fears regarding the ghetto's future. The growing alienation between him and Tenenbaum did not help matters, and simply made him feel even less in control. Although Barash respected the members of the underground, he did not trust their judgment. His fear of a rash response on their part grew when he found out that on August 12, two sacks of sugar had disappeared from the Judenrat storehouses. Barash, convinced that the underground was responsible for the theft, summoned Tenenbaum to the police station the same day. Tenenbaum ignored the summons, giving vent to his anger and frustration in a letter he sent to Vinizka the following day, August 13: “Yesterday a most stupid thing happened. I was summoned to the police station on suspicion of theft. A totally unnecessary and exasperating business. . . . However, there is so much work and so much fulfillment here every day, that one simply has no time to take to heart the crude behavior of the various officials, even if they do travel around in carriages and the like. It’s a shame to waste time over them.”\textsuperscript{27} The tension that for some weeks had typified the relationship between Tenenbaum and Barash grew into a total rupture. Reuven (Reuvchik) Rosenberg, a member of Dror who served as Barash’s bodyguard, resigned in protest at the incident.\textsuperscript{28} If an open confrontation was prevented, it was only because three days later, the Germans began evacuating the ghetto.

On August 13, Moshe Shertok, Shmerel Greenstein, and Yudel Becker of the fire brigade noticed “visitors” traveling in Barash’s carriage through the streets of the ghetto. These were none other than Friedel, Dibus, and Klein, who had come to inspect the ghetto fence. Although the Jews were suspicious, it was rumored that the purpose of the inspection was to prevent smuggling or modify the ghetto boundaries.\textsuperscript{29} On Saturday, August 14, Jewish workers who worked outside the ghetto reported that they had seen trains near the railway station and that the city was swarming with soldiers, SS officers, and Ukrainians. Instantly the rumor spread that the Germans were intending to deport another 10,000 Jews. The Judenrat denied the rumor, invoking the fact that the Wehrmacht had placed a large number of urgent orders with the ghetto factories as proof that the Jews had nothing
to fear. Indeed, Friedel, in his testimony, corroborated that in mid-July 1943, Froese, the Wehrmacht’s regional representative, had placed an order for 500 armored vehicles. Zimmermann had stressed the importance of the order to Berlin, arguing that there was no other way the order could be met.

While Barash was reassuring the ghetto that they had nothing to fear, Magel was stealthily proceeding with his plans to destroy the ghetto. On Sunday August 15, Magel, Heimbach, and Zimmermann fixed the start of the operation for 3:00 a.m. the following morning. After Heimbach informed Friedel of the decision, he ordered him to summon Barash to Gestapo headquarters in the Branicki Palace. There, in the evening, Heimbach summarily informed Barash that the following morning, police from Lublin would be transporting the Jews of Bialystok, their families, and factory equipment to Lublin. Since Lublin’s industrial infrastructure was far superior to Bialystok’s, he explained, it made sense to send the Bialystok workforce to Lublin. He assured Barash that the Jews’ lives in Lublin would continue in much the same manner as in Bialystok. As Friedel testified, Barash was devastated by the news. Heimbach tried to reassure him that there was no need for concern. He stressed the importance of obedience during the conduct of the operation and warned that any resistance would be severely punished. Heimbach then ordered Barash to inform the ghetto residents of the forthcoming operation and urge them to obey orders and remain calm. He was to instruct them to leave their houses and await further orders.

Barash, still believing in his powers of persuasion, made one final attempt to avert the decree. He reminded Heimbach that the ghetto’s industrial output was optimal, as corroborated by routine reports to the Gestapo. He may even have suggested bribery. Heimbach, however, remained impassive. His last words to Barash were that any Jew who tried to hide, escape, or resist the deportation was jeopardizing his life.

Barash left the Gestapo headquarters in a daze. Since he had not yet managed to form ties with Heimbach and Zimmermann, he realized that bargaining, begging, or bribery were out of the question and that there was absolutely nothing he could do. This was no doubt the most difficult moment in his life—the realization that he had failed, that all his efforts had been in vain, and that he may have been mistaken all along. And yet, even at such a time, his conviction in the justness of his cause was so strong that he persuaded himself that all was not yet lost and that the transfer to Lublin that Heimbach had described was not a prevarication. Be that as it may, he broke his promise to Tenenbaum by failing to inform the underground of
what he had just learned, thereby depriving the fighters of several hours of vital time in which to organize for action. The breach between him and Tenenbaum may not have been the only factor in his failure to alert the underground. He may also have feared that the news would cause panic and trigger a revolt, both of which he wished to avoid. It is equally possible that Barash was so stunned that he simply lost his will power, initiative, and confidence and was swept along on the tide of events like an automaton, mechanically obeying the instructions he had been given.

The Destruction of the Ghetto

That night, the night of August 15–16, 1943, several hours after returning to the ghetto, Barash called his secretary, Hadassah Shprung, to his office and dictated the following notice:

All ghetto residents, without exception, are hereby ordered to assemble on August 16, at 9:00 a.m., with a small piece of luggage, on Jurowiecka Street, for transfer to Lublin, together with the factories and workshops.  
Signed: Dibus, SS and Police Commander.

In her testimony, Shprung related that Barash ordered her to type the notices in Yiddish, Polish, and German and see that they were put up immediately. By 4:00 a.m. that morning, the notices were posted on the streets of the ghetto.34

The Underground Prepares

An idea of how unaware anyone was of things to come can be obtained from Vinizka’s description of the atmosphere in the ghetto during the days leading up to the aktion:

Things could not have been better. Even the incidents which took place between the end of February and July 1943, in which Jews both inside and outside the ghetto were implicated, did not ruffle the Germans’ composure. Their reaction upon discovering a wagon smuggling in weapons, or upon hearing that armed men were leaving the ghetto, or even upon learning that German soldiers had been murdered, was unusual. They did not even bother to investigate the cause of the huge bomb explosion [in the ghetto] . . . in June 1943. Not only did the Germans refrain from meting out collective pun-
ishment in the above cases; they also showed amazing restraint and control. It was their way of lulling the Jews into a false sense of security, until August 16, 1943, when they sprang.  

The letters written by Tenenbaum to Vinizka a few days before the liquidation of the ghetto also indicate nothing untoward that might hint at impending catastrophe. On August 10 he wrote: “Everything is as usual,” and on August 13: “As of tomorrow—I’m back in my room. It’s clean and freshly painted—and really nice. I’ll be able to invite you round again—we’ll be able to chat like before.”

On Sunday August 15, Hasia Bilicka of Hashomer Hatzair, who lived on the Aryan side, noticed growing numbers of Ukrainian policemen and SS men entering the city. Worried by this unusual state of affairs, she decided to warn her comrades in the ghetto. That evening, Bilicka entered the ghetto and made straight for the apartment of Gedalyah Shayek, Zerach Zylberberg-Ziskind, Haika Grosman, and Zila Shachness (who had come with her from Grodno in January 1943). She informed them of all the activity taking place outside the ghetto and of the enormous number of Ukrainian police who had converged on the city. Bilicka wrote that Shayek dismissed her fears, countering that only that morning a truck had entered the ghetto with leather hides for the ghetto’s shoe factory. Nor were Bilicka’s other comrades unduly worried by the news. Grosman, soon to become Hasia’s best friend, did not even consider the information newsworthy, and failed to report it in her memoirs. Despite her comrades’ lack of concern, Bilicka decided to remain in the ghetto, staying with members of the Tel Amal faction of Hashomer Hatzair, where her sister lived.

The night of August 15, when the representatives of the underground met in Tenenbaum’s room not far from the ghetto fence on Polna Street, was a pleasant summer’s night. No one had any inkling of what was about to take place a few hours later. The meeting, which began at midnight, was attended by Daniel Moszkowicz, Yoshe Kaveh, Miechek Jakubowicz, Leybush Mandelblitt, Zalman Felder, and Pethayahu Mahler of the Communists; Zerach Zylberberg-Ziskind and Haika Grosman of Hashomer Hatzair; Mordecai Tenenbaum and Reuven Rosenberg of Dror; Yerahmiel Kostyn of the Bund, Fanya Halperin of Hanoar Hazioni and Itzhak Fleisher of Betar. The meeting was chaired by Tenenbaum. The two topics on the agenda were the distribution of work among the leaders and the composition of the partisan groups leaving for the forests. As Grosman put it: “We had finished the distribution of assignments. The mood at the meeting had been practical and matter-of-fact.”
Grosman nor her comrades mentioned Bilicka’s bit of news. After two hours, the meeting ended, and the members returned home, little suspecting what lay in store.

Grosman was just dozing off when Gedalyah Shayek, the underground’s lookout man who, at the end of the meeting had returned to his lookout post near the ghetto fence, burst into her room on Białostockańska Street. Shayek, who earlier that evening had been so dismissive of Bilicka’s news, now hysterically informed Grosman that German forces were encircling the ghetto and that an SS detachment had entered the ghetto via the gate on Jurwicaska Street and had already set up sentries near the factories. Grosman described the terrible shock she felt when she heard the news: “The ghetto had been tranquil lately. Life had been normal. Not only that but new orders had recently arrived for the factories, from Königsberg and far-off Berlin. How happy the ghetto had been lately over the many Soviet victories, and Mussolini’s downfall. And now, suddenly— an aktzia.”

At about 2:00 a.m. on Monday, August 16, 1943, the evacuation forces had begun encircling the ghetto in a swift and silent maneuver designed not to alert the ghetto residents. The innermost ring, consisting of soldiers equipped with light automatic weapons, positioned itself outside the wooden fence surrounding the ghetto. The second ring consisted of soldiers equipped with heavy submachine guns, while the outer ring comprised armored vehicles. All three rings were backed up by the local security police and cavalry. All members of the evacuation forces were also equipped with rifles and hand grenades.

Shayek’s news left no room for doubt. It was clear to all that the final aktion was about to begin. In a matter of seconds, the members of the underground reconvened, together with Hershel Rosenthal of Dror and Velvel Wolkowysk, a friend of Barash’s. A swift count showed that they had almost 200 fighters, about 130 firearms, including 25 German rifles, several guns, a few submachine guns, one heavy machine gun, and several dozen grenades. The automatic weapons were generally in very poor condition. The grenades, most of which were handmade, were unreliable, and some of the weapons were being repaired at the time. Most of the weapons were stored in the Dror kibbutz’s warehouse at 14 Ciepła Street. In addition to the firearms, the underground had a small amount of dynamite, sulfuric acid, and improvised weapons, such as particular axes and scythes.

The leaders of the fighting fronts and the commanders of the underground cells had already worked out an emergency plan in the event of an aktion, in which members would take up positions, be issued with weapons, and await orders from their commanders. However, the surprise element of
the *aktion* created unforeseen problems and forced the underground to modify its plan. Moreover, Barash’s failure to inform the underground, as he had promised Tenenbaum a few months earlier, deprived them of valuable time in which to plan an effective counterstrike. Grosman wrote:

> The general plan had to be changed. The main points of attack, which had been set near the gates in order not to allow the Germans to enter the ghetto, had now lost much of their value. All the plans based on attacks from the houses near the gates, by grenade and a rain of fire, had to be altered. The initiative had been taken from us suddenly. Still, we decided to hold on to and entrench the existing positions. The first order, therefore, was to hold on to all the positions, and from them to attack the Germans as soon as they came close. Sentries were set and lines of contact established with the sector commanders.44

The underground, which had assembled at dawn at 1 Piotrkowska Street, at Tenenbaum’s order, feverishly devised a new plan to meet the new circumstances. Unfortunately, since none of the staff members survived, the only firsthand information regarding this new plan is Grosman’s testimony. She reported that the new plan was to launch an offensive at 9:00 a.m. as follows:

1. The main force would attack the Germans posted near the ghetto fence on Smolna Street (the eastern side of the ghetto) in order to break through the ring encircling the ghetto and create an escape route to the forest.
2. Simultaneously, four other attacks would be launched as diversionary tactics, to distract the enemy forces from the battle in Smolna Street. These attacks were to take place in Fabryczna, Nowogródzka, Chmielna, and Cieplak Streets, the route along which the deportation forces were supposed to lead the Jews to the assembly point on Jurowiecka Street.
3. In anticipation that several streets would be cut off, comrades would be positioned at either end of Jurowiecka Street, whose northern end abutted the railroad.
4. Despite the difficulties involved, weapons would be removed from the storeroom and distributed to the members of the underground, after they had taken up position, according to the composition and number of the forces.
5. Fighters would be stationed in the factories, ready to attack the Germans or set fire to the factories, if the German troops tried to enter.
6. The uprising would have two command centers, one at 14 Ciepła Street, on the eastern side of the ghetto, run by Tenenbaum and Moszkowicz, and the other on Piotrkowska Street, on the western side of the ghetto, manned by most of the other staff members.45

The plan was based on the assumption that at least some of the ghetto residents would join in the battle in the last minute. Ensuring an escape route to the forests was an important part of the plan. The operational command, well aware that many of the fighters would not survive the battle, wanted to provide some of them, at least, with a good chance of escaping and continuing the fight in the forests. Meanwhile, women members of the underground were asked to distribute leaflets with a manifesto Tenenbaum had composed in January 1943, calling on fellow Jews (in Yiddish, Brider Yiden) not to surrender:

Five million Jews have already been murdered in Europe by Hitler and his henchmen. At present, no more than 10 percent of Polish Jewry is left. In Chelmno, Łódź, Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibór and other death camps, more than 3 million Polish Jews have been tortured and butchered. Don't kid yourselves—all transports lead to death! . . . You have nothing to lose! Work can no longer save you. . . . They are taking us to Treblinka! Like leprous beasts they will poison us with gas, and afterwards burn us in crematoria! Let us not go like sheep to the slaughter! If we are too weak to protect our lives—we are strong enough to protect our Jewish honor and human dignity and to show the world that although they have broken our bodies, they have not broken our spirits! Do not go willingly to your deaths. As long as you are alive, fight for your lives, attack your executioners with you teeth and your nails, with axes and knives, with acid and iron rods. . . . If we fall as heroes, even in our death . . . we shall not die! . . . Except for our honor, we have nothing left to lose! . . . Avenge the blood of the communities that have been destroyed, and the towns that have been uprooted. When you leave your homes, set fire to them. Set fire to the factories and destroy them. Let us leave no legacy for the murderers.46

Such a persuasive rhetoric could not fail, so the underground leaders believed, to convince the masses to join forces with them. Believing that many people would answer their call and refuse to obey the Judenrat and the Germans, they were sorely disappointed with the response.47

By 3:00 a.m., several hundred Germans had marched toward the ghetto factories, while Michalsen, the commander of the aktion, made his way to the Judenrat building on Kupiecka Street. There, in Friedel's presence, he
informed Barash that the evacuation had begun. The entire operation, he estimated, would take eight days, ending on August 23. After first taking over a room in the Judenrat building to serve as headquarters, Michalsen ordered Barash to begin the evacuation with the help of the Jewish police. The Jews were to assemble on Jurowiecka Street, on the eastern side of the ghetto, whence they would be taken to the evacuation point in the Pietrasze Fields, some 3 kilometers away.

Barash had no choice but to do as told. Accordingly, the Judenrat put up a second notice ordering the ghetto residents to assemble on Jurowiecka, Fabryczna, Ciepła, Nowogródzka, and Chmielna Streets and in the Judenrat garden, by 9:00 a.m. that morning, for transfer to Lublin. The notice promised that they would remain alive. Barash, eager to set an example, was the first to assemble, complete with suitcase and backpack.48 Soon, most of the Jews followed, leaving their houses voluntarily.

Streets filled with Jews, crowding around the posters. They read them all at once, again, and then dispersed, frightened. There was no time for questions or for explanations; the posters spoke for themselves. Jews read them and turned away quietly, each to his home. There was no shouting; no hysteria. . . . There was no wailing or weeping, only quiet tension during the slow moving hours.49

On the morning of August 16, thousands of Jews, mainly from the western side of the ghetto, crossed the Biała River, which bisected the ghetto, and assembled in Jurowiecka and adjoining streets, awaiting orders. Yet, hundreds of Jews refused to obey the Judenrat’s instruction, and tried to save their lives. Some hid in bunkers and other prearranged hiding places.50 Some of the workers fled to the factories in the vain hope that, based on February’s experience, they would be safe there.

Realizing that they did not have the support of the masses, the underground leadership on Piotrkowska Street decided to abandon the plan of an open confrontation: “In vain our comrades stood at the corners, in vain they closed the three bridges over the Biała in a futile attempt to turn them back to their homes,” recalled Grosman. “They would not listen; they closed their ears to our appeals. . . . We had no masses behind us. . . . We had been deprived of the public purpose of our struggle.”51 Under these circumstances, the command decided to move the center of the fighting to the ghetto’s eastern sector, where the Jews had been ordered to gather. Accordingly, they transferred all weapons to this area and joined forces with the main command at 13 Ciepła Street, presided over by Tenenbaum and Moszkowicz. Grosman remembered:
Weapons were distributed, a hundred rifles, in addition to the pistols and grenades. There were many fighters; more than two hundred remained unarmed, or only had hand weapons, for self-defence. There was one old machine gun, and it was given to Nahum Abelvich.

. . . The few automatic guns were distributed. Most of the girls remained unarmed, but they had a different task. The sabotage and indecent groups were comprised mostly of girls. Others were couriers, and some were nurses. They had small arms. . . . Only Mordechai and Daniel would remain in the room. A chain of runners was set up and the sectors along the fence divided.

Shortly before 9:00 a.m., the members of the underground wrapped their weapons in pillows and eiderdowns and transferred them to the eastern sector of the ghetto: “The arms had to arrive in time,” Grosman remembered. “It was a few minutes before nine. The streets were empty.”

On their way to the other side of the ghetto, the fighters noticed that the diversionary tactics had succeeded, and that the wooden houses on Ciepła, Fabryczna, Nowogródzka, Chmielna, and Gorna Streets, and the haystacks in the Judenrat Gardens, where thousands of Jews had gathered, were ablaze. The Germans probably interpreted the fire as a sign of the beginning of the Jewish uprising. The German response was not long in coming. Shortly, the entire eastern sector of the ghetto was full of German and Ukrainian soldiers, who had come through its southern gate.

Resistance and Evacuation: Day 1

The uprising began as planned, shortly before 9:30 a.m., with sporadic shooting as hand grenades were launched at the Germans from the windows and balconies of the houses adjoining the ghetto fence. The Germans, equipped with machine guns and grenades, fired back indiscriminately. In the ensuing commotion, many Jews who were trapped in Jurowiecka Street were trampled to death. According to Grosman, the command on Ciepła Street sent Reuven Rosenberg to blow up the Judenrat building, which the Germans were using as their headquarters. It is not clear if he was ordered to carry out this important assignment alone. Grosman reported:

When Ruvchik crossed the border of the abandoned ghetto, Yuroviecka Street was already filled with Jews. . . .

Ruvchik just managed to get by, and then disappeared. We did not see him again. We concluded that he met his end from the sounds of the explosions, and the flames rising in that part of the ghetto.
Meanwhile, the Germans raced through the streets of the ghetto on their motorbikes, shooting at will and sowing great fear and confusion in the hearts of the thousands of helpless Jewish bystanders.\textsuperscript{56}

The main thrust of the underground’s offensive took place on Smolna Street, near the ghetto fence. Since this was the shortest route to the forests, the underground decided to concentrate most of its forces in this area in the hope of breaking through the German ring encircling the ghetto and enabling at least some of the fighters and others to escape. But the experienced and well-armed soldiers of Police Regiment 26 entrenched themselves behind the fence, while the German evacuation forces radioed for help, firing their machine and submachine guns at random. Many of the bullets hit the crowds of Jews who had not taken part in the uprising but were waiting helplessly for instructions. During the shooting the house at 3 Smolna Street was set on fire. Soon most of the wooden houses in the street were burning. Grosman reported:

Suddenly we were under fire. One man lay in his blood. The house went up in flames; the adjoining houses were also burning like matchboxes.

The house was no longer a shelter, we had to retreat. . . . Fire was consuming the houses, and we were standing in the open field where the enemy could easily see us. It would be a face-to-face battle.

Now they were shooting from the embankment. They, too, had retreated firing with heavy weapons. A machine gun began its rat-a-tat of death. . . . We repeatedly attacked, and retreated.\textsuperscript{57}

The battle on Smolna Street ended when the fighters’ ammunition ran out, leaving them with only scythes and axes to defend themselves. The area around Smolna Street was filled with dozens of corpses and hundreds of wounded, it was clear that the main battle was over.\textsuperscript{58} Although they had managed to breach the fence in a number of places, the Germans soon rallied round and began shooting back steadily, so that no one could escape. Although no one knows exactly how many members of the underground participated in the battle to breach the fence on Smolna Street, it is clear that not one of them survived. In the thick of the fighting, the remaining fighters feared that if they continued attacking, their fellow Jews would have to pay too high a price, and shortly before noon they decided to abandon face-to-face fighting and move the battle back, to 24, 26, and 42 Jurowiecka Street, where some of the fighters had gathered. At 42 Jurowiecka Street, fighters threw grenades at the Germans. When the Germans prepared to storm the house, the fighters blew it up.\textsuperscript{59} The German command
sent armored vehicles to Jurowiecka Street to destroy the fighters’ cells in the area. Grosman wrote: “the sound of shooting from the ghetto became fainter. There was no ammunition, no heavy machine guns. The gate on Fabrychna Street, closed and unused, was suddenly opened, and a heavy tank crawled towards Ciepła Street. It stopped suddenly; it was apparently hit by a Molotov Cocktail. There were more tanks in front of us.”

Despite the huge disparity in manpower and weapons, the fighters succeeded in inflicting a number of casualties on the Germans, particularly in the battle for Smolna Street. But this clash had exacted a far higher toll than anticipated, and even though it was only the first morning of the revolt, the fighters knew that the fight was mostly over. Their only consolation was the losses they had inflicted on the Germans and the knowledge that the remaining cells would continue to resist till the bitter end.

Once the battle for Smolna Street was over, the revolt moved to various other places, such as the Judenrat Gardens on Nowogródzka Street, where the fight was taken up by Yoshke Kaveh and Moshe Tate from Yudita’s group, Israel Margolis and Hershel Rosenthal from Dror, and some members of Hashomer Hatzair. After a heavy exchange of fire, in the course of which most of the fighters fell, the survivors retreated to the factories, to continue the struggle there. Another underground stronghold was the bunker at 7 Chmielna Street, where several dozen fighters were hiding, in the hope of escaping to the forest.

The Germans decided to isolate the fighters from the masses, and destroy communication among the various resistance cells. They drove the fighters into the area formed by Smolna, Nowogródzka, and Ciepła Streets, in order to contain the resistance and make it easier to control. By noon, most of the fighters had fallen, and by 2:00 p.m., the battle was over there, too.

Meanwhile, by noon an estimated 20,000 people out of a total of 30,000 had shown up at the assembly points on the eastern side of the ghetto. The Germans had seized control of the factories, shooting those hiding there or throwing them out to join the stream of Jews flowing toward the assembly point on Jurowiecka Street. In the afternoon, when Jurowiecka Street was full, the ghetto gate on the north side of the street was opened. Now the Ukrainian auxiliary forces began leading the Jews out of the ghetto under heavy SS guard. They proceeded through the tunnel running underneath the railway track, through the Białostoczek neighborhood, and then east toward Pietrasze Fields, near the Polesie train station—the deportation point—some 3 kilometers away. The German plan was to assemble all Jews in the Pietrasze Fields within the space of twenty-four hours, select all able-bodied Jews, and then begin the deportation proper.
ever, when the Jews reached Pietrasze Fields, Michalsen discovered that the trains which were supposed to transport the Jews had not arrived.

Train schedule 290 of the Reich Railway Authority in Königsberg states that “special trains” (Sonderzüge) for transporting the Jews from Białystok to Malkinia had been ordered for August 21–23. Heimbach had erred in assessing the dates of the deportations. Michalsen immediately sent Heibscher, his aide, and Heinz Errelis, who after the destruction of the Grodno ghetto had been transferred to Białystok, to the Reich Railway Authority in Königsberg to settle the matter. During discussions there, Hübscher and Errelis discovered that the “special trains” were to be sent to three destinations: Treblinka, Auschwitz, and for those who passed the “selection,” Lublin.

In the Pietrasze Fields, the Jews sat huddled on the grass, closely guarded by armed Ukrainians, awaiting their fate. It was a particularly hot day, and they suffered terribly from heat and thirst. Meanwhile, the ghetto houses continued to burn, and as darkness descended, the German and Ukrainian patrol forces were ordered to seek out the thousands of Jews still in hiding. As the German ring tightened, communication between the fighters’ groups and the command on Ciepła Street was severed.

On the first night of the evacuation, forty men and women from Yudita’s group tried to cross the ghetto fence and escape to the forests. The Germans guarding the fence retaliated with heavy fire, and the group was forced to retreat. Another group launched an abortive attack against a German weapons store. The Germans were aware that the escapees intended joining the partisans, who at the time were causing them heavy losses, and were determined not to let anyone escape. German patrols were also stationed in the nearby forests to prevent escapees reaching the partisans who were waiting for them on the other side of the fence.

By the end of the first day of the uprising, the underground had lost many of its 200 members. We have no way of knowing whether the acts of resistance were in obedience to instructions or were spontaneous. What is clear, however, is that those who chose to fight on the first day of the evacuation preferred an honorable death to a dishonorable life, for it was clear that no one would come out of the battle alive. It is interesting to note that most of those who survived were Communists, not only because most of the members of the Białystok underground were Communists but also because most of them decided to leave the ghetto for the forest before it was too late.

Of the underground command, the only member to survive was Haika Grosman. In her memoirs, Grosman wrote that the members of Hashomer
Hatzair and others of the underground command, begged her to leave the ghetto as soon as the uprising began. “In short, we think you are the one to come out of this safely and relish the victory.” Grosman, who was used to moving between the ghetto and the Aryan side of the city, was familiar with all the ghetto’s entries and exits. Shortly after the start of the uprising, while “the appalled and terrified masses were huddled over their bundles in Jurowiecka Street,” Grosman slipped out of the ghetto to the Aryan side through a factory. As she was walking through the streets of the city, she met Bronka Vinizka, Tenenbaum’s friend who, having heard about the evacuation, wished to join her comrades in the ghetto. Since Grosman was on the Aryan side of the city during the *aktion*, her knowledge of the events surrounding the evacuation and uprising must have been derived from Jews who hid during the evacuation and managed to slip out to the Aryan side of the city, or to the surrounding forests.

Two surviving German documents describe the uprising in the Bialystok ghetto. The first document, sent to Dr. Joseph Goebbels in Berlin from Königsberg on September 24, 1943, was drawn up by the Reich Propaganda Ministry in East Prussia. This document corroborates that following Himmler’s instruction, the *aktion* to purge the Bialystok ghetto began on August 16, 1943, at Globocnik’s request, and that some 30,000 Jews still remained in the ghetto when it started.

The operation was so sudden that, unusually, the Jews were taken by surprise. Forty-three men of the Police Regiment that had arrived the previous evening were recruited to encircle the ghetto and patrol it on the succeeding days. On the eve of August 17, 1943, the Jews began setting fire to buildings. The fires were extinguished by local and regional firemen. . . . An estimated 5,000 Jews, hiding in sewers, cellars and bunkers, offered marked resistance. . . . Generally speaking, the Jewish fighters were well-equipped with food and weapons, hand grenades, rifles and the like. They also had some automatic weapons of Russian and German origin. During the transport itself, about 200 Jews escaped. Most of them were shot, and the remainder, apart from three, caught. The *aktion* clearly established that there was a close tie between this ghetto and the Warsaw ghetto. Although radio transmitters were not found, a number of radio receivers were discovered. The armed resistance inflicted wounds on nine Germans, including two officers.. . . After the completion of the police action, it was evident that the damage caused was quite extensive. Most factories had been destroyed by Jewish sabotage operations, and the hospitals for example, had to be re-equipped from scratch.
Even if the author of this report underestimated the number of men in the police regiment surrounding the ghetto, and overestimated the number of weapons at the fighters’ disposal, this document undoubtedly proves that the uprising of the Jews in the Białystok ghetto was perceived by the Germans as an event of some significance. Although the armed uprising never developed into a sustained battle, the document indicates that the spontaneous resistance of the Jewish fighters during the evacuation made an impact.

The second German document alludes to battles between the German police and “gang members” (a term used by the Germans to describe the partisans) and Jews during the evacuation of the ghetto. The document mentions combat operations by Police Regiment 26, which was dispatched to Białystok from Lublin and took part in the evacuation operation. From the document, dated August 7, 1944, about a year after the evacuation of the ghetto, it is clear that one company of the police regiment stormed the ghetto on the tail of the armored division and fought inside the ghetto for the next five days. This document also informs us that even if the uprising was suppressed on the first day of the evacuation, the battle was by no means over, as clashes between the Germans and Jews continued.76

In his testimony, Fritz Friedel recounted that the ghetto Jews launched an uprising with rifles, submachine guns, and automatic weapons, but that on the very first day, Globocnik sent a tank into the ghetto to put down the uprising. “There was shooting on both sides, and both sides suffered losses.”77

Like the Warsaw ghetto uprising, the Białystok uprising began as soon as the Germans entered the ghetto. However, this is where the similarity ends. For whereas the Warsaw ghetto uprising took the Germans by surprise, this time the Germans were prepared. And whereas the Warsaw ghetto uprising had been carefully planned down to the last detail, the fighters in Białystok were taken by surprise and had no time to prepare. Moreover, the fighters in Warsaw had the backing of the masses, which the fighters in Białystok did not. Finally, the members of the Warsaw underground, unlike the Białystok fighters, could count on assistance from the Aryan side. All these factors explain why, while it took the Germans several weeks to squash the Warsaw ghetto uprising, it only took them hours to put down the Białystok ghetto uprising.

Members of the underground who were still scattered in various positions throughout the ghetto continued with sporadic resistance for a few more days. The fate of these men, who awaited Tenenbaum’s orders to leave for the forests, is described below.
The Germans decided to bring reinforcements into the ghetto in order to complete the evacuation and crush further resistance. All transport on the Aryan side was halted, and the streets adjoining the ghetto soon resembled a large military base. Armored vehicles were parked in the streets, and German soldiers, armed from head to toe, marched toward the ghetto as acrid smoke rose from its burning houses.78

At 6:40 a.m., of the second day of the aktion (Tuesday, August 17), hundreds of SS men poured into the ghetto, headed for SS headquarters in the Judenrat building. Their assignment was to hunt for Jews who had gone into hiding. Ten SS men per house were assigned for the smaller houses, and twenty per house for the larger ones. If the SS men suspected Jews of hiding in a house, they ordered them to leave, threatening to blow up the building and everyone in it. The hunt continued all day long. Each house was raided a number of times, and grenades were thrown at buildings. Hundreds of Jews were murdered. Later testimony described Germans shooting Jewish fighters hiding in underground shelters, including cisterns, bunkers, and cellars. Those who refused to come out were shot. A small contingent of Jews who had been singled out on the first day of the aktion to carry out “urgent work” in the ghetto, was ordered to repair the ghetto fence. The Jewish wagon drivers were ordered to evacuate the corpses from the streets and the Judenrat Gardens. Srul Abramson, one of those responsible for removing the corpses from the ghetto streets, testified that during the evacuation the Germans shot at masses of people and that the wagon drivers also had to collect the charred corpses of Jews who had been burned to death in the burning houses. According to him, Friedel ordered Marcus, the commander of the Jewish police, to prepare burial pits, threatening to execute twenty Jewish policemen if he failed to do so.79

At 2:00 p.m. that day, Friedel, accompanied by members of the German command, ordered the Jewish captives to line up. When no one made a move, the Germans opened fire. Armed with clubs, the Germans then passed between the rows of Jews and selected the able-bodied from among them. Those who refused to be separated from their families were beaten and dragged away by force. By 6:00 p.m. about 6,000 Jews, including hundreds of young women, were taken to the Pietrasze Fields. The remainder—the elderly and infirm—were loaded on to wagons and taken to the ghetto cemetery, where firemen had already dug large pits. Friedel accompanied them to the cemetery, ordered the helpless Jews to stand at the edge of the pit, and gave the order to shoot. Friedel himself was the first to fire. Accord-
ing to Reizner, Friedel insisted that the graves be symmetrical, and visited the cemetery every few hours to check if the work was proceeding according to plan. The firemen, who worked overtime digging large graves in the ghetto’s Żabia Street Cemetery, used the opportunity to hide a number of Jews. The corpses lying in the Pietrasze Fields were also buried in the ghetto cemetery.

While they were awaiting the arrival of the trains, the supervisors of the aktion ordered the local security police to herd all Jews who worked in a domestic capacity for the local Gestapo into the paper factory not far from the Pietrasze Fields. The rumor that some Jews were to be given special status spread swiftly, and many tried to join the “fortunate ones” in a bid to save their lives. However, members of the Gestapo who stood guard over all the factory doors turned away anyone who tried to sneak in. Two nights later, about 300 Jews were ordered to leave the factory and line up in front of the building, where another “selection” took place. After being loaded onto trucks, they were taken to Grodno and Łomża, where they were kept for a few months and finally sent to the camp of Stutthof, near Danzig, from which many were sent to Auschwitz.

Train schedules, telegrams sent to the train stations, and orders placed by the Reich Railway Authority, confirm that the deportation of Białystok Jews began on August 17, 1943, and ended a week later, on August 23. During that week, more than 25,000 Jews were deported in fourteen transports. Twelve of the transports were headed for Malkinia, the train station nearest Treblinka, and two for Auschwitz. Each day, two trains departed, bearing serialized numbers (PJ 200, 201, etc.). “We have no more strength left,” recalled Avraham Vered. “Battered and weak, we clamber into the high wagons. Those who can’t make it are cruelly beaten. Inside the wagons are filthy, and stink of excrement. People, unable to stand on their feet, sink to the floor. More and more keep coming. People sit on top of one another. Terror makes them lose control of their bladders and bowels. The doors are closed, ventilation is provided only by two small slats covered with barbed wire.”

The Jews who passed the “selection” in the Pietrasze Fields were herded on to separate cars on the trains heading for Malkinia. Upon arrival, these cars continued on to Lublin, while those in the other cars were taken to Treblinka for extermination. Jews who were sent to Auschwitz had to submit to another “selection” there. Of the transport that arrived on August 29, only 210 men and 17 women passed the “selection”; of the transport that arrived on August 31, 280 men and 795 women passed.

Although the overseers of the aktion assessed the number of able-bodied
Jews at about 15,000,85 only 12,000–13,000 were actually sent to the labor camps in Lublin.86 In his book Treblinka, Destruction and Revolt, Yitzhak Arad wrote that in August 1943, about 7,600 Białystok Jews were taken to Treblinka.87 To these must be added the 4,000 or so Jews who were sent to Auschwitz (assuming that each transport carried 1,600 to 2,000 people) and the 13,000 Jews who were sent to the labor camps in Lublin. These figures give a total of about 25,000 Jews who were evacuated in the fourteen transports that left Białystok. In addition, the Germans left about 1,000 Jews in the “small ghetto” (see below) who were evacuated in the last transport which took place on September 8, 1943. Nor must one forget the hundreds of Jews who were shot in the ghetto or in Pietrasze Fields in the course of the aktion, or the 2,000 children who were brought back to the ghetto under an exchange plan (see below).88 A swift calculation shows that on the eve of the aktion there were about 30,000 Jews residing in the Białystok ghetto.

The journey to Lublin was appalling: “No air, no water, no food,” recalled Shmuel Pisar, “How long we were inside these cattle cars I don’t really know. I remember someone saying seventy-two hours. We were terribly dehydrated. I saw people with faces that were literally blue, licking their own sweat; there was urine and excrement all over the floor. It was like a sewer.”89 When the transports reached Lublin, the Germans ordered the exhausted Jews off the train, beating them and setting vicious dogs on them. Pisar later wrote:

A long line of SS men, each holding a restive police dog on a short leash, stood along the ramp. . . . A short order—EVERYTHING OUT—and several of the great beasts leaped into our car. In the space of seconds, two or three of the half-conscious prisoners were torn to pieces. Horrified, the prostrate men dragged themselves up with their last ounce of strength and staggered out. Other bodies lying on the floor the dogs did not touch; they were dead. Of the hundred or so men in the car, more than a score had succumbed along the way.90

Confusing and contradictory data make an accurate assessment of the number of Jews taken from Lublin to Majdanek impossible. What we do know is that the Lublin camp, apart from a quota of Jews left behind to clean the trucks for subsequent transports, served as a transit point for other camps, such as Majdanek, Poniatowa, and Trawniki, and it is clear that these transports were the last large-scale transports to Majdanek. Polish researchers assess the number of Białystok Jews who were taken from Lublin to Majdanek at about 11,200. Many were probably killed upon arrival.91
As part of the aktion, five Jewish factories were transferred from the Białystok ghetto to Lublin. An Ostindustrie report of March 13, 1944, refers to an electronics workshop, a mechanical workshop, a small brush factory, a large sewing workshop, and a foundry. The report does not specify how many Jews were transferred with the factories or how many were incorporated into the Ostindustrie in Lublin.92

On the second day of the aktion, the remnants of the underground held out in a few areas, especially the factories. Fighters in the Rimer factory and in the tricot factory managed to resist for several hours. In the end, the Germans were left with no alternative but to bomb the factories, which collapsed, burying the fighters in the rubble.93 Apart from the factories, pockets of fighters still existed on the western side of the ghetto, which was already supposed to be “free” of Jews. In the course of the day, several clashes erupted on Kupiecka Street between members of the underground and the Germans. Meanwhile, Tenenbaum and Moszkowicz, hiding in Ciepła Street on the eastern side of the ghetto, were cut off and helpless.

Most of the fighters who survived the first day of fighting (about seventy-two) took shelter in the large bunker, at 7 Chmielna Street, awaiting further instructions or hoping for a chance to flee to the forests. The bunker, which had been dug by members of Dror in January 1943, was located under a large cottage that housed the Dror kibbutz. There were three ways of gaining access to the bunker: through a water cistern in the yard, through the cottage via an oven hidden under a large chest, and through a tunnel leading to an open field outside the ghetto. Mark described it: “Down below, an underground passage yawned, wide enough for two people to walk abreast. The tunnel led to an exit on Smolna Street [outside the ghetto].”94 The exit, well camouflaged with debris and refuse, offered the fighters a means of escaping to the Aryan side of the city and thence to the forest. The bunker itself was camouflaged and equipped with food, radio equipment, dynamite and bottles of acid.95 It is clear from the testimony of Berel Shatzman—the only survivor of the group—that members of the underground leadership, such as Zylberberg-Ziskind and Shayek of Hashomer Hatzair, also took refuge in the bunker. The bunker was so well camouflaged that the German did not discover it for four days, not until Thursday, August 19. Its occupants, needless to say, were taken unawares.

There are several versions of how the bunker on Chmielna Street came to be discovered. According to one version, corroborated by Friedel’s testimony, one or two Jews hiding there gave the game away. A second version claims that a German patrol passing by became suspicious upon seeing steam rising from the cistern in the courtyard. According to the third ver-
sion, carelessness on the part of a scout who had been sent out the previous night to reconnoiter the possibilities of escape led to its discovery.\textsuperscript{96} In any case, by 11:00 a.m. the bunker was surrounded, and by 4:00 p.m., all its occupants were removed and lined up along the wall of the house at the corner of Jurowiecka and Kupiecka Streets. Efraim Kissler, hiding on the roof of a house opposite, testified that Friedel, after singling out Berel Shatzman and Kowalewsky, ordered the remaining seventy Jews to be shot in groups of four.\textsuperscript{97} Kowalewsky did not live to tell the tale, but Shatzman survived. After the war, he was suspected of informing on his comrades, an allegation he vigorously denied, claiming that a German driver who knew him saved him, and took him to work for the Gestapo.\textsuperscript{98}

A number of fighters—mostly Communists—still remained in the ghetto, hoping to escape to the forests. On the night of August 19, a group of Communists, led by Yudita Nowogrodzka, tried to cross the ghetto fence and join the partisan unit Foroys in the nearby forests. The attempt failed and Yudita Nowogrodzka was killed.\textsuperscript{99}

On Friday August 20, the fifth day of the \textit{aktion}, the underground’s last headquarters on Ciep\-\-a and Fabryczna Streets fell and Tenenbaum and Moszkowicz were forced to take refuge in the Jewish hospital on Fabryczna Street—where the ghetto’s last few hundred residents, of which 300 were sick or wounded, had gathered, in the hope that the Germans would spare them, as they had in the February \textit{aktion}. The evacuation of the hospital, supervised by Friedel in person, was unbelievably cruel. Bedridden patients were shot or beaten to death, and children were thrown from third floor windows. Once the building was empty, the Jewish doctors were ordered to clean it up and then taken to the Pietrasze Fields for deportation.\textsuperscript{100}

All in all, the evacuation of the ghetto lasted five days—August 16–20, 1943—and each day hundreds of Jews were discovered hiding. According to Reizner, about 1,000 Jews were caught on the third day, and more than 2,000 on the fourth.\textsuperscript{101} Although these figures cannot be verified, they more or less correspond to the numbers quoted in a document sent by the Reich Propaganda Ministry to Berlin.\textsuperscript{102}

Jews who were not caught left their hiding places at night, searching for food in the Judenrat Gardens. Equipped with passwords, they met up with fellow Jews, exchanging news and discussing plans. Sometimes these Jews encountered Polish citizens, who came to the ghetto at night to loot Jewish property.

Once the last Jews were evacuated, the resistance came to an end. Despite uncertainty concerning Mordecai Tenenbaum’s and Daniel Moszkowicz’s deaths, most survivors believe that they committed suicide. Grosman wrote:
For a long time we tried to discover what had happened to Mordechai and Daniel. We heard many rumors, but one recurring version, that Shatzman, too, had heard, that Mordechai and Daniel were in the hospital; they had not arrived at the bunker. One of the nurses who fled from the hospital told about two men, one young, called Mordechai, and an older one, who had come to the hospital armed. As long as the hospital remained in existence, the doctors and nurses had tried to keep the two of them there. They had suggested that the two men move to the small ghetto, but they refused. They argued that there was no point in saving their own lives when there were no prospects of continuing the war. When the Germans arrived to liquidate the hospital, they both committed suicide.103

Bronka Vinizka, who was in constant contact with Tenenbaum until the start of the aktion, wrote:

Although I don’t know what happened to Mordecai, it’s clear that neither he nor his deputy Moszkowicz were among the seventy-two fighters hiding in the bunker on Chmielna Street. According to one version, Mordecai and his friend Moszkowicz committed suicide. This version was put forward by members of the ghetto whom I met after the deportation. It seems almost certain that Mordecai, who saw his fate as inextricably bound up with that of the ghetto, decided to put an end to his life.104

With the deaths of Tenenbaum and Moszkowicz, the insurrection in the Białystok ghetto came to a definitive end.

The Children’s Aktion

On August 17, the second day of the evacuation, 2,000 Jewish children aged 6–14 were selected for a special transport. A large percentage of them were taken from the orphanage. Others had been separated from their parents, by force if necessary. Some parents even begged for their children to be taken, believing that their chances of survival were greater.105 Rumor had it that the children were to be transferred to Switzerland, in exchange for German prisoners of war (two children per German prisoner). Lending credence to this rumor was the fact that three families with entry visas to Palestine were included in the transport.

Two German documents confirm that the Germans did indeed negotiate an exchange of this kind. The first document, a letter sent to Gestapo Chief Heinrich Müller from Berlin on July 13, 1943, reports that the British
government asked the German government, via Switzerland, if it was prepared to provide exit visas for Palestine to 5,000 Jewish children from the Generalgouvernement and the occupied Eastern Territories, and possibly from the occupied Western Territories, too. The letter stated that after discussion between the Reich foreign minister and the Reichsführer SS (Himmler), the German government was prepared in principle to negotiate. Although it agreed to provide the exit visas, it was not happy with the stated destination—Palestine—preferring to provide visas for England, subject, of course, to the approval of the House of Commons. It is clear, judging by the remainder of the letter, that Germany expected England to refuse this condition and that the whole plan was simply a ploy to embarrass Britain and force it to back down. The letter ended with the caveat that although Britain was unlikely to accept these conditions, the Reich Main Security Office should nevertheless prepare for the eventuality that it might agree.106

The second German document was sent about a week later, on July 21, 1943, from Berlin to the Reich foreign minister. The letter, on the subject of the deportation of the Jews, mentions an appeal by the British government to the Swiss legation for the transfer of 5,000 Jewish children from the occupied Eastern Territories to Palestine.107 After discussing the matter, the foreign minister and the Reichsführer SS decided that while they could not grant exit permits for Palestine, which would interfere with the Arabs’ lebensraum, they would instead be prepared to consider granting visas to Britain, subject to the approval of the House of Commons. Once again the assumption was that such approval would not be forthcoming, rendering the British government responsible for the failure of the negotiations. The letter further stipulated that any decisions reached by the British government were subject to the approval of the mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini—an ally of Hitler—and other interested parties. This letter, too, ended with the recommendation that, although the negotiations were likely to fail, the designated children should not be exterminated but should be kept alive, at least for the time being.108

Accordingly, 2,000 children were selected at the Pietrasze Fields and returned to the burning, corpse-strewn ghetto, accompanied by Barash’s wife, Yocheved, and some Judenrat employees. Upon their arrival, Barash’s wife led them to the TOZ hospital, where she instructed Dr. Tuvya Citron, in the name of the Judenrat, to take care of the children. Dr. Citron testified that when they realized that the children were to be sent to Palestine in exchange for German prisoners, dozens of Jewish hospital employees volunteered to help look after them.109
The orphanage building opposite the hospital (10 Fabryczna Street) was requisitioned for the purpose. The children, accompanied by female chaperones, were ordered to march in pairs toward the building, where they were assigned rooms. Each room accommodated between thirty and forty children. Toward evening, Friedel and Dibus arrived to supervise the operation. Friedel informed Dr. Citron that the children were “his” [Friedel’s], and warned him to take good care of them. The adults, helped by the older children, served drinks and porridge from the Judenrat storehouses. Later that evening the Ukrainian guards opened fire on the ghetto and among the houses that were hit was the orphanage. Dozens of children were killed, and many were fatally wounded.

According to the testimonies of Dr. Citron and Hadassah Shprung, two days later, on August 19, Barash ordered Dr. Citron to return to the hospital to take care of the sick and instructed Dr. Moshe Katzenelson, a senior member of the Białystok municipality and head of the ghetto’s Health Department, to accompany the children instead. Shprung also testified that although Barash’s wife was unwilling to be separated from her husband, Barash urged her to accompany the children and to take care of them until they were released. Barash also gave Shprung some diamonds and gold rings with which to bribe the Germans during the journey, to ensure the children’s safety. In addition to the thirty or so escorts who accompanied the children, there were two hospital orderlies, three nurses from the orphanage, and the three families with entry visas to Palestine. The children were marched toward Polesie train station in pairs, followed by the adults. Bringing up the rear were a number of wagons transporting the younger children.

Documents issued by the Reich Railway Authority state that a transport of 1,260 Jewish children left Białystok on August 24 for Theresienstadt. This figure accords with Citron’s estimate that around 800 children died or were wounded when the orphanage was hit. During the Nazi trials in Germany in the 1960s, it was revealed that the children left Białystok on August 21 or 22 (not August 24 as stated in the Reich Railway Authority documents), in an ordinary passenger train, arriving in Theresienstadt on August 24.

Only two of the women accompanying the children to Theresienstadt—Hadassah Shprung and Helena Wolkenberg—survived. Shprung later reported that “there was bread and water on the trains, and the children were allowed to roam around freely. The Nazi supervisors were in a separate compartment, at the end of the train, and did not bother the children. . . . You would almost think it was a holiday excursion.” Testimony from the trial of
Dibus, chief of Security Police in Bialystok who accompanied the transport, indicates that the children did not suffer hardships during the journey, despite its length.\textsuperscript{116} Shprung testified: “After about three days, the children began to forget the traumas of the past few days. They made friends, chatted with each other, and spoke excitedly of their relatives abroad whom they would soon be seeing. The only jarring note came from the older children who, every so often, approached the escorts anxiously inquiring: ‘What do you think, should we jump from the train?’”\textsuperscript{117}

When the train arrived in Theresienstadt, the children were separated from the adults. Shprung testified, “This meant that the children were effectively alone. We immediately decided to disguise Yoheved, the youngest of the chaperones, taking advantage of the darkness of the carriage. A pinafore was put on her, and her hair was braided to make her look like 15–16. She stayed with the children in the carriage. At least she can be of some help.”\textsuperscript{118} In Theresienstadt the children were placed in special barracks in order to prevent contact with the ghetto residents. The Germans feared that the children might disclose information about Treblinka and other death camps, of which the Theresienstadt population was as yet unaware. That same night (probably August 24), the adults were taken to Auschwitz and killed, apart from twenty who were “selected” to work in the camp.\textsuperscript{119}

Some six weeks later, a transport from Theresienstadt arrived in Auschwitz carrying 1,260 Bialystok children and Czech doctors and nurses. The Auschwitz camp log for October 7, 1943, states: “1,260 Jewish children and 53 Czech chaperones arrived from Theresienstadt in a transport arranged by the Reich Main Security Office. They were killed in gas chambers on the day of their arrival [in the camp].”\textsuperscript{120} Alfred Wetzler (alias Josef Lanik), a prisoner in Auschwitz who worked for the camp archive, drew up a list of the new arrivals from Theresienstadt. In his book \textit{Co Dante Nevidel} (in Czech, \textit{What Dante Never Saw}), Wetzler wrote: “On October 7, 1943, 1,260 children and about 50 adult chaperones were gassed.”\textsuperscript{121}

Although no single factor can explain the collapse of the planned exchange of Jewish children for German prisoners, the intervention of Haj Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, was no doubt a significant contributory factor. Dieter Wisliceny, Adolf Eichmann’s aide, appearing after the war as a witness for the prosecution in the Nuremberg Trials, testified on July 15, 1946, that Eichmann was willing to discuss the transfer of Jewish children to Palestine and that even Himmler was prepared to do so, following overtures by the International Red Cross. At the trial, Wisliceny reported that Eichmann ordered the transfer of 10,000 Jewish children from Poland to Theresienstadt. The order had already been partly implemented
when Wisliceny was suddenly recalled to Berlin, to be informed by Eichmann that Himmler had changed his mind. This change of mind was apparently the result of vehement opposition by the mufti of Jerusalem, who argued that the children would in a few years’ time bolster the Jewish presence in Palestine.\(^{122}\)

Andro Steiner, who together with Gisi Fleischmann and Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandel, belonged to the Slovakian Working Group, a secret Jewish rescue organization, conducted negotiations with Wisliceny in 1943–44. In the summer of 1943, they discussed the possibility of transferring Jewish children from Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary to Palestine. Wisliceny named his price—a large sum of money in dollars. Fleischmann and Rabbi Weissmandel immediately set about raising the money, but were informed by the Joint Distribution Committee and other Jewish organizations that they would not support a plan that helped the enemy. Although Sali Mayer, the Joint’s representative in Switzerland, did send money to Weissmandel in Bratislava, some of the money may not have reached its destination, or the working group may have used it for other purposes. Later, Wisliceny informed Andro Steiner that although one group of Jewish children had already reached Theresienstadt, the children would not be sent to Palestine, because the mufti, who was close to Eichmann, opposed the move.\(^{123}\)

Since the testimonies of Eichmann and Wisliceny are questionable, the most likely explanation for the failure of the plan was Britain’s refusal to go along with it. Thus the Germans achieved exactly what they wanted—to show Britain up in a bad light, as a country unwilling to save Jews, even Jewish children. The exchange plan was subsequently dropped from the German agenda.

The End of Jewish Białystok

On the second day of the *aktion*, the Germans established the small ghetto in the area bordered by Fabryczna, Jurowiecka, Ogrodowa, and Ciepła Streets, to accommodate the 700–1,000 Jews who were responsible for cleaning the factory machinery and collecting raw materials. These included firemen, wagon drivers, porters, and various tradesmen and their families. Also left behind in the small ghetto were leading Judenrat officials such as Barash, Dov Sobotnik, Avraham Limon, Yitzhak Marcus, Rabbi Gedalyah Rosenman, and factory managers. The small ghetto functioned as a kind of makeshift labor camp. Although it was surrounded by a fence,
it was not heavily guarded, and Jews who were still hiding in the large
ghetto made forays into the small ghetto, in search of food.¹²⁴

Even after the deportation, the Germans continued looking for Jews
who were still hiding, using increasingly sophisticated techniques, such as
cutting off the electricity and water supplies until conditions became un-
bearable. The main problem facing the Jews in hiding was obtaining food.
There was also a constant fear of discovery. The Ukrainians who carried out
the hunt did a thorough job, checking attics and cellars and sitting for hours
in abandoned houses. They even examined food remains in garbage bins in
an attempt to track down Jews who were hiding.¹²⁵ Up into October 1943,
hundreds of Jews were caught and jailed. Some were summarily shot, while
others were taken to the forests before being disposed of.¹²⁶ In time, the
number of Jews caught in this way dwindled.

One of the Jews left in the ghetto was Eva Kracowska who, until No-
vember 1, 1943, hid in an attic room with two of her friends. In her testi-
mony she explained that each night one of them went hunting for scraps of
food, until one of them was shot. Although they managed to drag him up
to the attic, he died a few days later. On November 1, Kracowska managed
to escape to the forest, where she made contact with the partisans.¹²⁷ Lisa
Shtrauch also hid for three months in a bunker on Ciepła Street, with
eleven other Jews. When their hiding place was discovered, they were jailed
for about ten weeks, after which they were taken to Stutthof and thence to
Auschwitz.¹²⁸

Life in the small ghetto was rife with tension, with the Germans pa-
trolling the area every few hours. Barash was warned that if even one Jew
was found without a work permit, the entire population of 700 would be
immediately killed.¹²⁹ The Jews in the small ghetto heard from the wagon
drivers that the factory machinery and raw materials were being loaded
onto trains, and taken to Lublin. They still hoped that they, too, would be
taken along with the machinery, and that work would be found for them in
Lublin, as promised. In early September 1943, a rumor spread through the
small ghetto that now that the deportations had ended, all remaining Jews
would be taken to Lublin. Of an estimated 1,000 Jews living at the time in
the small ghetto, about 700 had work permits and 300 were “illegal.”¹³⁰

On September 8, 1943, the Jews of the small ghetto and several hundred
Jews from the city’s jail were put on a large train, with thirty-one cars, trans-
porting vital equipment from Białystok to Lublin. The train traveled via
Małkinia, reaching Lublin the same day.¹³¹ Like their fellow Jews who had
arrived in Lublin some three weeks earlier, the Jews in this transport were
also put through a “selection,” after which they were sent to camps in
Majdanek, Poniatowa, Bliźyn, and Trawniki. In early September 1943, mothers and children arriving from Białystok were killed in Majdanek, in a massacre that resembled the massacre of Jewish children from the Warsaw ghetto in May 1943. No details are available on how the Białystok children were killed in Majdanek, although we know that they were not sent directly to the gas chambers but were kept waiting outside the camp until nightfall, when they were exterminated.132

The uprisings in the Białystok ghetto and in the Treblinka death camp in August 1943 and the activities of the partisan movements in the East, occasioned a swift change in German infighting for control of the labor camps. The German authorities knew full well that now, as a result, Himmler would be likely to speed up the pace of the Jewish deportations, and that is what happened in September 1943.133 Hitler’s order of September 2, 1943, due to take effect on November 1, 1943, gave Albert Speer exclusive authority over military production, including personnel recruitment, thereby totally ending plans for the development of the Ostindustrie.134 Five days later, the SS Economics Office preempted this move by taking control of ten Jewish labor camps in the Lublin District, including Poniatowa and Trawniki, which contained thousands of Jews from Białystok. On October 22, Oswald Pohl, head of the SS Economics Office, ordered eight labor camps, including Poniatowa and Trawniki, to be transferred to his jurisdiction.135 A week later, however, on October 29, Speer issued an ordinance on the division of functions in the war economy, transferring responsibility for manpower recruitment for the war economy to the sole supervision of the Armaments Ministry.136 This meant that the Ostindustrie would lose its Jewish workforce, effectively cutting short its existence.

It is possible that Himmler, seeing that he was about to lose Jewish manpower for the Ostindustrie in any case, decided, in a fit of pique, to speed up the destruction of the Jews as part of the Final Solution. No doubt the fact that Globocnik was transferred from Lublin to Trieste, the revolt that erupted in Sobibor in mid-October 1943, the army’s industrial boycott of labor camps owned by the Ostindustrie, and Speer’s order of late October 1943 all strengthened Himmler’s resolve to liquidate the Jews in the camps of Majdanek, Trawniki, and Poniatowa. True to form, on November 3, 1943, in Operation Harvest (Aktion Erntefest), a major action was unleashed in these camps, during which 42,000 Jews (of which 11,000–15,000 were from Białystok) were killed. During the three-day action, the Germans killed thousands of skilled Jewish laborers, most of them from the Warsaw and Białystok ghettos, who were working for the German war economy.137

It is not clear in which of the Lublin camps Barash, Rabbi Rosenman,
and the other Judenrat officials were on that fateful day. All we know is that they were sent to Lublin in the last transport that left Białystok in September 1943, and that none of them survived. Presumably they, too, were killed in Operation Harvest, together with most of Białystok’s Jews.

Officially, the final aktion in Białystok lasted a month, ending on September 16, 1943. After the last transport left Białystok on September 8, the ghetto was transferred to the administration of a trust. About forty SS men were installed in the Judenrat’s former Labor Department on Kupiecka Street to guard the ghetto and hunt down the odd Jew still in hiding. The ghetto was divided into two sections. A gate was built at the junction of Jurowiecka and Kupiecka Streets, and all the windows of the houses overlooking Jurowiecka Street were boarded up. Vacant lots were enclosed by fences, probably to sever contact between those in hiding. A private German company was appointed to remove any remaining Jewish property from the ghetto, a task that was methodically and efficiently performed by Belorussian and Ukrainian workers under a Polish foreman. The mop-up operation began on the eastern side of the ghetto, in the area bordered by Fabryczna, Ciepła, and Nowogródzka Streets, and proceeded to the western side. All property removed during the operation was sent to Germany. During the operation, which ended on October 16, 1943, the workers thoroughly inspected all attics and cellars, and any Jews who were discovered were taken to the city jail. Wooden objects, pictures, books, and documents for which the Germans had no use were burned in the courtyards of the houses. When they finished, the ghetto was an empty shell.

Most of the Jews in jail were taken to one of the nearby forests and shot or sent to Stutthof. Several dozen were left languishing in the city jail until May 1944, when they were recruited for Operation 1005—a special operation designed to erase the traces of the mass graves of tens of thousands of citizens in the Białystok District who had been murdered by the Germans.139

Thus, the entire Jewish community of Białystok, which only two years earlier had numbered 50,000 souls, was destroyed.
Chapter 9

A Comparative Study of the Białystok Ghetto and Other Ghettos

The body of research on the Holocaust period makes a comparative study of the Jewish ghettos possible. Examining the ghettos in Warsaw, Łódź, Vilna, and others in Eastern Europe offers insight into the focus of this study—the Białystok ghetto.

The Establishment of the Ghettos

The first point to note is that from the outbreak of war in 1939 until Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Białystok was under Soviet rule. During the twenty-one months of Soviet rule, many Jewish young people were swept along by the spirit of communism, seeing in it the promise of a better future. The German occupation in the summer of 1941 took both the general and Jewish population unawares. This time, unlike the beginning of the war, the Einsatzgruppen had been given instructions to murder “the enemy of Nazism”—namely Jews and Communists. Consequently, massacres by the Einsatzgruppen, German police battalions, or other auxiliary forces were common occurrences in localities taken over by the German army. Although in 1939, too, the Einsatzgruppen had massacred Poles and Jews, these had been small-scale operations rather than part of a grand master plan. In 1939, the Germans had not yet devised the Final Solution to the Jewish Question, and the Einsatzgruppen were still subordinate to the Wehrmacht. In 1941, however, Himmler was no longer dependent on the Wehrmacht, and the Einsatzgruppen were clearly bent on a policy of genocide, directed primarily against Jews.

From the point of view of the Jews, the 1941 German occupation was completely different from the Soviet annexation of 1939. The occupation of the Eastern Territories in 1941 and the massive scale on which the Jews
there were murdered came as a huge shock. From then on, the Jews lived a life marked by loss and grief. Their situation bore no comparison with that of the Jews in the Generalgouvernement and in the Western Territories, which were annexed to the Reich in 1939. In the latter, despite German instructions that Jews were to set up a Judenrat and wear a yellow patch, it was several months, or even years, before the ghettos were established. In the territories captured after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, on the other hand, the ghettos were set up immediately.

The first attempt to set up a ghetto in Warsaw took place on November 4, 1939, about two months after the outbreak of war and more than a month after the city’s occupation. On that date, the SS and Gestapo summoned a number of Judenrat members to an extraordinary meeting, informing them that the city’s military commander ordered all the 300,000 Jews living in Warsaw to move into a randomly selected area in the space of three days. Rumor of the establishment of a ghetto spread like wildfire, striking panic and despair into the hearts of the Jews. A Judenrat delegation, under Judenrat head Adam Czerniakow, attempted to thwart the plan. Although he did not succeed, the establishment of the ghetto was postponed due to differences of opinion between the army and the Gestapo.

In February 1940, the Germans resumed their plan to set up a ghetto. This time, the area that was supposed to serve as the ghetto was the eastern sector of the city, across the Vistula River in the Praga suburb. However, opposition by the municipality caused the plan to be deferred again, but not for long. This time, the Germans planned to set up two ghettos, in different parts of the city. The transfer of the Jews to the ghetto was set for July 1, 1940, but once again deferred, this time at the behest of the governor of the Generalgouvernement in Kraków. In late August, the proposal was once again raised, this time by the German Department of Health, on the grounds that the Jews were a health hazard and therefore had to be quarantined. At this juncture, the German intention was merely to set up a Jewish neighborhood that would not be completely cut off from its surroundings. However, when the Germans realized that it would take four to five months to implement such a plan, they abandoned it in favor of ghettoization. The ghetto was to be set up in a residential area, which had already been designated in March 1940 as an infected zone, constituting more than 4 percent of the city’s area.\(^1\)

Finally, on October 2, 1940, the governor of the Warsaw District issued an official order for the establishment of the ghetto. A week or so later, Czerniakow was handed a list of the streets that were to be included in the ghetto. Due to contradictory information regarding the ghetto’s bound-
aries, and the Poles’ claim that the establishment of the ghetto would cause tens of thousands of Poles to be uprooted, the Germans allowed the Judenrat and the Poles to negotiate the borders of the ghetto. The original deadline for completion of the evacuation was October 31, but since this did not allow sufficient time to transfer and rehouse tens of thousands of Jews and Poles, it was extended to November 15. The Jews, meanwhile, had no idea of whether the Germans were intending to confine them in an open or closed ghetto, and German silence on this matter bred rumor and speculation. The answer was not long in coming. On November 16, when the Jews assembled at the ghetto gates in order to go about their business as usual, their way was barred by German and Polish sentries.

Unlike Warsaw, which was part of the Generalgouvernement, the Germans annexed Łódź to the Reich in October 1939, incorporating it into the Warthegau District (West Poland). At first the Germans intended incorporating Łódź into the Generalgouvernement, but in the end Hitler decided to annex Łódź to the German Reich, as requested by Arthur Karl Greiser, governor of Warthegau, and by Łódź’s sizable German population. To all intents and purposes, Łódź became a German city. It was the Germans’ intention to evacuate Łódź’s 230,000 Jews, as it had done to other areas annexed to the Reich, and to constrain and dilute the Polish population. At the same time, the local authorities began planning the establishment of a provisional ghetto, in which to isolate the city’s Jews. A document signed by district commander Friedrich Übelhör, dated December 10, 1939, refers to the establishment of two Jewish concentrations. The first, located in the northern part of the city with its dense Jewish population, was also to absorb unemployed Jews from other neighborhoods. The second ghetto, whose location was yet to be decided, was supposed to cater to Jewish artisans, who would be housed in special, guarded barracks. From that point on, preparations to set up the ghetto were set in motion. Throughout, Übelhör related to the Jews as to a plague. Indeed, this was the leitmotif of several documents in connection with the establishment of the ghetto and the isolation of Łódź’s Jews, as had been the case with the Warsaw ghetto.

In early January 1940, the Germans discussed the possibility of resettling 3,000 Germans from the Baltic states in spacious Jewish homes, whose occupants would be transferred to the ghetto. In mid-January, the local authorities discussed the technical aspects of setting up the ghetto, referring in this meeting to only one area and making no mention of barracks for Jewish artisans. Simultaneously, and without prior warning, the Germans began evicting Jews from their homes. On February 8, an official order announced the establishment of the ghetto and specified its boundaries. Two
of the city’s most dilapidated areas were chosen for this purpose: the Bałuty neighborhood and the old city, both in the northern sector of the city. Germans and Poles who resided in these places were ordered to vacate the premises by the end of the month, while the Jews who were supposed to move into the ghetto were ordered to leave their possessions in their apartments and hand over the keys to the janitors. Although the Germans intended implementing the transfer in an orderly fashion according to a pre-arranged schedule, when they saw that the evacuation was not proceeding fast enough they began arresting Jews off the streets. One night in March 1940, armed Germans entered the homes of Jews in Łódź’s main street, killing hundreds of Jews. This and other atrocities perpetrated by the Germans convinced the Jews of the seriousness of the Germans’ intentions, and by the end of the month most Jews had moved into the ghetto. In the same month the Germans completed the ghetto fence. In early April, the Jewish cemetery in the Marishin neighborhood was attached to the ghetto. The ghetto under the leadership of Chaim Rumkowski, head of the Judenrat, was finally sealed on April 30, 1940.5

It is important to bear in mind that in September 1939, several months before the ghetto’s establishment, many Jews began fleeing Łódź with the flow of refugees, and in the space of a few months, tens of thousands of Jews had left the city. Consequently, when the ghetto was set up, only about 164,000 Jews were left. Ironically, the Łódź ghetto, the first in occupied Poland, which was meant to be a provisional ghetto, outlived all the ghettos of Eastern Europe. Shortly after its establishment, the ghetto became institutionalized, and the disciplined way in which the Germans ran it became legendary. Government representatives and public figures, both Jewish and gentile, were sent to Łódź to learn about the ghetto’s structure and the organizational and administrative methods employed by the Germans.

Thus we see that the Germans were in no hurry to establish ghettos in the Generalgouvernement and the Reich-annexed areas in 1939. After Operation Barbarossa, however, in the summer of 1941, ghettos were swiftly set up in most of the occupied territories, in order to facilitate implementation of the Final Solution to the Jewish Question and to facilitate the exploitation of Jewish skilled labor for the war effort.

Vilna, which at the outbreak of war in 1939 was part of the Polish Republic, was annexed to Lithuania in the summer of 1940. At the time of its conquest by the Germans on June 24, 1941, there were about 60,000 Jews living in the city. After some ten days, when the Jewish community leaders met to elect a Judenrat, the soldiers of Einsatzkommando 9, who had entered the city two days earlier, began dragging Jews off the streets or from
their homes. The Jews were jailed and later taken to Ponary, some 10 kilometers away, where they were killed. That month, a total of 5,000 Jewish men were taken to Ponary and killed. The Jews who were left behind knew nothing of their fate.

On August 31, 1941, the Germans, in a four-day operation, evacuated all the Jews living in the old city center, where the ghetto was to be established, and sent 8,000 of them, including most members of the Judenrat, to Ponary, where they were murdered. Four days later, on September 4, the non-Jewish inhabitants of the area were evicted in a two-day operation, and two ghettos were set up, on either side of a street that acted as a dividing line. A wooden fence was erected around the ghettos, and all windows or doors overlooking the Aryan side were sealed. On September 6, the city’s remaining 47,000 Jews were summarily transferred to the two ghettos, without prior warning. They were given no assistance in transporting their goods and were not allowed to take furniture. About 30,000 Jews were moved to the first ghetto, 10,000 to the second, and another 6,000 Jews were taken to Ponary, where they were killed. The first ghetto was designed for skilled artisans, who had work permits, and their families, and the second was designated for people without work permits, and their families. A mere three weeks after the transfer, the Germans returned to carry out aktionen in the two ghettos. On October 1, 1941, about 2,000 Jews were deported to Ponary, and in the course of the month, the second ghetto was liquidated. The aktionen continued in the first ghetto until late December 1941, in line with the German plan of cutting back the working population in the ghetto to 12,000. In the space of half a year, the Germans murdered some 40,000 Jews from Vilna. About 20,000 Jews remained behind, of which some 12,000 were legal (with work permits) and 8,000 illegal (Jews without work permits who were hiding in the ghetto). Thereafter, the ghetto became a kind of labor camp, and survived as such until the spring of 1943.

Białystok, like Vilna, also belonged to the territories conquered by the Germans in June 1941. However, unlike Vilna, two weeks after the beginning of the German occupation of Białystok, the murder of local Jews ceased. On July 26, 1941, a month after the occupation began, the Judenrat announced that the military authorities in Białystok had ordered them to set up a Jewish ghetto in the city. Ephraim Barash’s assertion that he had tried to dissuade the authorities from setting up the ghetto in the run-down area originally assigned for this purpose, indicates that he already knew of the plan. Owing to his intercession, the German military authorities assigned a different area for the ghetto, with more streets and larger houses. From the available sources, it would seem that the transfer of Poles from,
and Jews to, the ghetto area took place according to plan. The Judenrat’s strict housing policy ensured the orderly absorption of Jews in the ghetto. Five days later, on August 1, 1941, the gates of the Białystok ghetto were closed on its 43,000 inhabitants.

The above shows that there were fundamental differences in the way the ghettos were established in the territories occupied in 1939, and in the territories occupied in 1941.

The Early Days of the Ghettos

Unlike the Jewish communities in the Eastern Territories, whose populations were massacred during the occupation in 1941, the systematic massacre of Jews in the Generalgouvernement and in the Western Territories annexed to the Reich began only in early 1942, reaching a peak in the summer and autumn of that year. For example, the deportation of 300,000 Jews from Warsaw to Treblinka began in late July 1942, almost three years after the outbreak of war. In Łódź, the deportation of Jews to Chelmno began in mid-January 1942, more than two years after the outbreak of war. Finally, the deportation of Jews from the Lublin District to Belżec and Sobibór took place about two-and-a-half years after the German occupation began. Although the Jews in the Generalgouvernement and in the territories annexed to the Reich lived under terrible conditions and were subject to discriminatory and degrading laws, they were not in any immediate danger of extinction, as were the Jews of Vilna, Kovno, Białystok, Minsk, Lwów, and other places, where massacres were daily occurrences in 1941.

Also worth noting is that the massacre of Jews in the territories that were occupied during the first stage of Operation Barbarossa varied from one place to another. The massacre of the Jews of Vilna has already been described. In Białystok, the Germans burned about 800 Jews live in the local synagogue on the first day of the occupation, and during the following two weeks shot about 6,000 Jews dead in a location outside the city. In Kovno, Lithuania, the Germans murdered about 20,000 Jews—just over half the Jewish population—in four months. And yet in Grodno (near Białystok), the Germans left 20,000 Jews alive. The reason for these inconsistent approaches was that the decision regarding the massacre of Jews was largely left to the initiative of local German commander, particularly the Reich Main Security Office representative. For example, in a report dated December 1941 on the destruction of Lithuanian Jewry, Karl Jäger, the commander of Einsatzkommando 3 in Einsatzgruppe A, explained that
although he had already destroyed 85 percent of Lithuanian Jewry, he had trouble disposing of the remaining 15 percent, who were *Arbeitsjüden* (Jewish laborers), due to opposition by the local administration and the Wehrmacht.8

Unlike Vilna, where only two months after the occupation began in late September 1941, Jews testified that they were being led like sheep to the slaughter, or Kovno, where thousands of Jews were killed in the forts surrounding the city, the Jews of Białystok were totally ignorant of the fate of the thousands of men who had been dragged from their homes during the first two weeks of the occupation. For months on end, the mothers, widows, and orphans of these men assumed that they had been taken to forced labor camps in some remote location and that one day they would return.

The traumatic events that took place in Białystok from the first day of the German occupation helped determine the way of life of the Jewish community and the policy of the local Jewish leadership. After the wave of massacres at the start of the occupation, more than 40,000 Jews remained in Białystok. Apart from several thousand who were evacuated to Pružany in October 1941, most of whom later returned, the ghetto Jews lived undisturbed for about a year and a half, until the *aktion* of February 1943. The Judenrat, which was founded even before the establishment of the ghetto, began regulating the life of Białystok’s Jews with the intention of making life as “normal” as was possible, under the harsh occupation conditions. Despite the terrible trauma the community had experienced during the early days of the German invasion, the relative peace that followed kindled the hope that it could continue unscathed, until the end of the occupation.

The traumatic events of the early days of the German occupation left a deep imprint on Barash and fostered his resolve to do all he could to prevent a repetition of the atrocities he had witnessed. Consequently, Barash tried to build up a “good” relationship—inasmuch as that was possible—with the German officials in charge of the ghetto, whom he believed were largely responsible for the ghetto’s fate. Simultaneously, he strove to make the ghetto economically indispensable to the Germans, thereby improving its chances of physical and economic survival.

This way of thinking was not unique to Barash. The heads of a number of Judenräte that operated according to strategic considerations thought in a similar fashion. Most notable were Jacob Gens of Vilna, Chaim Rumkowski of Łódź, and even Moshe Merin of Zagłębia (Będzin and Sosnowiec—Upper Silesia). Each in his own way managed to build up a special relationship with the local German authorities while simultaneously ensuring an efficient workforce as a guarantee, albeit provisional, of survival in the pres-
ent and hope for the future. These Jewish leaders were all convinced that they were right, and that history would corroborate this.

The Warsaw Judenrat, which tried to avoid intervention in the Jews’ internal affairs, also refrained from interfering in the Jews’ economic life. Czerniakow supported a liberal approach and, despite the circumstances, advocated free enterprise. His approach was diametrically opposed to the strict authoritarian methods adopted by Rumkowski in Łódź. In Warsaw, members of the Judenrat set up a Production Department, encouraging Jews to seek employment in the factories established by the Germans in the ghetto, unlike the Łódź ghetto, where industry was concentrated in the hands of the Judenrat and run mainly by the Jewish factory owners. This difference between the Warsaw and Łódź ghettos was largely the result of the different conditions that prevailed in the two ghettos. Although the Jewish leadership had a significant part to play in developments within the ghetto, each Judenrat head had a different relationship with the Germans, depending on local conditions. This relationship affected all aspects of economic life in the ghettos.9

Barash had one single-minded goal throughout the ghetto’s existence—to save the Jews from deportation and destruction. From his point of view, the end justified the means. He therefore put all his energies into industrial production for the German army and into building up a relationship based on mutual trust with Germans who were interested in turning the ghetto into an industrial compound. Jacob Gens, head of the Vilna Judenrat, had an identical approach, believing that hard labor could buy life and that ties with the local Germans could guarantee safety. Unlike Barash, however, Gens did not have the backing of the Jewish public in Vilna, especially after his notorious stint as head of the Jewish police during the first year of the ghetto’s existence. Unlike Barash, who was humble in his dealings with the ghetto Jews, Gens was arrogant and never lost an opportunity to underscore his own importance. The above notwithstanding, Gens’s world view was similar to that of Barash, and he too pinned his hopes on the “miracle of work.”10

Although Gens, Barash, Rumkowski (ultimately), and Moshe Merin were all convinced that work was a safeguard against deportation and destruction, and might even bring about their salvation, Barash was the only leader who had the unconditional backing of the ghetto public. Barash’s mild character and pleasant manner deflected any criticism, either from his colleagues in the Judenrat or from the ghetto public. Even Mordecai Tenenbaum, leader of the Jewish underground in the Białystok ghetto, who might have been expected to oppose Barash’s policy, never accused Barash of lead-
ing the public astray. On the contrary, in February 1943, Tenenbaum wrote that the situation on the front was such that “a radical about-face could take place any day”\textsuperscript{11} and probably also believed that industrial production could buy them vital time.

Haika Grosman’s criticism of Barash in her book, written in the late 1940s, must be seen in the context of a certain atmosphere fostered by survivors (mainly members of the youth movements) in Israel after the war. These survivors, former members of the underground, held the Judenräte heads responsible for the failure of their plans and blamed them for planting false seeds of hope in the ghetto populations and leading them astray. Another critic of Barash was the Polish historian Szymon Datner, a survivor of the Białystok ghetto who during the occupation aligned himself with the Communists, Barash’s staunch opponents. Toward the end of their lives, both Grosman and Datner retracted their criticism of Barash and admitted, independently, that in retrospect they would not have blamed him.\textsuperscript{12}

Today we know that in many cases, the policy of “salvation through work”—both in the ghettos and in the forced labor camps—almost worked. The outstanding example of a “working ghetto” in which thousands of Jews were saved was Łódź. Many Jews believed that labor would save them from death, as the historian Emanuel Ringelblum wrote in May 1942: “Community activists have assured us that the danger of deportation was averted thanks to the workshops which produce goods for the German army. Similarly in Vilna, Kovno, and dozens of other ghettos . . . only those who worked directly for the Germans remained alive.”\textsuperscript{13} For a long time, the Jews in the ghettos assumed that the negotiating talents of the Judenräte heads, combined with an intensive work regime, would ensure their survival. Indeed, at the start of the Warsaw occupation, some Jews blamed Czerniakow for failing to recruit the entire ghetto population for productive work and praised Rumkowski’s hard-line approach as being farsighted.

Barash, like Gens and Rumkowski, was aware of developments on the front and believed that the ghetto’s industrial productivity would buy them time until the liberation. Indeed, Rumkowski almost succeeded, since the Soviets had reached the outskirts of Łódź when the Germans sent tens of thousands of Jews to Auschwitz in August 1944. Some Jews in Łódź were left alive because the Germans still required a workforce and also because the extermination at Birkenau ceased about two months after their arrival. The Jews of Białystok were not so lucky. In the summer of 1943, thousands of them were sent to the labor camps in Lublin, ostensibly to augment the Jewish workforce there. However, on November 3, 1943, Himmler decided he had no more use for them and ordered them all killed. The Jews of
Vilna, who also believed they would be saved thanks to their industrial productivity, were mostly deported to work camps in Estonia and Latvia in August and September 1943. Only a few survived. For the Jews in the East, the swift advance of the Soviet forces had different implications than it did for the Jews in the Łódź ghetto or in the forced labor camps in central and western Poland. Neither Gens nor Barash could have known this in advance.

The Underground Movements

A comparison between the underground movements in the various ghettos reveals substantial differences. In several ghettos, both in Poland and in the territories occupied in 1941, underground organizations came into being in early 1942. These organizations had a dual aim: armed resistance within the ghetto and escape to the surrounding forests. The underground movements were a response to the growing body of information on the massacre of Jews and to aktionen launched by the Germans in the various ghettos.

Following the massacre of the Jews of Vilna in the early months of the occupation, some recognized that the destruction of Lithuanian Jewry was part of a larger plan to exterminate all of European Jewry. So it is not surprising that an underground was established as early as January 1942. The founders of this underground—members of the youth movements—urged Jews not to go “like sheep to the slaughter” but to take up arms against the Germans during subsequent deportations. Another remarkable feature of this underground movement was that in a relatively short amount of time, it managed to unite youngsters from all shades of the political spectrum, who normally held irreconcilable views. In a special manifesto, the underground declared that its main goal was to prepare itself for a large-scale armed resistance in the face of any attempt to destroy the ghetto.14 The leaders of this organization recommended that similar underground movements be set up in all the ghettos, in the spirit of the Vilna underground. Accordingly, it sent couriers to all parts of occupied Poland, to inform the people of the wholesale massacre of Jews and of the establishment of the underground in Vilna.

In Warsaw, which was far from Vilna, controversy raged for many months over how to interpret information on the murder of Jews in the East and in other places in the Generalgouvernement, which filtered into the ghetto in the early months of 1942. Only in late July 1942, a week after the mass daily deportations of Jews from the ghetto, did an underground movement finally evolve. This underground decided to prepare itself for the day of
reckoning. When eight months later, in April 1943, the Germans decided to liquidate the ghetto, the underground responded by launching an armed uprising, with the participation of members of the Revisionist underground and the ghetto public. Note that the Warsaw ghetto revolt was the largest uprising in Europe organized and implemented by Jews during the German occupation. The Warsaw ghetto uprising not only made an enormous impact at the time; it entered the pantheon of twentieth-century heroic feats, as one of the outstanding events of the Second World War.

Bialystok’s underground differed from those of other ghettos. Unlike Warsaw, where the Jews trusted the underground, especially after the January 1943 evacuation, the Jews in Bialystok considered the underground a makeshift, chaotic, and ultimately useless organization. It is important to remember that for two whole years the ghetto had been under Barash’s spell, believing that work would save them. This fact explains why, during the evacuation, the underground had so little popular backing. “In vain our comrades stood at the corners” wrote Grosman, “in vain they closed the three bridges over the Biała in a futile attempt to turn them back to their homes. They would not listen; they closed their ears to our appeals.”

In Vilna, although the ghetto residents were aware of the existence of the underground, after the Yitzhak Wittenberg incident in the summer of 1943 the underground was considered a dangerous organization that jeopardized the ghetto’s stability. Most of the ghetto residents disagreed with the underground’s methods so that when, in September 1943, it became clear that the Germans were about to liquidate the ghetto (after the Gestapo murdered the Judenrat head, Jacob Gens), the underground leadership, under Abba Kovner of Hashomer Hatzair, realized that it could not count on the masses to revolt. Consequently, it decided to abandon the idea of an uprising in the ghetto and focus on escaping to the forests. Accordingly, it sent about eighty of its members to the forests of Rudniki. Thus, the same underground leadership that had, in late December 1941, urged the ghetto to rebel and that, by January 1942, had its own Jewish fighting organization, chose to abandon the ghetto and its thousands of inhabitants in their time of need and escape to the forests.

In Warsaw, on the other hand, the mass deportation in the summer of 1942 showed that the partisan option was not viable. The underground organization that emerged during the mass deportation expanded until it took the place of the Judenrat, after the suicide of its head, Adam Czerniakow. Under the new circumstances of the “small ghetto,” and given the enormous repercussions of the January 1943 revolt, most of the ghetto’s 50,000 residents supported the idea of armed resistance. Not only did they
consider themselves part of the underground but they considered the leaders of the underground as the ghetto's true leaders. During the four months between the January revolt and the May uprising, an alliance grew up between the Jewish Fighting Organization and the Jewish masses who were still left in the Warsaw ghetto. Mordechai Anielewicz and his comrades prepared the ghetto population for the revolt during the final evacuation, knowing that they could count on widespread support. It never occurred to them that there could be any alternative to fighting. They did not see fighting as a way out of their predicament but rather as an act of human dignity for Jews and mankind. They never once abandoned the idea of armed resistance, although they knew they would die in the process.

In Kraków, the Jewish Fighting Organization considered the chances of an armed struggle in the small ghetto nonexistent, and abandoned the idea right from the start. Instead, the underground shifted the focus of the struggle to the Aryan side of the city, where it perpetrated acts of sabotage. Attempts by the underground to develop partisan activity around Kraków met with difficulties, mainly because of the hostility of local AK groups, which were subordinate to the Polish Government-in-Exile in London and rejected Jewish partisan activity.

In the Kovno ghetto, the Communists, together with the Zionists, led the struggle against the Germans. In 1943, the two groups set up a joint framework for action and partisan activity. The idea of armed resistance within the ghetto never even arose. On the contrary, the underground devoted all its energy to creating ties with the partisan movement in Lithuania, with the aim of establishing a base in the forests of Lithuania that would absorb the Jews from Kovno. Underground activities in Kovno were backed by the Jewish police and took place with the knowledge and support of Elhanan Elkes, head of the Judenrat.

The underground of the Minsk ghetto, set up in August 1941, about a month after the German occupation of the city, was made up entirely of Communists—not surprisingly, since Minsk had been part of the Soviet Union from 1920. Right from the start, the underground decided that its goal was to escape to the forest and fight alongside the partisans. Soon the Judenrat head, Eliyahu Mushkin, and the commander of the Jewish police, Ziama Serbiansky, began cooperating with the underground. No doubt this was because they considered themselves loyal Soviet citizens who were duty-bound to help the Soviet Union in its struggle against the Germans and they wished to save their own lives and those of a large percentage of the ghetto population. For many months, the underground in Minsk operated freely, establishing direct contact with the partisans in the forests, in
order to set up its own independent base of Jewish partisans. The underground in Minsk placed the emphasis on survival, and like the underground movements in Kovno, Kraków, and other ghettos, rejected the idea of armed struggle inside the ghetto almost from the start. Almost all the Jews of Minsk were aware of the existence of the underground, and the fact that about 10,000 Jews escaped to the forests was a tribute to the underground’s popularity with the ghetto population.

Although escaping to the forests was an option in Białystok, Tenenbaum had never been enthusiastic about the idea, for reasons both pragmatic (he did not believe it possible to survive in the surrounding forests) and ideological (he sincerely believed in the importance of armed struggle inside the ghetto). The Białystok underground, unlike other active underground movements, was shrouded in secrecy, and most of those in the ghetto were unaware of its existence. This situation helps explain why the Jews in the Białystok ghetto were unprepared and why, when the underground called on them to resist, most had no idea what they were supposed to do.

Moreover, the Białystok underground was hampered by a lack of unity. It is hard to understand why the two underground movements were unable to overcome their ideological differences and unite, even after tens of thousands of Jews in the district, including ten thousand Jews from Białystok, were sent to Treblinka and Auschwitz between November 1942 and February 1943. Unlike the Communists of Vilna and Warsaw, who set aside their differences and joined ranks with the Zionist movements in order to fight together for a common cause, the Communists in Białystok were unable to abandon their isolationist and conservative approach. Only when the ghetto faced annihilation, more than a year after the underground’s establishment, did the Communists decide to unite with a Zionist Socialist movement such as Dror. By then it was already too late. After such a long period of paralysis, the united underground found it hard to devise a common strategy in the face of the ghetto’s imminent liquidation. Accordingly, when the evacuation began two weeks later, the underground was unprepared, and its leaders were unable to organize anything other than a spontaneous, improvised uprising.

Unlike the Vilna underground, which was prepared for a revolt but which, for reasons outlined above, decided to abandon the ghetto and escape to the forests, most members of the Białystok underground decided to stay in the ghetto. Despite the lack of a strategic plan, and despite the lack of cooperation on the part of the ghetto public, which blindly followed Barash, several dozen underground fighters still conducted a face-to-face battle with the Germans. All of them fell. This revolt was to engrave itself
on the collective memory as a heroic attempt to safeguard Jewish honor and dignity.

The Jewish Police

In attempting to compare the various ghettos, one cannot ignore the role the Jewish police (Jüdischer Ordnungsdienst) played in ghetto life. Shortly after their establishment, the Judenräte in Eastern Europe were ordered to organize a Jewish police force, usually even before the establishment of the ghettos. Unlike the Judenräte, which enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy, the Jewish police force was totally subordinate to the Germans. The Germans instructed the Judenräte on desirable characteristics for potential candidates for the force, such as good health, military experience, and a secondary school education.16

In September 1941, Anatol Fried, Judenrat head of ghetto 1 in Vilna, appointed Jacob Gens, a former captain of the Lithuanian army who had arrived in Vilna in the summer of 1940, as chief of Jewish police. Gens's deputy was a Revisionist, and other members of Betar were appointed to key positions within the police force (Betar had a high proportion of men with military training and of officer rank). Soon, Gens and the Jewish police took over areas of activity that were, rightly speaking, under the Judenrat's jurisdiction. This phenomenon was not peculiar to Vilna but was common in other ghettos, too. Fried, an assimilated Jew who was unpopular both with the Germans and with the ghetto public, was not suited to the post of Judenrat head. It was he who enabled Gens to assume control of the ghetto institutions and to become the supreme authority in the ghetto. In practice, Gens, with the Germans' knowledge, vied with Fried for control of the ghetto. While Fried was still head of the Judenrat, the Germans issued instructions that clearly showed that Gens and his police force were the uncontested rulers of the ghetto and that the Judenrat had no authority to replace him.

Gens, dissatisfied with the powers granted him, attempted to strengthen his ties and standing with political groups and intellectuals within the ghetto. As a step in this direction, he held soirees in his apartment for Jews from the entire political spectrum, ranging from Revisionists to Bundists and Communists. His plan worked. In July 1942, in a dramatic move, the Germans informed Fried that the Judenrat would be dissolved and that Gens would forthwith be head of the ghetto. Fried, whose organizational talents were recognized by the Germans, was appointed Gens's deputy. One
would not be wrong in assuming that the Germans believed that the appointment of Gens would enhance the ghetto’s work potential,\textsuperscript{17} and that in Gens, they had a faithful lackey.\textsuperscript{18}

In Łódź, Rumkowski recruited former members of the underworld from the infamous Bałuty neighborhood, as members of his police force. Among the hundreds of policemen selected, the most notorious was Shalom Hertzberg, a hardened criminal, who imposed a reign of terror on the inmates of the ghetto’s main prison. Hertzberg was not averse to stealing from the ghetto’s residents, but even when he was caught and imprisoned, Rumkowski soon obtained his release. In the summer of 1940, the ghetto residents organized protest demonstrations against Rumkowski, accusing him of impoverishing and starving the public. The Jewish police, with Rumkowski’s acquiescence, cracked down on the demonstrators, kicking them with their heavy boots. From that point on, the Jewish police were an object of hatred for the ghetto Jews. Rumkowski never abandoned his belief that only a group of violent thugs could impose order on the ghetto, silence his opponents, and strengthen his standing.\textsuperscript{19} Although criminal police operated in other ghettos, too, only in Łódź did they enjoy the support of the Judenrat head himself. In other places, the criminal police operated under the auspices of the Gestapo, and the Judenräte were powerless to stop them. Rumkowski’s support of criminal police had an enormous bearing on his relationship with the Jewish public.

Rumkowski cynically exploited the Jewish police for his own ends, at the expense of the ghetto public. Evidently he did not believe that he could win over the ghetto public or decrease the opposition by easing the lot of the people under his care. Although he had the authority to appoint honest men to the police force, he clung to his belief that violence and force were the right way to rule the wretched and impotent public. During another spate of demonstrations in the ghetto in March 1941, Rumkowski ordered the Jewish police to crack down on the demonstrators with savage cruelty. Many Jews were injured and jailed, hundreds were expelled from the ghetto, and many were dismissed from their jobs, effectively condemning them to death by starvation. Hatred of the Jewish police in Łódź peaked in 1942, following the cruelty and brutality with which the Jewish police organized the deportations from the ghetto.\textsuperscript{20}

On the behavior of the Jewish police in Warsaw in the early months of the ghetto’s existence, the historian Emanuel Ringelblum wrote: “The Jewish police force is composed of fine and congenial men. . . . Many of them are intellectuals, who dislike giving orders.”\textsuperscript{21} Czerniaków’s mistake was to appoint Joseph Szeryński, an apostate who had served as a brigadier in the
Polish army, as chief of Jewish police in the Warsaw ghetto, in the belief that an experienced Polish officer who had ties with the top brass in the Polish police would best serve the ghetto’s interests. Szeryński tarnished the image of the Jewish police by surrounding himself with other assimilated Jews, who exploited their position to terrorize the ghetto public and flaunt their wealth and privilege. What had once been a decent police force was now a collection of corrupt and arrogant men, brandishing rubber truncheons and resorting to bribery and extortion. The ghetto’s 2,000 police, who were totally spared the large aktion of the summer of 1942, played a significant role in the evacuation of the Jews, at least in the initial stage of the aktion, when Czerniakow committed suicide. The brutality and intransigence of the ghetto police during the aktion has been harshly criticized in many memoirs. Although a few police endangered their lives to save Jews, these were by far the exception. Jacob Laykin, Szeryński’s deputy, helped implement the deportation with ruthless efficiency, cunning, and fanaticism. Even the Germans called him the “little Napoleon.” After the aktion, members of the underground executed Szeryński, Laykin, and Israel Firzst, who served as a liaison between the Judenrat and the Gestapo.24

The Warsaw ghetto differed from other ghettos in that most members of the Jewish police force were assimilated Jews who, in the Jewish community’s darkest hour, faithfully served their German masters by ruthlessly evacuating hundreds and thousands of Jews.

At the other end of the spectrum were the Jewish police in the Bialystok ghetto. The police force there comprised about 200 of Bialystok’s finest Jews, including members of the intelligentsia, high-school graduates, and businessmen. Initially, it is true, the activities of the police during the deportation to Pruzhany, about two months after the ghetto’s establishment, created a negative image. The chief of Jewish police, Yitzhak Marcus, was a weak man who failed to gain public support. The Judenrat, which in principle supported the autonomy of the ghetto police, soon discovered that it harbored a gang of corrupt policemen who collaborated with the Gestapo. This gang had been operating inside the ghetto for months, instilling fear into the hearts of the public and Judenrat alike. When Barash realized that this gang had almost caused the Judenrat’s downfall and had endangered the ghetto’s existence, he denounced the ringleaders to the Germans and proceeded to purge the Jewish police of its undesirable elements. Note that this episode took place almost a year after the ghetto’s establishment, when Barash’s standing was sufficiently strong to carry out such measures. The purge went a long way to improving the public’s image of the police. The appointment of the former deputy chief of Police, Moshe Berman, a warm
and good-natured Jew, as chief of police also helped matters. Later on, the newly reconstituted police force refused to take part in the evacuation of the Jews in the February 1943 \textit{aktion}, despite German threats. In the final deportation in the summer of 1943, the Germans, apparently aware that it was futile, no longer enlisted the help of the Jewish police.

The way the Jewish police forces behaved in the various ghettos teaches us a lot about the Judenräte, of which they were an integral part. Gens, in Vilna, tried to curry favor with the Germans and paid for it with his life. Rumkowski, in Łódź, will be remembered till the end of time as a cruel tyrant, despite the relatively high number of Łódź survivors. Czerniakow, in Warsaw, who favored the appointment of his friend Szeryński, was later unable to call him to order and took no action to stop the moral decline of Szeryński and his men. Barash was the only Judenrat head who, together with his colleagues in the Judenrat, attempted to safeguard morality within the police force. With great effort and at considerable personal risk, he succeeded in ridding the Jewish police force of Białystok of the stigma of disgrace that had adhered to it from its early days.

In view of the above, it is tempting to believe that the Judenrat was wholly responsible for life in the ghetto. The reader of this book, favorably impressed by the personality of Barash, may be forgiven for thinking that Barash’s achievements, and the “beautiful death” (as Tenenbaum put it) experienced by the Jews of Białystok, could have been repeated in other ghettos. A comprehensive comparative study, which no doubt shall be written some day, will help highlight the differences among the ghettos and examine the factors that caused these differences in the shadow of the German occupation. Despite the differences outlined above, all the ghettos had one thing in common: they were all doomed to extinction.
Epilogue: “Do Not Forget Them”

After Operation Harvest (November 3, 1943), any Białystok Jew who was still alive was either an inmate of Biłżyn or Auschwitz, or in jail, or living on the Aryan side of the city or in the surrounding forests.

Several hundred Białystok Jews, such as Dr. Tuvya Citron, Shamai Kizelstein, Miriam Yahav, Shmuel Piser, and others were sent from Lublin to the Biłżyn labor camp. In *Of Blood and Hope*, Samuel Piser describes the camp:

Biłżyn was a labor camp situated in the bleakest countryside I had ever seen. Like most camps, it was surrounded by a thick forest. But inside the barbed-wire fence, dominated by machine-gun towers every few hundred feet, there was no sign of nature: not a single blade of grass, not a single weed; only black crows occasionally circled overhead, never deigning to alight. The entire compound was covered by gravel and rock, constantly swept and replenished by teams of skeletal prisoners.¹

The prisoners of Biłżyn camp were taken to Auschwitz in July 1944. Those who passed the “selection” were put to work there. Upon the evacuation of the camp in January 1945, they were forced to participate in the “death march” to Germany.

Some of the Jewish men who were still in jail in Białystok were put to work for the Sonderkommando set up to destroy traces of the massacres—an operation that was given the code name Operation 1005. Artur Harder, the adjutant of Paul Blobel, the commander of Operation 1005, arrived in Białystok in late April 1944. In coordination with Otto Helwig, Harder ordered Zimmermann to set up a special local unit to destroy all the corpses in the mass graves of Jews killed by the Germans in the Białystok District.² Waldemar Macholl, head of Department IVA-3 of the Białystok Gestapo, was appointed commander of the operation for the Białystok District. The
Sonderkommando comprised about fifty to sixty police from the motorized gendarmerie, as well as Jewish forced laborers.\textsuperscript{3}

In early May 1944, about forty young Jewish men (mostly from Białystok and a few from Grodno and other places), including two minors (one aged 16 and the other 12) were released from Białystok jail to work for the Sonderkommando.\textsuperscript{4} They were herded into a truck, a former mobile gassing unit known locally as a black raven, and driven to the forests of Augustów in the northern part of Białystok District. There, under heavy guard, they were ordered to exhume and burn the thousands of corpses lying in the mass graves. The operation, which took place simultaneously in a number of other places in the district, lasted for about two months. On July 13 (or 15), 1944, the Germans, while supervising the operation in the Garbówka forest near Białystok, realized that the Soviet army was approaching the area. They immediately ordered all the Jews to line up at the edge of one of the pits, and shot them dead. Ten managed to escape to Białystok and were saved.\textsuperscript{5}

While the deportations were proceeding, some Jews managed to slip over to the Aryan side of the city and establish contact with the Jewish couriers who worked for the ghetto underground. From early 1943, some of these escapees tried to establish contact with partisan groups in the nearby forests. The couriers—Marila Rozycka, Hasia Bilicka, Anya Rod, Bronka Vinizka, Liza Czapnik, and Haika Grosman—helped some of the escapees reach the forests, and with the help of their German comrades Artur Schade, Otto Busse, Alexander Bohle, and Otto Beniske, managed to maintain contact with the partisans in the forests almost until the city’s liberation.\textsuperscript{6}

Another group of young people who left for the forests shortly before the destruction of the ghetto were the Wayse Kazshukhes (Yiddish for “White Pelts”). Members of this group, which was armed, focused on wreaking revenge on local people who had betrayed Jews hiding in the forests to the Germans. In time, this group joined a Russian partisan unit led by a Jew from Mocha’s group, until the liberation of the region by the Soviet army.\textsuperscript{7}

Most Jews who fled to the forests were unarmed. Unlike the Soviet partisans, who moved eastwards in order to find ammunition and food, the Jews were forced to stay near the city in order to absorb new arrivals. It should not be forgotten that at that time, the Germans were combing the forests in search of Jewish fugitives. Various groups of Jews, mostly private groups of fugitives who had survived the large-scale massacres in the district, were hiding in the forest. Usually these groups comprised no more than five to ten unarmed Jews who hid in trenches and bartered with local peasants and hoarded food for the winter. Kot remarked that they looked more dead than alive, and that the men were indistinguishable from the women.\textsuperscript{8}
All in all, until January and February 1944, about eighty partisans from the Bialystok ghetto lived in the nearby forests, waging a daily war for survival. Grosman recalled:

The deep snow and the fine weather had been death traps; the partisans had not been able to move. The slightest activity attracted the attention of the Germans stationed in nearby villages. For a long time the partisans had existed on a little dry flour sometimes mixed with snow. When that ran out they ate the remains of the dry beans and lentils. Many were ill, and were without even minimal medical aid. Comrades lay powerless, unable to move hand or foot. Some few who still held out were doomed to suffer a slow death from hunger and disease. The Jewish partisan unit was dying.9

The larger forests, such as Suprasl and Białowieża, which the Germans left alone, sheltered larger groups of Soviet partisans as well as a few Jews from Bialystok, including Eliyahu Vered and Moyshe Buch. The forests near Bialystok—surrounded as they were by major traffic arteries and railroads—were more dangerous.10 It was only in March 1944, when Soviet partisans led by General Wojciechowski, reached the nearby forests from Moscow, that the Bialystok Jews hiding in the forests began operating in a military framework.11 Grosman wrote:

Those who came were mostly Russian paratroopers who had been sent to the Białowiez area. . . . They were General Kapusta’s men. When they reached the Białystok area where we met, we were the only organized force there. . . . We were the only base they could depend upon. We knew the area, the forests and the villages, and behind us we had a well organized underground.

They brought help, medicine, food and arms. They also brought a breath of spring.12

By the time Bialystok was liberated by the soldiers of the Soviet army on July 27, 1944, only a handful of Jews were left, all living in the city under assumed identities.

Summary and Conclusion

The entire history of the Bialystok ghetto was shaped by two of its most dominant and charismatic figures—Ephraim Barash, leader of the Judenrat, and Mordecai Tenenbaum, leader of the fighting underground. In April
1943, Tenenbaum sent a letter to the Secretariat of the United Kibbutz Movement, addressed to his “Comrades in Palestine.” The letter ends:

And so, after such dedication, effort and achievements, the Hehalutz and Zionist youth movements in Poland—the center of World Jewry—are coming to an end. If it has to be like this, history will judge. I do not know if or when this letter will reach you, comrades. With these lines I wanted to establish a memorial, however inadequate, for those dearest to me, who are no longer with us. Comrades, the movement feels honored to have produced such people, people who have spent months preparing for a beautiful death. Can there be such a thing? Do not forget them.13

This letter, which represents the essence of Mordecai Tenenbaum’s philosophy, highlights the difference between his approach and that of Ephraim Barash, the head of the Judenrat and representative of the ghetto. For whereas Barash condemned armed resistance as useless at best and dangerous at worst, Tenenbaum and his comrades saw it as the means to an honorable death. For them armed resistance was a way of making a final statement to mankind, to the Jewish people, and to the Land of Israel. Therefore, while the choice facing Barash was slavery versus death, the choice facing Tenenbaum was an honorable versus a dishonorable death (going like “sheep to the slaughter”). Apart from the February aktion, this fundamental difference of outlook colored their entire relationship.

This difference in outlook was more than just a personal difference. Rather, it reflected the different viewpoints of the ghetto youth (as represented by Tenenbaum) and adults (as represented by Barash). Although normally adults tend to be more realistic, and youngsters more optimistic, under the abnormal circumstances of the Holocaust the opposite was true. The adult ghetto population chose to bury their heads in the sand rather than accept a reality that threatened their whole raison d’être, while the youngsters accepted this reality, however unpleasant.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, the Jews of Białystok, like other Jewish communities in Poland, found themselves in an impasse. During the 1930s, growing unemployment, antisemitism, and domestic and international problems undermined the status of Polish Jewry in general and of the Białystok community in particular. Despite enormous difficulties, the Jews of the city managed to preserve a traditional Jewish way of life. The Jews there established and for many years ran Poland’s second largest textile industry.

A few weeks after the outbreak of the Second World War, Białystok was
annexed to the Soviet Union, under the provisions of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. During the period of Soviet annexation, which lasted almost two years, the Soviet authorities set about Sovietizing the Jewish community as they had done to the Jews in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, a process that aimed at destroying all vestiges of Jewish life. Although Sovietization was imposed on all Jewish communities in the Soviet-annexed territories, it was particularly pronounced in Białystok, at the time a major industrial center with a large Jewish bourgeois population and a center for Jewish refugees fleeing from German-occupied Poland.

Under the Soviets, all Jewish economic, political, educational, religious and cultural activities soon came to a standstill. If they did not die completely, this was only because the Soviet rule was cut short by the German invasion of Białystok in late June 1941. Unlike the Soviets, who had aimed at destroying the Jews’ political and cultural life, the Germans aspired to their total physical annihilation.

No one would deny that the Stalinist Soviet administration, with its traditional blend of suspicion, betrayal, and oppression, dealt a mortal blow to Jewish life in Białystok. And yet, superficially at least, Jewish life in the city carried on as normal. Perhaps hundreds of years of exile had taught the Jews to adapt, or perhaps the Soviets did not stay long enough for the Jewish community to realize the full extent of the calamity that had befallen it. Possibly also, when the Jews of Białystok saw what was happening to the Jews in German-occupied Poland, they felt they were lucky in comparison. In any event, the Jews of Białystok learned to cope with the new reality. Factories worked overtime, new jobs were created, government stores expanded, and food was readily available. Jews found employment in the municipality, the local police, and local party institutions. Although Jewish public institutions lost their autonomy, they still continued to function. New and exciting educational and cultural opportunities opened up for the youth, and the fear of Polish antisemitism receded.

This situation came to an abrupt end with the German invasion of the Soviet Union. When the Germans entered Białystok on June 27, 1941, the city had about 50,000 Jews. Some two weeks later, about 7,000 had been killed. Some were shot on the spot, while others were taken outside the city before being murdered. The ghetto was seated on August 1, 1941, and a Judenrat was set up to organize Jewish life under the German occupation. News of the massacre of Jews in the Eastern Territories had not yet penetrated the ghetto, and despite the tremendous shock of the German invasion, the general feeling was that the worst was over and that the Jews could now get on with their lives.
Throughout the two years of its existence, the Białystok ghetto was organized, industrious, and even prosperous. Unlike other ghettos, it never experienced starvation or abject poverty. Despite the difficulties of life under the German occupation and fears concerning its future, life in the ghetto continued on an even keel. People's expectations were modest, concern for cleanliness and hygiene prevented epidemics, weddings were held and children were born. Even when news began reaching the ghetto of the atrocities that were going on outside, the public did not abandon its faith in the future. The person responsible for this stability in the shadow of death was the Judenrat head Ephraim Barash, whose unwavering strength and certainty communicated itself to the ghetto public.

The Judenrat in Białystok was one of several such institutions established by the occupation authorities in the Generalgouvernement and other German-occupied territories. The occupation authorities saw the Judenrat as a vital institution, mediating between them and the Jewish public. Therefore, the Judenrat had to be set up immediately upon the establishment and closure of the ghetto. Primarily, it served a regime that planned to exterminate the entire Jewish population, in a masterplan devised by the Germans. Initially, the members of the Judenrat, like the public they served, were not aware of this plan, and even when they found out about it, they refused to believe it.

The Judenrat soon became an autonomous apparatus dealing with all the needs of the Jewish community, such as food, work arrangements, economic and social aid, medical services, internal security, legal matters, education, financial matters, population registration, transport, and the like. All these functions were, naturally, carried out with the approval and under the supervision of the occupation authorities. In theory, the Judenrat was totally subordinate to the authorities' whims. In practice, the Jewish leadership in Białystok enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom and even support, especially after it proved its ability to supply the Germans with an efficient workforce and cheap products. It was this understanding between the Judenrat and the local occupation authorities that lulled Barash into a false sense of security and distracted him from Hitler's policy of genocide.

For the first year of its existence, the Judenrat had a collective leadership, in which Barash was simply one of equals. In November 1942, however, with the changeover of local German staff and the implementation of genocide policies in the district, it was clear that only Barash was capable of serving as leader. From that point on, he became the undisputed leader of the Jewish community.

Barash made the same mistake as most Jewish community leaders dur-
ing the Holocaust period. As a rational man, he was unable to believe that the Germans would write off the Białystok ghetto, which under his skilled leadership had become indispensable to the German war effort. Barash labored under the illusion that the Germans, unlike the Polish masses or the simple Ukrainian peasants, were a sophisticated and down-to-earth nation. He was convinced that nothing would induce the Germans to abandon the ghetto whose productivity was a feather in the cap of the local occupation authorities. This conviction was shared by Jacob Gens of Vilna, and to a certain extent also by Moshe Merin of Zagłębie and Chaim Rumkowski of the Łódź ghetto. The difference was that in Białystok, this idea was not unique to Barash alone but was shared by most of the Jewish population.

Barash's assumption that a nation with any sense would not murder its slaves was logical enough. What he did not and could not have known was that German policy regarding the Jews was not based on rational considerations. The special ties that evolved between him and the German overseers merely strengthened his belief that the Białystok ghetto was special, in terms of its industry, discipline, and order. Therefore, even when news of the extermination of Jews in Treblinka and the destruction of hundreds of Jewish communities reached the ghetto, Barash still chose to believe that the Germans were guided by local considerations and that by “working, we shall be saved.”

It was this belief that was Barash’s guiding principle, even sometimes leading him to act in a seemingly “unethical” manner. It should be stressed that unlike some other Judenrat heads, Barash was an extremely moral person who never exploited his position for personal gain. If, therefore, he decided to sacrifice the few for the many, it was only because he believed that in this way he could save lives. Events even seemed to justify this assumption. Despite the eviction to Pruzhany in October 1941, and the February 1943 action, thousands of Jews were still left in the ghetto. Barash believed that his organizational talents and his ability to play off the various authorities against each other would succeed in keeping the Jews alive.

Barash was able to turn the Judenrat into a bureaucracy catering to all the needs of the Jewish community under enormously difficult conditions. Realizing that the greatest danger to the Jews’ survival came from within, he struggled to rid the community of collaborators, and criminals—sometimes by brute force—and made sure that the Jewish police force was composed of honest men.

Naturally, Barash’s attempt to win over the authorities carried with it its own dangers. The need to adapt to the German mentality made him too willing to accept their methods. It would have been only natural if, under
such conditions, he had himself resorted to foul means or had become their puppet. Barash, however, never fell into the trap, but remained honest in his dealings to the end. What helped him preserve his integrity was no doubt the fact that he saw himself as a mediator between the ghetto and the Germans, in the great tradition of the Jewish intercessors who saved their people from destruction throughout history.

In view of the above, it is surprising, to say the least, that Barash continued to cling to his beliefs even after he realized the ghetto was doomed. Why, for example, did he see to it that the deportation was carried out in an orderly and disciplined manner? Why didn’t he urge the Jews to flee or, at the very least, resist? Why didn’t he tell them the truth? Why didn’t he, at least, make an effort to save individuals?

There is no clear-cut answer to these questions. We shall never know what passed through Barash’s mind during the ghetto’s final hours. All we know is that throughout the two years of the ghetto’s existence, Barash never believed that escape was a viable option. On the contrary, for him a Jew without a ghetto was a condemned Jew. The fact that refugees from other ghettos preferred the Białystok ghetto to the nearby forests merely confirmed his belief that the forest was dangerous, while the ghetto offered the possibility of survival. For Barash, who considered himself responsible for his flock even in the ghetto’s final hours, a massive flight from the ghetto appeared to be the height of irresponsibility, if not downright anarchy.

It is equally possible that Barash did not urge the ghetto population to resist because he believed that it would not help. For Barash, what was important was to survive. Dying an honorable death carried little weight with him. Time was also against him. Even had he believed an uprising might help, there was not enough time to prepare for one. The Germans, on the other hand, after the Warsaw ghetto uprising, had prepared themselves well in advance for any possible resistance.

Again, perhaps Barash failed to act because the shock of what he was told induced in him a state of apathy born of despair, in which he felt that only a miracle could save them. His apathy and silence should be construed not so much as a betrayal of the public as a natural psychological response to a wholly unnatural situation.

Equally tragic is the figure of Mordecai Tenenbaum, the underground leader. After his mother, comrades, and girlfriend had all been killed, Tenenbaum, a native of Warsaw, was left by himself to lead the ghetto fighters in Białystok. Although he realized he was unable to save the Jews, he believed it was his mission to make sure that Jews of the ghetto had an honorable mention in history.
It was Tenenbaum’s ties with the Vilna and Warsaw ghettos that gave rise to the Jewish underground in Białystok. Unlike the Jews of Vilna, however, who had witnessed the large-scale massacre of Jews following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Jews in Białystok considered themselves safe. No doubt this feeling was also influenced by the relative calm that prevailed in the Warsaw ghetto, to the west, which continued until the large deportation of July 1942. The Vilna-versus-Warsaw controversy helps us to understand the polemic of fight-versus-flight that assailed the resistance movements during the Holocaust. On the one hand, underground fighters were aware of the imperative to respond to the wholesale slaughter of Jews. On the other, they were concerned with the need to preserve life and avert disaster. The underground in Białystok was party to this polemic, too.

Thanks to Barash, who made a point of befriending Tenenbaum, communication was established between the Judenrat and the underground, despite their different ideological and practical viewpoints. The subsequent evolution of events, such as Tenenbaum’s willingness to go along with Barash’s approach (to sacrifice the minority for the sake of the majority) at the ghetto’s hardest hour, the underground’s reluctance to take action, and developments in Stalingrad in February 1943, all helped create the illusion that salvation was possible.

The schisms within the Białystok underground, which lasted almost until the end, set the Białystok underground apart from the Vilna or Warsaw undergrounds. Unlike the Communists in Vilna and Warsaw, the Communists in Białystok, who had gained considerable power during the period of the Soviet annexation, argued that it was impossible to separate the Jewish struggle from the Soviet struggle against the German conquerors. The pioneer youth movements, on the other hand, saw their struggle as primarily a national Jewish struggle to save Jews. The Communists adopted an insular and conservative policy, predicated on suspicion and distrust, precluding any alliance with those who were not ideologically compatible. It was this intransigence that prevented the various undergrounds factions from uniting until it was too late.

The fact that the Dror faction in Białystok, headed by Tenenbaum, had been imported from Vilna, meant that for much of the time Dror in Białystok suffered from the lack of a competent leadership. This was another factor preventing the establishment of an organized underground movement along the lines of the Vilna and Warsaw undergrounds. In addition, the underground never really recovered from the loss of its core leaders from Hashomer Hatzair who died during the February 1943 aktion. All these factors explain why it was so difficult to create a united front in Białystok.
In Warsaw, the various underground forces began coalescing already after the large-scale deportation of July 1942, so that by the time of the revolt in January 1943, a united organization existed which enjoyed the backing of most of the local population. In Białystok, on the other hand, the underground factions united only in early August 1943, being unable to overcome their differences even after the February aktion. Another factor accounting for the lack of cohesion and militancy of the Białystok underground was the personality of its leader, Mordecai Tenenbaum, who was more of an intellectual than a warrior, more a man of the pen than a man of the sword. Finally, the people of the ghetto had no idea of the underground’s existence, and, even if they had, they were influenced by Barash’s opposition to armed resistance. These factors explain why the scope of the uprising was so limited and why the ghetto public failed to put up a fight during the deportation.

There are some who claim that initially at any rate, Tenenbaum was overshadowed by the more dominant Barash. Be this as it may, no harm came of it, since Barash was an honest, upright man whose primary concern was the welfare of the public under his care. It was also hard to find fault with Barash’s outlook, based as it was on logical and rational considerations. Contrary to expectations, however, Tenenbaum never deferred to Barash even for a minute. Theirs was an equal relationship, based on mutual respect. While Barash provided Tenenbaum with weapons and intelligence, Tenenbaum kept him informed of the latest development in the underground. Their relationship was based on friendship, trust, and sympathy. The ideological differences between Barash, who represented the establishment, and Tenenbaum, who represented the underground, could easily have developed into a poisonous vendetta. That it did not was largely due to the character and probity of these two upstanding personalities, whose greatness runs through all their actions and writings.

About a year before the ghetto’s destruction, in an event marking the anniversary of the Judenrat’s establishment, Barash said: “Although there is little room for optimism in the ghetto, if we look at how far we have come, and the burden we have carried (in Yiddish, unzer bagazh), I am sure the Białystok ghetto will have a happy ending. . . . If we live through this, we will have plenty to tell.”

Although they did not survive, this book is a modest attempt to fulfill their wish and tell their story.

As I completed my research into the history of the Białystok ghetto, it became increasingly clear to me that this history, on a deeper level, is simply the history of the psychological vagaries of this unfortunate ghetto leader.
obsessed with his vision of survival, who managed to win over the entire
ghetto public with his message of reassurance and hope. In the symbiotic
relationship that grew up between him and his community, his wish became
their wish. Like him, they, too, opted for life, under any condition, at any
price.
Notes

Introduction: “Bialystok-upon-Tiktin” (pages 1–17)

6. Yerucham Bacharach, Demografje fun der Yidisher Befalkerung in Białystok (Białystok, 1937), p. 9. All data on the Jewish population of Białystok and the province predating 1921 are estimates only.
16. Yaakov Makowsky testimony, June 2, 1991, Yad Vashem Archives (hereafter YVA), 03/6357, p. 17. See also Hannah Birk testimony, Department of Oral Testimony, Institute for Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University (hereafter HUJ), (110)8.
18. Wisniewsky, Bóźnice Białostoczczyny, p. 137. See also Hershberg, Pinkas Bialystok 1:228–29.
22. See “Zamenhof, Ludwik Lazar,” Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem, 1972), 16:925. See also Hershberg, Pinkas Bialystok, 1:426; Bialystoker Yizkor Bukh, p. 12.
32. See interview with brother of Nahum Zemach, founder of Habimah, in Yediot Aharonot, May 7, 1993, weekly supplement, p. 75. See also Hershberg, Pinkas Bialystok, 1:407–8.

1. *The Interwar Period (pages 18–48)*

1. See Bacharach, *Demografye fun der Yidisher Befalkerung in Bialystok*, p. 12.
2. Ibid. The percentage of Poles in the city was 46.6 percent, Germans 1.9 percent, Russians 1.8 percent, and Belorussians 0.8 percent. See Wrobel, “Na rowni pocylej,” p. 167. See also Raphael Mahler, *Yehudei Polin bein Shtei Milhamot Haolam* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1968), pp. 18–19.
8. Tekstil-Maysters, pp. 5–6.
13. *Bialystoker Metal Industri*, September 27, 1929. Apparently, only a single issue of this journal was printed.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. See Michal Taboryski, “Robotnicy w ruchu robotniczym Białegostoku w lat-
19. Zvi Wieder, “Yidishe Hantwerk un Hantverker in Bialystok,” Bialystoker Al-
manach (1931), pp. 259–65. See also Bialystoker Yizkor Bukh, pp. 54–85, 97.
20. Joel Rubinstein, “Der Bialystoker Sokhrim-Fareyn un Zayn Tetigkeyt,” Bia-
lystoker Almanach (1931), pp. 259–65. See also Bialystoker Yizkor Bukh, pp. 84–85, 97.
also Bialystoker Almanach (1931), pp. 233–43; Bialystoker Yizkor Bukh, p. 86.
22. Hershberg, Pinkas Bialystok, 2: 227–30, 269–70, 281–83; Fuksman, “Kehile-
Wezn in Bialystok,” Bialystoker Almanach (1931), pp. 33–34, 37–38; Wrobel, “Na
rowni pocylej,” pp. 183–86. See also Barikht fun der Yidisher Kehile far di Yorn,
1933–1937 (Bialystok, 1937), pp. 7–11.
25. The following information is based on Bacharach, Demografye fun der
Yidisher Befalknerung in Bialystok, pp. 17–39.
26. Ibid., pp. 17–33.
86. See also periodical Gikhe Hilf Baym Linat Hazedek, February 20, 1933, pp. 1–4.
179–83.
2:322.
31. Iron ha-Yovel shel ha-Gymnasium ba-Ivri be-Bialystok (1924) p. 1. See also
Jacob Samid, ed., Ha-Gymnasium ba-Ivrit be-Bialystok, 1919–1939 (Haifa, 1991) p. 19;
Hershberg, Pinkas Bialystok, 2: 311–15; Haika Grosman testimony, March 30, 1992,
YVA, 03/8650, pp. 31–38.
33. Ha-gymnasium ba-Coedatzioni be-Bialystok, Tokhit ha-Limudim (1925); Iron
ha-Yovel, p. 3. The high school’s library had 3,890 Hebrew books, 3,444 Polish
books, 2,146 German books, 175 English books, and 168 books in other languages.
Apart from the general library, the teachers had various specialized libraries for
research purposes, to help them prepare material for specialist courses. See Ha-
Gymnasium ba-Ivrit be-Bialystok be-Temunot uva-Misparim (1936–37).
34. See Anatol Leszczyński, “Akademicka Korporacja Syjonistyczna Rewizjon-
of Poland between Two World Wars, ed. Yisrael Gutman, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jehuda
37. Chaim Grade, Tsemakh Atlas (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1968), p. 34.


46. Yitzhak Gruenbaum, Nuemim ba-Sejm ba-Polani (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1946), pp. 107, 116.


49. Ibid., pp. 16–17.

50. Ibid., p. 17.

51. Ibid., p. 18.


53. Der Bialystoker Veker, January 3, 1930.


55. Ibid., p. 199.

56. Ibid.

2. Bialystock under Soviet Rule (pages 49–89)

1. One of the six German army units (Heeresgruppen) assembled on the eve of the war was the Northern Unit (Heeresgruppe Nord), which took part in the conquest of Poland in September 1939, together with the Third and Fourth Units that fought with it. See Georg Tessin, Verbande und Truppen der deutschen Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939–1945 (Osnabrück: Biblio-Verlag, 1979), v:7, 459. On September 11, the German forces reached the Warsaw–Bialystok railway line. The Third Unit conquered Białystok on September 15, 1939 and continued on its
way, while the Fourth Unit remained in the city. See Klaus A. Maier, Horst Rohde, Bernd Stegemann, H. Umbrett, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrie*, (Stuttgart, 1979) 2:118–19. See also *Die Berichte des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht, 1939–1945* (Cologne, 2004).


4. Maier et al., *Deutsche Reich*, p. 129; *Berichte des Oberkommandos*, p. 27.


Notes

25. Lederman, Fun Yener Zayt Forhang, p. 75.
34. Vered, Lihiot be-Tsel ha-Shoah, p. 20. See also Dorn testimony, YVA, 03/6205, p. 12; Nowak, Moja Gwiazda, p. 53.
37. Litwak, Plitim Yehudiim mi-Polin, p. 90; Redlich, Jews under Soviet Rule, pp. 29–30. See also Dorn testimony, YVA, 03/6205, p. 28.
38. Bialystoker Shtern, February 2, 1940.
39. Ibid.
40. Bialystoker Shtern, January 1, 1941.
41. Levine, Tekufah be-Sograyim, p. 98.
42. Yisrael Becker testimony, April 1991, Author Collection. See also Litwak, Plitim Yehudiim mi-Polin, p. 91; Levine, Tekufah be-Sograyim, p. 103.
44. Redlich, Jews under Soviet Rule, p. 40; Grodner, “In Soviet Poland and Lithuania,” p. 142


50. Daniel Blatman, For Our Freedom and Yours: The Jewish Labor Bund in Poland, 1939–1949 (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), pp. 54–55. The arrest of the four local Bundists was described by Shaul Goldman’s wife in Poland in 1946 before she left for Australia. In her testimony, she related that all four, together with a Polish member of the PPS, were sent to Minsk prison and to Siberia, and no one knows what became of them. Handwritten testimony, Author Collection. Smolar, too, referred to this incident and described how Panteleimon Ponomarenko, in a meeting in Minsk, announced that documents had been found testifying to the fact that Goldman and Kapitulka, the PPS leader in Bialystok, were suspected of being agents of the Polish political police. See Smolar, “Ha-Hayim ha-Yehudiim,” p. 129.

51. Blatman, For Our Freedom and Yours, p. 50.

52. See Haika Grosman, video testimony, 1992, YVA, VD/118.


54. Ibid., pp. 513–14.


56. Grosman testimony, YVA, 03/8650. See also Makowsky testimony, YVA, 03/6357.

57. Perlis, Tenuot ha-Noar, p. 56.

58. Ibid., pp. 58–60.


60. Bialystoker Shtern, January 27, 1940.


63. Vered, Libiot be-Tsel ha-Shoah, pp. 20–21.

64. Bialystoker Shtern, February 2, 1940; Dorn testimony, YVA, 03/6205, pp. 19–21.

66. Redlich, *Jews under Soviet Rule*, pp. 32–33; Levine, *Tekufah be–Sograyim*, p. 116. Nowak related that, in September 1940, wide-sweeping changes were made in the school. All subjects were taught in Russian, Belorussian was taught as a “mother tongue,” Polish was abolished from the school curriculum, and Polish books were read only outside the school walls. See Nowak, *Moja Gwiazda*, p. 57.


68. Some Polish authors, too, especially Janina Broniewska, tried to publish their articles in Yiddish translation, since they were not allowed to publish any original material in the Polish paper, *Wolna Praca* (Free work), which began appearing around that time. Only translations of articles that had first been published in the official organ of the Belorussian Regional Party Committee were permitted. See Smolar, “Ha–Hayim ha–Yehudiim,” p. 129; Levine, *Tekufah be–Sograyim*, p. 139.

69. Levine, *Tekufah be–Sograyim*, p. 138. See also Redlich, *Jews under Soviet Rule*, p. 36; Grossman, *In Farkisheftn Land*, p. 75. In those days, writes Ben Shimon, the veteran correspondents of the paper were summarily dismissed and replaced by “di naye koshere Komunisten” (new “kosher” Communists) until the entire editorial board of *Unzer Dror* was replaced. See Shimon, “Di Yidishe Presse.”


71. Until February 22, 1940, the paper appeared three to four times a week; until July 6, 1940, only twice a week, and after that, for the year preceding the outbreak of war with Germany, once a week only. See Levine, *Tekufah be–Sograyim*, p. 356 n. 5.


75. Peysekh Kaplan, who sat beside Chaim Nissenzweig, was silent throughout, making a swift exit at the end without staying for the ensuing discussion. See Chaim Nissenzweig testimony, June 1, 1964, YVA, 03/2812, p. 14.


83. Grossman, *In Fürkisheftn Land*, pp. 62–63. The Lwów Jewish Community Library was also purged of books that opposed the spirit of the Soviet regime. It became a Jewish branch of the state library of the Ukrainian Academy of Science and served mainly for research purposes. See Levine, *Tekufah be-Sograyim*, p. 160.
84. Ravitzky testimony, YVA, 03/3187, pp. 14–15.
85. Lederman, *Fun Yener Zayt Forhang*, pp. 89, 94. See also Becker testimony, Author Collection.
89. Ibid., pp. 102, 105.

3. The Early Days of the German Occupation (pages 90–114)

3. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/823, pp. 31–32. See also Heiner Lich-
Notes
17. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/823, p. 60; Investigations of Nazi Crimes, YVA, TR-11/I 016, pp. 50–51; Datner, *Pamiece 200,000 Żydow Wojewodztwa Białostockiego*, p. 13. This estimate is based on a later assessment by the Judenrat.

18. [Peysh Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok” (unsigned, written in the ghetto by Peysh Kaplan in February–March 1943), YVA, M-11/18, p. 1. The Polish translation of this chronicle can be found in *Biuletyn ZIH* 60 (1966): 51–76.

19. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 1. There are no official documents on how and by whom the Judenrat was set up. All we know is that this was the first Judenrat and that at the end of a month, its membership doubled, from twelve to twenty-four. However, a number of testimonies provide us with a fairly clear picture of how the Judenrat came into being. David Klementinowski’s testimony indicates that Waldek Riegert, senior manager of the municipal electricity station, who had been appointed interim mayor by the military governor of Białystok, entrusted Rosenman with the task of setting up the Judenrat. See Klementinowski, *Lebn un Umkum in Bialystoker Geto*, p. 20. [Kaplan] “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok” indicated that Rosenman was ordered to set up the Judenrat on the first day of the city’s occupation, but Reizner recalled that the city’s commander summoned Barash as well as Rosenman and that the two together called a meeting of community activists, informed them of their discussion with the city’s commander, and elected the members of the Judenrat. See Reizner, *Umkum fun Białystoker Yidntum*, p. 43.


22. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/541, p. 28. According to this source, this *aktion* was carried out by members of Einsatzkommando 8, at the bidding of its commanders who were members of the Security Police. See also Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/885, p. 282; Datner, *Pamiece 200,000 Żydow Wojewodztwa Białostockiego*, p. 14; Monkiewicz and Kowalczyk, *Zaglada Ludnosci Żydowskiej w Białymstoku*, p. 8; Reizner, *Umkum fun Białystoker Yidntum*, p. 47; Kot, *Khurbn Kialystok*, p. 24.

23. These two battalions belonged to the Polizeiregiment (Central Police Regiment), under Montua and were used by Heinrich Himmler to carry out “special”
assignments. On June 10, 1941, Polizeibataillon 322 reached Warsaw, where it was incorporated into Division 221. Until it left Warsaw on July 2, the Polizeibataillon was responsible for policing and security procedures. See Auswärtiger Einsatz, also known as Kompanie Tagebuch, the diary of Company 9, Polizeibataillon 322, YVA, 053/86, p. 147, also known as Kriegstagebuch, no. 1, YVA, 053/127. The proceedings of the trial appear in Justiz und NS-Verbrechen, (Amsterdam: University Press, 1978), 19: 435–69.

24. These details were written down on the same day (July 8, 1941), in a report Nagel sent Montua. In this report, Nagel pointed out that judging by the amount of loot seized in a relatively small number of apartments, further raids would presumably unearth much greater booty. See Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/721, pp. 144–45. See also Konrad Kwiet, “From the Diary of a Killing Unit,” in Why Germany? National Socialist Anti-Semitism and the European Context, ed. John Milfull (Oxford: Berg, 1993), p. 84; Browning, Ordinary Men, p. 13.

25. See Richard Breitman, The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution (New York, 1991), p. 173. Breitman writes that Jewish property in Białystok was confiscated on July 1. His version, however, is both incomplete and inaccurate, since both the proceedings of the trial of members of Polizeibataillon 322 and the Company diary show that the Polizeibataillon reached Białystok on the night of July 5. Breitman's mistake was to rely on the testimony of Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski. Although the latter remembered the date on which the Einsatzkommando 8 unit entered the city, he forgot the exact date on which Polizeibataillon 322 began its raids. See Breitman, Architect of Genocide, pp. 291–92, n. 43.


27. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/721, p. 149. Monkiewicz and Kowalczyk write that in his testimony, Franz Brisk, Montua’s adjutant, claimed that Himmler ordered this “punishment” of the Jews in retaliation for the murder by unidentified men of six Germans who were ordered to confiscate property. See Waldemar Monkiewicz and Jozef Kowalczyk, Tragiczne losy Żydow w Białymstoku w okresie okupacji hitlerlowskiej (booklet 44, vol. 8, Social Sciences, Warsaw University of Białystok), p. 90.


29. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/721, p. 150. Browning, Ordinary Men, p. 13, indicates that Himmler was present at the stadium when Daluège delivered his speech. It is not clear what he bases this information on. As a rule, his information is derived from the company diary (see above, note 23), which, however, makes no reference to Himmler’s presence that day (July 9, 1941) in Białystok. At the policemen’s trial in Germany, some of the policemen who were in the stadium at the time reported that, as far as they remembered, Himmler delivered the speech, and only a few could say with certainty that it was Daluège who spoke. However,
one may assume that the rumor of Himmler’s visit to Białystok spread quickly even after he left the city following the ceremonial supper on July 8, and that had Himmler had been present at the stadium the next day, the diarist would surely not have forgotten to mention such a significant event in the company diary.


32. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 275. Note that this announcement refers to a yellow patch, not to a white armband with a blue Star of David. Evidently the yellow patch was easier to attach, and the Germans did not insist on the white armband with the blue Star of David. In the final analysis, most Jews of Białystok wore a yellow patch sewn on to their garments. See Kot, Khurbn Białystok, p. 29. Kot recounted how one of the Judenrat members demonstrated how to affix the patch and how all the Jews began searching for yellow fabric. See also Klementinowski, Lebn un Umkum Białystoker Geto, p. 24.


34. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/721, p. 167. The distance between the trenches was apparently 30–40 meters. Testimonies indicate that one of the units dug the trenches deeper, and therefore there was no need to dig additional pits.


38. Reizner, Umkum fun Białystoker Yidntum, and Kot, Khurbn Białystok, quote a figure of 3,000 Jews, Datner, Pamieć 200,000 Żydów Wojszodztwa Białostockiego, and Klementinowski, Lebn un Umkum in Białystoker Geto, say 4,000, and Monkie-wicz and Kowalczuk, Zagłada Ludności Żydowskiej w Białymstoku, 4,000–5,000 Jews. The German court referred to 3,000 Jewish men, but stressed that this was the lowest estimate. See Indictments and Verdicts, TR-10/609, p. 61. See also Edward Janowicz, “O zlikwidowaniu 4,000 Żydów bialostockich twz. ‘sobotnich’ na Pietraszach 12-go lipca, 1941,” November 1946, YVA, M-11B/247.

39. Similar incidents took place also in Warsaw and Vilna. On November 13, 1939, two Polish policemen were sent to 9 Nalewki Street, Warsaw, to arrest a Jewish offender. A dispute broke out, and members of the Gestapo surrounded the house and arrested fifty-three men. Their wives demanded that the Judenrat intervene. Meanwhile, members of the Gestapo demanded a ransom of 300,000 złotys for their release. The Judenrat collected some of the money and handed it over to the SS in return for the prisoners’ release. However, on November 28, the Germans

40. Kot, *Khurbn Bialystok*, p. 25; Reizner, *Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum*, p. 50. Kaplan quotes other figures and argues that the ransom demanded was 5 million rubles, 5 kilograms of gold, and 300 kilograms of silver. See [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 5. An announcement published by the Judenrat several days later (on July 17, 1941) referred to 2 million rubles. However, the announcement made no mention at all of the gold and silver the Germans demanded. See Blumental, *Darko shel ha-Judenrat*, p. 276.


45. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, pp. 19–20, TR10/813, pp. 149–50. Note that the proceedings of the Wannsee Conference (January 20, 1942) recorded a figure of 400,000 Jews for the Bialystok District. See Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman, and Abraham Margaliot, eds., *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected Sources of the Destruction of the Jews of Germany, Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*, trans. Lea Ben Dor (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1981), p. 203. This estimate, which was apparently made even before the German occupation, was based on inaccurate information. One may assume that at the Wannsee Conference no one bothered to calculate the exact number of Jews in the district, and so the mistake was perpetuated.


47. An order issued by Hitler on June 25, 1941, concerning the appointment of military commanders for the Occupied Eastern Territories, stipulated that the military commanders of the occupied territories would be subordinate to the OKW commander, who received instructions directly from the Führer. Koblenz State Archives, R 6/209, p. 43.

49. See Czesław Madajczyk, Faszyzm i Okupacja, 1938–1945: Wykonywanie oku-
50. GKA, SWWW/747, p. 113. See also Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-
to/661, pp. 22–23.
51. GKA, SWWW/747, p. 114.
52. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/813, pp. 151–52. See also ibid., YVA, TR-10/661, pp. 23–24; Madajczyk, Faszyzm i okupacja, 1:148, app.
53. The solution was only temporary, probably because Hitler did not want to
leave evidence behind before the end of the war with the Soviet Union. As far as
Poland was concerned, the Germans insisted that Polish law had ceased to exist be-
cause Poland had ceased to exist as an independent state. They could not make
the same claim with respect to the Soviet-controlled territories, however, because
at that stage, only parts of the Soviet Union had been conquered. See GKA,
SWWW/747, p. 140 (see Appendix).
54. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, pp. 25, 139, 147.
55. Ibid., p. 147.
57. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 147.
58. Until November 1942, the Białystok District was subject to the authority of
the civil administration and policed by the Orpo (which included the Schupo and
the Gendarmerie). The Schupo were generally assigned to the cities, and the gen-
darmes to the villages. Białystok was an exception, being assigned a motorized gen-
darmerie unit throughout the occupation. As in the Reich itself, the Security Police
in the Białystok District was made up of Gestapo, Kripo, and SS units. See Klars-
60. See Klarsfeld, ed., Documents concerning the Destruction of the Jews of Grodno,
p. 530; Madajczyk, Faszyzm i okupacja, 1:148, app.
61. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 3.
62. Mordecai Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab (Hakibbutz Ham-
63. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 278.
64. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 6. See also Kot,
Khubn Bialystok, p. 30.
65. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 279. See also Reizner, Umkum fun Bia-
lystoker Yidntum, p. 53.
67. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 16. See also Kot,
Khubn Bialystok, p. 30.
68. Klementinowsky, Lebn un Umkum in Bialystoker Geto, p. 29. See also Reizner,
Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum, p. 53.
69. Kot, Khubn Bialystok, pp. 29–30. See also Nowak, Moja Gwiazda, p. 68.
70. Nowak, Moja Gwiazda, p. 70.


73. We do not know how the second, expanded Judenrat was established. Apparently, the Judenrat’s president, Rabbi Rosenman, was ordered to continue as president and to expand the board from twelve to twenty-four members. The General gouvernement was subject to the order issued by Governor-General Hans Frank, of November 28, 1939, stipulating that where the Jewish population exceeded 10,000, the Judenrat board had to have twenty-four members. One may assume that in this matter, as in many others, the authorities in the Białystok District decided to follow the laws applying to the Generalgouvernement.

As to the number of Jews in the ghetto when it was sealed, I believe that given the estimated number of Jews who perished prior to the establishment of the ghetto, and given the statistics on the number of Jews in the ghetto provided by the Judenrat and Mordecai Tenenbaum (see below) at various intervals, this number—43,000—is the most accurate. Philip Friedman puts the number at 60,000, basing this estimate on Datner, who also specifies 60,000. This figure is definitely inflated, being corroborated neither by Jewish sources nor by German statistics. See Philip Friedman, *Roads to Extinction* (New York and Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1980), p. 76. See also Datner, *Wakla i Zagłada Białostockiego Ghetta*, p. 23.


75. Reizner, *Umkum fun Białystoker Yidntum*, pp. 43–45. No reliable list of the twenty-four members of the Judenrat is available. The minutes of sessions show that generally speaking, not all members were present at sessions, to which departmental directors and various officials were also invited. Evidently, the twenty-four members of the Judenrat retained their positions until the end of the ghetto’s existence, except for Peysekh Kaplan, who died in March 1943, after a serious illness.


77. The names of the divisions and committees are taken from Judenrat reports, and from public notices that were found after the war and incorporated into ibid., p. 549.

78. Ibid., p. 550.

79. Ibid., pp. 12, 16.

80. Ibid., pp. 18, 219.

81. Ibid., p. 282.

82. Ibid., p. 16.

83. Ibid., p. 29.

84. Ibid., pp. 302, 326.

85. Ibid., p. 33.

86. Ibid., p. 27.
87. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 28.
88. Ibid. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, pp. 32–34.
89. Klementinowsky, Lebn un Umkum in Bialystoker Geto, pp. 37–38; Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 39; Reizner, Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum, p. 72; Nowak, Moja Gwiazda, p. 75.
90. Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 39.
91. Reizner, Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum, pp. 72–73. Kot claimed that quite a number of people with “connections” in the right places were issued with “the green cap of the Jewish Police” for a payment of $50. These became known as “die 50-dollerdike” (the 50-dollarniks). See Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 39.
93. Ibid., pp. 341, 343 (translation in the original).
94. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 29; Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 41.
95. Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, pp. 41–42.
96. Ibid., p. 42. See also Birk testimony, HUJ, (110)8.
97. Reizner, Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum, pp. 73–74.
99. Quoted in ibid., p. 41.
100. Ibid., p. 44. Barash reported that the Germans found 60,000 rubles on one woman, a box of gold, and 20 dollars that were hidden in buttons. See also [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 29.
101. Ibid., p. 64. The number of evacuees from Bialystok to Pruzhany may have exceeded 5,000. The Judenrat may have deliberately played down the number so as not to upset the ghetto population even further. Both Rosenman and Barash, in two separate Judenrat meetings, referred to an overall ghetto population of 35,000 (see Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, pp. 54, 78). This may have been the number they reported to the Germans, although after the evacuation to Pruzhany, there were in fact 38,000–39,000 people left in the ghetto. The official number of evacuees as reported to the ghetto residents was 4,000 (p. 342), and as reported to the Judenrat (which did not always keep a check on the number of ghetto residents) 5,000 (p. 64). Reizner, Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum, refers to the evacuation of 6,000 Jews (p. 73); Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, puts the figure of evacuees at 8,000 (p. 43); while Kaplan, who was a Judenrat member, refers to 5,000, the same number specified by Barash at the Judenrat session. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” M-11/18, p. 29.
103. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 30. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, pp. 64, 150. Note that the official currency in the Occupied Eastern Territories was the Reichsmark (RM), and that 2.5 Reichsmark were the equivalent of one dollar. However, Soviet currency was also legal tender, and the Germans were prepared to accept tax payments and the like in rubles. At that time, the Reichsmark was equivalent to 10 rubles.
104. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 31.
4. The Period of Calm, November 1941–November 1942 (pages 115–154)

5. Ibid., p. 108. The minutes were originally written in Hebrew.
7. Koch’s instruction of December 15, 1941, stated that from January 1942, the Reichsmark would be the ghetto’s official currency. The going rate for the Reichsmark was 10 rubles (Blumental, *Darko Shel Ha-Judenrat*, p. 395) at a time when half a kilogram of sausage cost 1.5 Reichsmarks. See “Tsu der Geshikhte fun di Bialystoker Yidn,” YVA, M-11/29, pp. 15–17.
11. Blumental, *Darko Shel Ha-Judenrat*, p. 307, notice 307. The order regarding the establishment of housing committees was issued on August 15, 1941, after the motion was rejected in the Judenrat session of August 3. See ibid., p. 9.
12. Ibid., p. 111. See also ibid., p. 398, notice 190, and pp. 55, 87, 123, 271.
13. Barash announced in a Judenrat session on August 14, 1942: “Jews are arriving from two opposite directions: From Slonim and from Warsaw. Even worse, they have begun to return from Pruzhany.” Ibid., p. 231.
15. Ibid., p. 505, notice 371. See also ibid., p. 435, notices 248, 249.
16. Ibid., p. 71.
17. On February 14, 1942, Barash reported: “There are still various plans concerning the ghetto: [to split it into] two ghettos. . . . However, we are doing all we can to show them how useful we are.” Ibid., p. 135.
18. Ibid., p. 373, notice 148.
21. Quoted in Ibid., p. 95. Peciner expressed a similar opinion: “It is up to us to behave as Jews have done throughout the generations.” Ibid.
22. Quoted in ibid., p. 63. This sum shows that the tax was based on an estimated 41,000 people, not 35,000, as Barash and Rosenman quoted in previous sessions. Ibid., p. 55. This higher figure may have been used because Barash needed more money to finance other Judenrat expenses, or because the Germans mistakenly assessed the number of Jews in the ghetto at more than 40,000. The threat of lashes for nonpayment of “state taxes” (melukhe shtayern) was brought up at the Judenrat session of October 25, 1941. Ibid., p. 367, notice 140. See also [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 24; Tsu der Geshikhte fun di Bialystoker Yidn,” YVA, M-11/29, p. 5.
23. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 7.
25. Ibid., pp. 73–75.
28. Ibid., pp. 159, 171. See also [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 24.
31. Reizner, Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum, p. 62. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, pp. 67–69, 369, notice 146.
32. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 12. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, pp. 11, 291, notice 20; Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 48.
34. Ibid., pp. 431–33, 155. See also Vered, Libiot be-Tsel ba-Shoah, p. 31.
35. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 79.
36. Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 34. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, pp. 87, 89, 179, 377, notice 157, p. 383, notice 166.
37. Quoted in Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 81.
38. See note 2 above. Barash himself mentioned this tragic episode during the Judenrat’s first anniversary celebrations. See Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 217.
39. Ibid., p. 79.


42. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 93.

43. Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, pp. 37, 48.

44. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 237. Elsewhere Barash said: “Our policy of making the ghetto useful to the authorities is correct.” See ibid., p. 229. Both statements were made in August 1942.

45. Quoted in ibid., p. 215.

46. Quoted in ibid., p. 229.

47. Quoted in ibid., p. 245.

48. Quoted in ibid., p. 249.

49. Quoted in ibid., p. 253.

50. Quoted in ibid.

51. Quoted in ibid., p. 255.

52. Ibid., p. 249. In the first half of October 1942, the Gestapo in Białystok received a secret order from the Reich Main Security Office to destroy the Białystok ghetto and other ghettos in the district. See Aaron Eisenbach “Di Felker-Oysratung Politik fun Daytshen Imperializm inem Iberbrukh period oyfn Mizrakh-Front,” Bleter far Gesikhhte 4, no. 4 (July–December 1950): 45.

53. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 13. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, pp. 246, 255, 261; Vered, Libiot be-Tsel ha-Shoah, p. 31. On the deportation of women from Białystok to Wołkowysk, see Gehia Faktor, Białystok unter der Daytsher Hershaft,” January 1947, YVA, M-11B/305.

54. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 255.

55. Ibid., pp. 255–57.

56. Ibid., pp. 253–63.

57. See Sobotnik’s statement on June 28, 1942, on the ghetto’s first anniversary, in ibid., p. 221. See also statements by Sobotnik, Goldberg, and Rosenman on October 11, 1942, ibid., pp. 261–63.

58. Quoted in ibid., p. 93.

59. Quoted in ibid., p. 105. See also [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 20.

60. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 255. See also ibid., pp. 121, 247.

61. Quoted in ibid., p. 99.

62. Ibid., p. 115. See also Reizner, Umkum Bialystoker Yidntum, pp. 62–63.


64. Ibid., pp. 203, 171, 229, 245–47.

65. Ibid., p. 551. See also ibid., pp. 31, 383, notice 64, p. 395, notice 184, p. 415.
notice 216, p. 513, notice 385; [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 20.


67. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 23. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 155.

68. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, pp. 20–21. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 23. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 149.

69. Dorn testimony, YVA, 03/6205, pp. 54–55; [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 21.

70. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 22.

71. Quoted in Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 155.

72. Quoted in Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 141.

73. Dorn testimony, YVA, 03/6205, pp. 54–55; [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 21.

74. Quoted in ibid., p. 66. See also [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, pp. 20, 23.

75. Barash’s phrase was spoken in Hebrew in the original.

76. Quoted in ibid., p. 177. Barash’s phrase was spoken in Hebrew in the original.

77. Ibid., pp. 201, 203, 217, 247. See also [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 23.

78. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 247. In June 1942, Barash reported that there were about 7,000 people working outside the ghetto. Ibid., p. 197. See also Reizner, Umkum Bialystoker Yidntum, p. 83.


80. Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 32. See also Klementinowsky, Lebn un Umkum in Bialystoker Geto, p. 36; [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, pp. 6, 37.

81. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, pp. 6, 34–35; Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, pp. 131, 327, notice 83, p. 397, notice 186, p. 241. See also Reizner, Umkum Bialystoker Yidntum, p. 66.

82. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 453, notice 283. See also Klementinowsky, Lebn un Umkum in Bialystoker Geto, p. 42.

83. See Sobotnik’s statement in Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 171: “We have entrusted tax collection to the Jewish Police, thereby killing two birds with one stone. For not only does tax collection becomes more efficient, the Jewish Police also benefit therefrom.” See also ibid., p. 509, notice 377.

84. Ibid., p. 315, notice 61.

85. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 35. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 427, notice 234, p. 479, notice 323, p. 541, notice 427.
86. Quoted in Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 129.
87. Ibid., pp. 187, 256. Yehiel Shedler, who until February 1943 worked outside the ghetto, harshly criticized the Jewish police who stood guard at the ghetto gate for collaborating with the German police. See Shedler testimony, HUJ, (110)14, p. 27. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 455, notice 287, p. 289, notice 288; [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Białystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 36.
88. Quoted in Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 189. See also Reizner, Umkum Białystoker Yidntum, p. 94.
89. Grossman, Underground Army, p. 64.
90. Klementinowsky, Lebn un Umkum in Białystoker Geto, pp. 39–40. See also Kot, Khurbn Białystok, p. 35; Friedman, Roads to Extinction, p. 149.
91. Quoted in Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, pp. 187–91. See also Reizner, Umkum Białystoker Yidntum, p. 94; Kot, Khurbn Białystok, p. 35.
94. See Sobotnik’s statement on June 20, 1942, in Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 191.
95. Klementinowsky, Lebn un Umkum in Białystoker Geto, p. 40. See also Reizner, Umkum Białystoker Yidntum, p. 95; Kot, Khurbn Białystok, p. 35; Nowak, Moja Gwiazda, p. 85.
96. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 211.
97. Quoted in ibid., p. 199. See also [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Białystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 36.
98. Reizner, Umkum Białystoker Yidntum, p. 68. See also [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Białystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 36.
99. Quoted in Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 201.
100. Quoted in ibid.
101. Ibid., pp. 257, 243. See also [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Białystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 36; Nowak, Moja Gwiazda, p. 72.
104. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Białystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 8. See also Reizner, Umkum Białystoker Yidntum, pp. 81–82.


114. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/29, pp. 9, 12–13; “Tsu der Geshikhte fun di Bialystoker Yidn,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 10; See also Blumenthal, *Darko shel ha-Judenrat*, p. 487, notice 340. Reizner writes that Leib Minzberg, an Agudat Israel leader from Łódź, was entrusted with organizing the jam and potato flour factory, which he ran until the ghetto's evacuation. See Reizner, *Umkehr Bialystoker Yidntum*, p. 92.


119. Ibid., pp. 5, 297, notice 35, p. 299, notice 37, p. 301, notice 40. The ghetto had three pharmacies, one at 3 Rozsanska Street, one at 7 Nay Velt Street, and the third at 36 Kupiecka Street. See also ibid., p. 429, notice 240.

120. Ibid., pp. 16, 25.


431, notice 242, p. 451, notice 278, p. 327, notice 84. See also Nowak, *Moja Gwiazda*, p. 82; Reizner, *Um Kum Bialystoker Yidntum*, p. 65.


125. See Barash’s statement on August 16, 1942, ibid., p. 239. See also ibid., p. 423, notice 226, p. 425, notice 230, p. 445, notice 271.


131. Blumental, *Darko shel ha-Judenrat*, pp. 6, 14; Reizner, *Um Kum Bialystoker Yidntum*, p. 65.


133. Quoted in Blumental, *Darko shel ha-Judenrat*, p. 93.

134. Ibid., p. 331, notice 91. See also similar notices, ibid., p. 299, notice 35, p. 339, notice 98, p. 385, notice 170, p. 429, notice 238.


138. Reizner, *Um Kum Bialystoker Yidntum*, p. 86. See also [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA M-11/18, p. 19.

139. Blumental, *Darko shel ha-Judenrat*, p. 323, notice 76. In addition to this no-
tice, other notices were put up for enrollment for vocational courses on September 3 and 8, 1941 (ibid., p. 327, notice 85), and on September 5 a notice was posted concerning the registration of teachers (ibid., p. 328, notice 86). See also [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, p. 27; Reizner, Umkum Bialystoker Yidntum, p. 69; Blumental, Darko shel ba-Judenrat, pp. 29, 79.

140. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, pp. 27–28. On the opening date of the various classes in the secular school, see Blumental, Darko shel ba-Judenrat, p. 351, notice 114, p. 359, notice 125, p. 399, notice 189, p. 401, notice 194, p. 407, notice 203, p. 441, notice 259. The school also had classes for pupils who knew no Yiddish, and for pupils who knew no Hebrew. Ibid., p. 405, notice 200. On the religious school, see ibid., p. 375, notice 153. See also Reizner, Umkum Bialystoker Yidntum, p. 69.


142. Blumental, Darko shel ba-Judenrat, p. 325, notice 82.

143. Ibid., p. 355, notice 118. This notice was put up on October 7, 1941, following the many complaints about bribery that were voiced after the deportation to Pruzhany. It served both to deter the Judenrat officials and to show the ghetto residents that the Judenrat intended to punish offenders.

144. Ibid., pp. 181–83. The law court was set up on the next day, on June 1, 1942. See p. 461, notice 294.


146. Quoted in ibid., p. 219.

147. On the Judenrat’s first anniversary, Sobotnik said the following about Rabbi Rosenman: “He has gone through a lot. His greatest virtue is that he appointed the honorable engineer Barash to take his place, since he himself was unable to perform his duties properly.” See ibid., p. 221. Kaplan also stated that the rabbi had to resign from his position because of his age and poor health. [Kaplan], “Der Yidnrat in Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/18, pp. 2–3.


149. Quoted in ibid., p. 221.

150. Quoted in ibid., p. 225.

151. In an assembly that took place on November 9, 1941, Barash said: “We are relying on you to pass on everything [that was said here today] to the entire population.” Ibid., p. 77. Dr. Rosenman opened the General Assembly that took place on November 23, 1941, with the following words: “The purpose of today’s assembly is to inform the entire community, through those who are here today, of the situation in the ghetto.” Ibid., p. 89. In the General Assembly of August 16, 1942, which was so well attended that people had to bang on the door to be let in, Barash gave a detailed review of the situation and explained the thinking behind his policy. He also said: “I ask all of you to pass on the word to the thousands who were unable to attend.” Ibid., p. 239.
Notes


5. The Early Days of the Underground (pages 155–184)


4. Quoted in Korczak, Lebavot be-Asfar, p. 49.

5. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Dlekah, p. 123.


7. Ibid.


11. Itzhak (Antek) Zuckerman, Sheva ba-Shanim ha-Hen (Ghetto Fighters’ House, 1990), pp. 137, 142. See also Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Dlekah, p. 7.


13. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Dlekah, new ed., p. 101; Zuckerman,

15. Ibid., p. 44; Grosman testimony, YVA, 03/8650, pp. 89–91. See also Group Interview, YVA, 03/3882, p. 3. Abba Kovner also said in his testimony: “We participated in the Pioneer Coordination Committee’s efforts to help people escape from Vilna to Białystok and Grodno.” Kovner testimony, HUJ, (12)83, p. 6.
17. Friedman, “Tzi is in der Nazi tsayt gevenan ‘ander Deitchland?” YIVO Bleter 39 (1955): 161. Herman Adler, in his testimony, also claimed that it was only because of this preliminary agreement that the Jewish deputy police commander in the Vilna ghetto, the Betarist Josef Glazman, allowed them to leave Vilna. See Herman Adler testimony, Ghetto Fighters’ House Archives, 0418, p. 10.
18. Bella Hazan testimony, Ghetto Fighters’ House Archives, H-71; See also Bella Hazan Yaari testimony, YVA, 03/4025, p. 23; Birman, “Tsu Mayne Libe Haverim,” YVA, M-11/15, pp. 285, 286 (includes a list of Dror members who came to Białystok together with Anton Schmidt). The exact date on which the group left Vilna is not known.
23. For the document, see Friedman, “Tzi is in der Nazi tsayt gevenan ‘ander Deitchland?” YIVO Bleter 39 (1955). See also Zuckerman, Sheva ha-Shanim ha-Hen, p. 144; Schmidt, Righteous Among the Nations YVA, 03/55.
26. Ibid., p. 69. See also Grosman testimony, YVA, 03/8650, p. 99.
28. Quoted in ibid., p. 64.
29. Ibid., pp. 63–64.
30. Ibid., pp. 64–65.
31. Ibid., p. 120.
32. See Zuckerman, Sheva ha-Shanim ha-Hen, p. 37.
33. See Tel Hai, pp. 7–12.
35. Ibid., pp. 286–87. See also Tel Hai, p. 325. See also Bronka Vinizka Klibansky, “My Memories of Mordecai Tenenbaum and of the Activities of the Underground in Białystok” (in Hebrew), Yalkut Moreshet 9 (October 1968): 9, 59.
38. Ibid., p. 289.
40. See Talmi and Talmi, eds., Leksikon Zioni, p. 46.
42. Talmi and Talmi, eds., Leksikon Zioni, p. 53.
43. Arad, Ghetto in Flames, p. 240.
45. See Talmi and Talmi, eds., Leksikon Zioni, p. 112.
46. Mark, Ofyshstand in Białystoker Geto, p. 212; Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekah, p. 38.
48. Arad, Ghetto in Flames, pp. 239–42.
50. Quoted in ibid.
51. Quoted in ibid., p. 76.
52. Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, pp. 195–96. See also Gnatowski, “Z dziejow Białegostoku w latach II wojny swiatowej,” p. 44.
55. Sefer Hashomer Hatzair, p. 657.
60. The more popular papers were the Białostoker Zeitung, Dos Reich, Pruessische Zeitung, and the Königsberg Zeitung. The less popular papers were the Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, and the Volkscher Buechachter. All were German-language papers. See Datner, Pamiece 200,000 Zydoow Wojewodztwa Białostockiego, p. 19.
61. When a radio set was discovered in an apartment on Jurowiecka Street, the Germans shot all residents of the building to death. See Datner, Pamiece 200,000 Zydoow Wojewodztwa Białostockiego, p. 19. See also Y. Tzdiker, In di Negel fun Toyt (Buenos Aires, 1947), pp. 61–64.
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62. See Arad, Gutman, and Margulies, eds., Documents on the Holocaust, p. 208.
66. See Indictments and Verdicts, YVA TR-10/661, p. 47. See also Białystok Trial, p. 552.
69. Białystok Trial, p. 554.
70. Ibid., p. 555.
73. Tenenbaum’s diary informs us of an assassination attempt against Otto Streblow, a director of the aktion in Grodno. Streblow was wounded and three members of the underground were killed during the attack. Ibid., p. 23.
74. The four transports left on January 29, 30, and 31 and February 1, 1943, respectively. Białystok Trial, pp. 579–81.
75. See Zydowski Instytut Historyczny (ZIH) Archives, Warsaw, 36(149d); Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekah, new ed., pp. 25–28; Grossman, Underground Army, pp. 177–83; Białystok Trial, pp. 583–628.
76. On the deportations to Treblinka during the above period, see Itzhak Arad, Treblinka, Ovdan ve-Mered (Am Oved, 1983), pp. 263–65.
77. See Zydowski Instytut Historyczny (ZIH) Archives, Warsaw, 36(149d); Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekah, new ed., pp. 25–28; Grossman, Underground Army, pp. 177–83; Białystok Trial, pp. 583–628.
79. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekah, new ed., p. 15.
80. Ibid., p. 22.
81. Ibid., p. 90.
83. Ibid.
85. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekah, new ed., p. 15.
86. Ibid., p. 22.
87. Ibid., p. 90.
88. Ibid., pp. 16, 20. See also Klibansky, “My Memories of Mordecai Tenenbaum,” p. 66; Syzmon Datner, “Getto Białostockie i jego podziemne archiwum,” 1945, p. 95, Author Collection.
89. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekah, new ed., p. 31.

91. *Tel Hai*, p. 373.


93. Ibid., p. 35.

94. The gathering of material began in January 1943 and continued for several months. The earliest document is dated July 8, 1942, and the latest, April 1943. The archive, including both source and copied documents, comprises 433 Judenrat notices and 52 minutes of Judenrat meetings in the Bialystok ghetto; 11 essays and two short articles by Mordecai Tenenbaum-Tamaroff; 46 reviews, diaries, testimonies, and memoirs of Bialystok, Grodno, and other towns in the Bialystok District, and of the Treblinka extermination camp; local Gestapo documents pertaining to the ghetto’s fate; and 9 personal accounts and a label that was removed from a freight car on the Treblinka-Bialystok train. Tenenbaum himself prepared all the material for concealment, as proved by his handwritten notes in the margins of the documents. While most of the documents in the archive are in Yiddish, some are also in Hebrew or Polish. The Gestapo documents are, obviously, in German. See *Archive of the Bialystok Ghetto Underground, YVA, M-11*.


96. Ibid., p. 149.

97. In December 1942 and January 1943, the first partisan groups left the ghetto. See Datner, “Szkice do studiow nad dziejami zydowskiego ruchu partyzanckiego,” p. 27.


99. Ibid., p. 34.

100. Ibid.


103. Ibid., pp. 23–24.

104. Ibid., p. 24.


107. Ibid., p. 18.

108. Ibid., p. 21.

109. Ibid., p. 18.

110. Ibid., p. 17.

111. Ibid.

112. Ibid., p. 24.

Notes

114. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 28.
115. Ibid., p. 24.
116. Ibid., p. 33.
117. This paragraph, as well as others referring to Haika Grosman, was omitted from both editions of Dappim min ha-Delekab. The original manuscript is in YVA, M-11/3.
119. Ibid.
120. Ibid.
121. Ibid., p. 64.
122. Ibid., p. 16.
124. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 20.
125. Quoted in ibid.
127. Ibid., p. 155.
128. Ibid., p. 152–53.
129. Presumably, the Bund faction that did not join Front A nevertheless agreed in principle to join the newly formed underground, because Rubinstein, their representative, participated in a meeting that took place at Barash’s house on January 31, 1943. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 31. See also Grossman, Underground Army, p. 153.
130. Quoted in Grossman, Underground Army, p. 263.
131. Ibid., p. 153.

6. The First Aktion, February 1943 (pages 185–215)

2. Ibid., p. 253.
4. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 53.
6. Eisenbach, Hitlerowska polityka, p. 458. See also appendix to Friedel’s Trial, GKA, SAB. The appendix was also published by Szymon Datner, “Annex to Friedel’s Trial” (in Hebrew), Biuletyn ZIH 100, no. 4 (July 1976): 102.
7. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 63.
8. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 497; Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 63. Since industrial orders continued pouring in, the Judenrat tried to absorb factory workers formerly employed outside the ghetto into the ghetto factories. Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 499, notice 358, p. 267.
10. Ibid., p. 267. Tenenbaum reported that 25,000 square meters—including most of Zamenhof and Zydowska Streets and some of Biała, Branska, and Polna Streets—were removed from the ghetto. See Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekab*, new ed., p. 63; Blumenthal, *Darko shel ha-Judenrat*, pp. 271, 501.
13. [Peysekh Kaplan], “Der Khurbn Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/17, p. 2. This piece was written in the ghetto in March 1943 for the underground archives, apparently by Peysekh Kaplan.
17. [Peysekh Kaplan], “Der Khurbn Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/17, p. 2. This piece was written in the ghetto in March 1943 for the underground archives, apparently by Peysekh Kaplan.
20. Ibid., pp. 57–58. Müller’s data on the number of Jews in the ghetto were inflated, since in late 1942 there were only about 42,000 Jews in the ghetto, including hundreds of refugees who arrived after the *aktion* in the district. See also Gerald Reitlinger, *Die Endlösung* (Berlin, 1960).
21. Interestingly, the next day Tenenbaum wrote in his diary: “Klein (the “good guy”) has become director of the ghetto. We see this as a victory for the moderate elements in the Gestapo.” See Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekab*, new ed., pp. 46, 39. On Himmler’s order, see Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, p. 58.
27. Ibid., pp. 86–87.
30. Koblenz State Archives, 161/25, R6-209, pp. 40–43. In his answer to Speer dated February 9, Himmler wrote: “Of course you are right. Building wooden accommodation for a further 20,000 people is currently out of the question, and my officers have received instructions to make do with what there is.” See ibid.
31. Albert Speer, 

32. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekab*, new ed., p. 31. A few days earlier, seven wagon loads of clothes had arrived at the Tekstil Industrie Ofbau and Verterfassung plants in the ghetto. See ibid., p. 27.

33. Ibid., p. 22.

34. Ibid., p. 28.

35. Ibid., p. 29.

36. Ibid., p. 30.

37. Original manuscript of Tenenbaum's diary, YVA, M-11/3.


40. Ibid., p. 29.

41. Ibid., p. 22.

42. Ibid., p. 32.


44. Timetable, YVA, 053/47. This timetable was also subsequently changed, but the number of deportees remained constant.

45. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, p. 82.


47. Kot, *Khurbn Bialystok*, p. 56. See also Vered, *Libiot be-Tsel ha-Shoah*, p. 33.

48. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekab*, new ed., p. 34. For information on Dror’s bunker, see also Klibansky, “My Memories of Mordecai Tenenbaum,” p. 60.

49. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekab*, new ed., p. 34. See also Reizner, *Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum*, p. 120.


51. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekab*, new ed., p. 35.

52. Ibid., p. 36.

53. Ibid. See also Tel Hai, p. 331; Klibansky, “My Memories of Mordecai Tenenbaum,” p. 60.


55. Reizner, *Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum*, p. 120.


58. Ibid., p. 39.

59. Ibid.
Notes

60. Ibid., p. 65.
61. Reizner, Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum, p. 120.
63. Ibid., p. 41. See also Reizner, Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum, p. 121.
64. Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, pp. 59–60. See also [Kaplan], “Der Khurbn Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/17, pp. 3–5; Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ba-Delekab, new ed., p. 65–66; Friedel Trial, Shlomo Blas testimony. Grossman, Underground Army, p. 253. See also Shedler testimony, HUJ, (110)41.
65. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ba-Delekab, new ed., p. 66. See also Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 59.
67. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ba-Delekab, new ed., p. 66.
68. [Kaplan], “Der Khurbn Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/17, p. 5. See also Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ba-Delekab, new ed., p. 66.
70. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ba-Delekab, new ed., p. 67.
73. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ba-Delekab, new ed., pp. 67–68.
76. Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 62. The chronicle written by M. Kayin (probably a pseudonym for Mordechai Chmielnik, of the Poalei Zion–SS) in the ghetto, found among the documents of the underground archive, states: “The factories have proved to be a safe haven, and everyone is seeking asylum there. . . . They go there for the 300 grams of bread, and fight to get in, even though everyone knows that next time round, the factory workers will also be taken to Treblinka. Nevertheless, there is a residual hope that perhaps some people, if not all, will be safe in the factories. . . . That’s why they’re flooding the factories.” M. Kayin [Mordechai Chmielnik?], “Di Shtimung in geto Bialystok,” April 1943, YVA, M-11/31, p. 2.
78. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ba-Delekab, new ed., p. 68.
80. The editor of the Polish version of Kayin’s chronicle pointed out that a Jew called Yudowsky, who was known to be a Nazi collaborator, denounced Malmed to the Gestapo. See “Zaglada Białegostoku,” Biuletyn ZIH 60 (1960): 81.


82. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 69. The witnesses at Friedel’s trial described the atrocities committed by Friedel and emphasized that he was responsible for implementing the aktion. See Friedel Trial. Friedel was not dismissed from the Gestapo, even after the aktion, although his failure to appear in the ghetto on February 8 and 9 seems to indicate that he was reprimanded, as Tenenbaum claimed. See ibid.

83. [Kaplan], “Der Khurbn Białystok,” YVA, M-11/17, p. 10; Reizner, Umkum fun Białystoker Yidntum, p. 135; GKA, p. 102.


86. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 70.

87. Vered, Libiot be-Tsel ha-Shoah, p. 33.

88. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 70.

89. Ibid. In another entry Tenenbaum wrote: “10,000 people are ‘below ground.’ The entire Białystok ghetto has become one huge hiding place.” See ibid., p. 73. Tenenbaum apparently estimated that about 10,000 Jews were hiding in factories, another 10,000 in special hiding places, and the remainder in their homes.


91. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 70.


94. Kaplan cited two public figures who committed suicide. The first was Zvi Wieder, a veteran activist and author who worked as a baker in the ghetto. His neighbors testified that he hanged himself when he saw the Gestapo heading straight for his hiding place. The second was Francesca Horowitz, a well-known teacher and chief secretary of the Judenrat. Before the start of the aktion, Horowitz’s nerves had been shattered after she found out that her family in Galicia had been wiped out, and during the deportation she suffered a nervous breakdown and committed suicide by swallowing poison. Unusual for the times, both burial ceremonies were attended by a large number of people. See [Kaplan], “Der Khurbn Białystok,” YVA M-11/17, pp. 14–15. See also Shprung Levkowitz testimony, Author Collection; Reizner, Umkum fun Białystoker Yidntum, p. 137.
96. Ibid., p. 41. This was the only time that Tenenbaum wrote exclusively in Yiddish. See also Reizner, *Um Kum fun Bialystoker Yidntum*, p. 141; Klementinowsky, *Lebn un Um Kum in Bialystoker Geto*, p. 58.
97. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekah*, new ed., p. 74. “The behavior of the Jewish police was exemplary. They did what they could to save lives.” See Kayin [Chmielnik?], “Di Shitimung in Geto Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/31, p. 2. See also Grosman testimony, YVA, 03/8650, p. 182.
98. Transportation Order no. 552 of the General Administration of Eastern Railways assigned five trains to deport Jews from Bialystok to Treblinka. The order stated that the first train was to leave Bialystok for Treblinka on February 9, 1943. See Ludwigsburg Collection, YVA, 053/47. When, however, it transpired that the *aktion* in Bialystok would begin already on February 5, the original deportation schedule was changed, and the first two transports were rerouted to Auschwitz. See Danuta Czech, *Kalendarium der Ereignisse im KL. Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1939–1945* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1989), pp. 407–8. See also *Hefte von Auschwitz* 4 (1961): 72. The other three trains reached Treblinka as originally planned, although their exact dates of departure are unknown. See Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, p. 99. In his book on Treblinka, Arad failed to examine other archival material, relying exclusively on the train timetables from February 1, 1943. He therefore reached the erroneous conclusion that the five transports that left from Bialystok in February were all headed for Treblinka. See Arad, *Treblinka* p. 236. Vinizka Klibansky, too, was wrong in stating that seven transports left Bialystok. Bronka Vinizka Klibansky, “The Bialystok Uprising” (in Hebrew), *Yalkut Moreshet* 36 (December 1983): 34.
99. Estimates of the number of Jews deported and killed vary from one source to another. See Grossman, *Underground Army*, p. 235; Klementinowsky, *Lebn un Um Kum in Bialystoker Geto*, p. 55; [Kaplan], “Der Khurbn Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/17, p. 16. After the *aktion*, Tenenbaum wrote: “About 9,000 men were deported during the *aktion*. Another 900 or so were killed on the spot.” See Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekah*, new ed., p. 72. Barash told Tenenbaum that according to official lists, 8,500 Jews were deported and killed, but that he believed the figures to be nearer 10,000. See ibid., p. 45. Friedel also wrote that in February 1943, 10,000 Jews were deported from the ghetto. We may assume that Barash, with his intimate knowledge of the ghetto population, was most accurate in his assessment.
100. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekah*, new ed., p. 17.
104. Ibid.
105. Ibid., p. 22.
106. Ibid., p. 21.
107. Ibid., p. 34.
108. Ibid.
109. Ibid., p. 36.
110. Ibid., p. 39.
118. Tenenbaum calls the Communists “shatfaim” (collaborators), a sarcastic allusion to the fact that they were supposed to be partners in the struggle. See Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekah*, new ed., p. 73.
120. Ibid., p. 209. See also Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekah*, new ed., p. 48.
121. Klementinowsky described the outstanding bravery of the three Smitizky sisters who, together with Rivka Korniansky, Osnat Tzaleh, and Devorah Litvin, poured petrol and acid from the third floor of their building on the Germans who were about to enter. See Klementinowsky, *Lebn un Umkum in Bialystoker Geto*, p. 54. Ber Mark wrote that a group of young people led by Rachel Rosenzweig offered resistance in a building on Chmielna Street. See Mark, *Oyfshtand in Bialystoker Geto*, pp. 279–80. See also A. Gershuni, “Vegn der Vidershtand-Bavegung in Bialystoker Geto,” January 1946, YVA, M-11B/116.
125. Ibid., pp. 91–92.
126. Ibid., p. 73.
129. Ibid., p. 77. Zipporah Birman also wrote: “There is no more news from Warsaw. Apparently, there was a counteraction . . . but it was quashed. . . . The feeling is terrible. We are the last to survive. Even in Bendin, no-one is left. We shall be the last to fall. After us, there will be no one. There will be no one left to bury our mutilated bodies.” See Birman, “Tsu Mayne Libe Haverim,” YVA, M-11/15.
Notes

130. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 91.
131. Ibid., p. 50.
132. Ibid., p. 79.
133. Ibid.
134. Ibid.
135. Ibid., p. 84.
137. [Kaplan], “Der Khurbn Bialystok,” YVA, M-11/17, p. 16. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 515, notice 388; Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 70; Grossman, Underground Army, p. 234.
138. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., pp. 41–42. This anguished entry in Tenenbaum’s diary was in Yiddish. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 517, notice 391, p. 519, notice 520; Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 71.
140. Klementinowsky, Lebn um Umkum in Bialystoker Geto, p. 61. See also Klibansky, “Bialystok Uprising,” p. 34.
141. Reizner, Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum, p. 144. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 517, notice 389, p. 519, notices 393, 395.
142. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., pp. 43, 48. See also Blumental, Darko shel ha-Judenrat, p. 525, notice 402, p. 529, notices 408, 409.
143. On February 14, 1943, a transport of 500 Jews left Grodno. The next day, another transport of 1,600 Jews left Grodno for Treblinka. See ZIH, 36(149d), p. 2. See also Klementinowsky, Lebn um Umkum in Bialystoker Geto, p. 60.
144. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 51.
147. Reizner, Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum, p. 146.
148. Excerpts from documents of the Białystok Gestapo relating to the Ghetto, YVA, M-11/26. This document, together with two other German documents, was copied from the original German, and also appears as M-11/34 in the Yad Vashem Archives. Note that this is the only known case of a German document falling into the Judenrat’s hands. There is no doubt that the document was copied from the original, both because the language and style are typical of Nazi decisions and orders and because Tenenbaum added comments in his own handwriting. Tenenbaum could have obtained the document only from Barash, especially since the Jews who worked for the Gestapo almost certainly had no access to classified material and, even if they had, would not have risked their lives by stealing it.
149. Grossman, Underground Army, p. 234; Grosman testimony, YVA, 03/8650, p. 214.
The Interim Period, March–May 1943 (pages 216–242)

1. The Judenrat notices and Tenenbaum’s diary end in March 1943 (the minutes of Judenrat meetings end even earlier, in mid-November 1942). Both sources were transferred from the ghetto’s underground archive to the Aryan side of the city, where they were hidden in metal containers. There is no reason why the Judenrat should have stopped putting up notices in the ghetto or why Tenenbaum should have stopped writing his diary after March. The only logical explanation is that the archive material for April–August 1943, which must have been hidden, at least in part, outside the ghetto, was never discovered.


3. Ibid., p. 535, notices 418–19; Vered, Libiot be-Tsel ha-Shoah, p. 35.


10. Ibid., pp. 23–24.


12. See Rabin, Grodno, p. 597.


See also Nowak, Moja Gwiazda, p. 117.


17. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekah, new ed., p. 53.

18. Ibid., p. 54.

19. Ibid.

20. Tenenbaum reported: “Barash gave me 98 gold coins, precious stones, watches, chains, etc. They will sell like hot cakes.” Ibid., p. 55; “Barash gave me half a kilogram of gold, about thirty gold watches, etc.” Ibid., p. 60.

21. Ibid., p. 54.

22. Ibid., p. 53. A number of errors occurred in the printed version. See original manuscript in YVA, M-11/3.
Notes

23. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 54.
24. Ibid., p. 55.
31. Datner, Walka i zaglada Bialostockiego Ghetta, p. 34; Grossman, Underground Army, p. 222. Grossman gives one to understand that their capture was due to the excessive use of forged papers. See ibid., p. 223.
33. Ibid., p. 227. See also Datner, Walka i zaglada Bialostockiego Ghetta, p. 34.
34. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 58. See also Datner, Walka i zaglada Bialostockiego Ghetta, p. 34.
35. Pawel Kozec testimony, July 5, 1991, YVA, 03/6180, pp. 48–53. See also Datner, Walka i zaglada Bialostockiego Ghetta, p. 34.
36. Makowsky testimony, YVA, 03/6357, pp. 51–62; Vered, Libiot be-Tsel ba-Shoah, p. 35; Aaron Lach testimony, 1993, Author Collection. Datner wrote that this group was headed by Bobrik and Wiskowska of the Communists. Over time, the leadership of the group was assumed by Jezy Sochaczewsky (Sasha) from Warsaw, formerly a sports instructor for Morgenshtern, who worked in Bialystok in a printing house. Sochaczewsky perished in September 1943, during clashes with Germans in the Izovy forests. Bobrik was killed in similar circumstances, in January 1944. See Datner, Walka i zaglada Bialostockiego Ghetta, p. 35.
38. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 55.
39. Vinizka Klibansky wrote that Hershel Rosenthal left for the forest in June 1943, while Tenenbaum wrote in his diary that Rosenthal left in March. Either Rosenthal returned to the forest in June, or Klibansky did not remember the exact date of his departure. Klibansky, “My Memories of Mordecai Tenebaum,” p. 63; Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 59.
40. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 54. Although Tenenbaum wrote that the first company left for the forest in March, he did not specify how many left, who they were, or what happened to them. Presumably the company was a mixed group of young people from several movements. Some members of the company, the first to be sent out by Front B, evidently returned to the ghetto. Ibid., p. 61.
Notes

42. Kot, Khorbn Bialystok, pp. 72–73.
47. Grossman, Underground Army, p. 263.
48. Ibid.
49. Datner, Walka i zaglada Białostockiego Getta, p. 35. Nahum Ablewicz was killed in the ghetto uprising on August 16, and Yoel Kissler was killed several days later, in the forests of Izovy. Ibid. On leaving for the forests in that period, see Klibansky, “Bialystok Uprising,” p. 35.
51. Ibid., pp. 242–50; Grosman testimony, YVA, 03/8650, p. 146.
52. On the attempts to free Kuba Rogozinsky from Wołkowysk, see Grossman, Underground Army, p. 157–66. See also ibid., pp. 258–60, 269–70.
53. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 55.
54. Ibid., pp. 55, 61.
57. Rabin, Grodno, pp. 597–98.
61. Ibid., p. 262. Kot claimed that three boys were killed. See Kot, Khorbn Bialystok, p. 74. See also Tuvya Citron, “An oyfreis fun a Bombe oyf Tchi$tie Gas,” October 1945, YVA, M-11B/89.
62. Grossman, Underground Army, p. 262. Kot wrote that the Judenrat settled the matter by stating that an oven in the bakery situated on the ground floor of the building had exploded. See Kot, Khorbn Bialystok, p. 74.
64. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 60.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid., pp. 60–61.
67. Ibid., p. 61.
68. Ibid., p. 91.
69. Ibid., p. 110.
71. Ibid., p. 255.
72. Ibid., p. 256.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid., p. 257.
75. Ibid., in this instance, the Hebrew edition diverges from the English edition.
79. Ibid.; Omiljanowicz, Zienia Bialostocka przypomina, p. 15. See also Jerzy Turonek, Białorus pod okupacją niemiecką (Warsaw: Książka Wiedza, 1993), pp. 73–75.
81. Ibid., pp. 28–29, 33.
82. Ibid., pp. 29–32; Turonek, Białorus pod okupacją niemiecką, p. 76.
86. Omiljanowicz, Zienia Bialostocka przypomina, p. 27; Omiljanowicz, Zanikajace echa, p. 179.
87. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., pp. 111–13. The Żydowski Komitet Narodowy (ZKN, Jewish National Council) was set up to represent the majority of the Warsaw Jews before the two Polish undergrounds (the AK and the AL). See also Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., p. 107.
88. Ibid., pp. 112–13.
91. Artur Schade testimony, YVA 03/6619. See also Omiljanowicz, Zanikajace echa, pp. 183–86; Shamai Kizelstein, “Netiv Ha-Goral,” 1991, pp. 5–6, Author Collection.
93. Dorn testimony, YVA, 03/6205, pp. 57, 62, 76–80. The three families that Schade hid were the Kizelstein family, engineer Goldstein’s family, and Mari (Kaplan) Mendelsohn’s family. Mari Mendelsohn testimony, Author Collection.
96. Hasia Bilicka Bornstein and Haika Grosman, testimonies, YVA, M-31/469.
See also Bronka Vinizka Klibansky testimony, March 24, 1954, YVA, 031/55.
98. Ibid., p. 250; Kozec testimony, YVA, 03/6180, pp. 29–30.
99. See Kozec testimony, YVA, 03/6180; Dorn testimony, YVA, 03/6205; Mari Mendelsohn testimony, HUJ, 110/20.
100. See YVA, 031/5355.
101. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekab, new ed., pp. 75–76.

8. The End of the Ghetto (pages 243–276)

2. On Heinrich Himmler’s order concerning the destruction of the ghettos in the Ostland, see Arad, Gutman, and Margulies, eds., Documents on the Holocaust, p. 363. In August 1943, Himmler issued a similar order for the Jews remaining in the Generalgouvernement, Warthegau, and Silesia. See also Eisenbach, Hitlerowska polityka, pp. 459–60.
3. See Stanisław Piotrowski, Misja Odyla Globocnika: Sprawozdania o wynikach finansowych zagłady Żydów w Polsce (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawn., 1949) p. 47. Since the iron-processing plant in Lublin and the textile plants in Radom were not yet ready for operation, the Jews were employed in existing factories, such as the brush factory in Lublin, set up in May 1943. The Ostindustrie took over the factories previously managed by the SS in Radom on July 1, 1943. These were clothes workshops, a carpentry workshop, an munitions plant, and a factory for the exploitation of resources from marshes and quarries. The Radom labor camp employed about 5,000 Jews. See Piotrowski, Misja Odyla Globocnika, pp. 48–50; Eisenbach, “Di Sibbes vos Hohn Tzugeaylt,” p. 74.
7. Ibid, p. 80. See also Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, p. 299, TR-
10/813, p. 157; Mark, *Oyfshtand in Bialystoker Geto*, p. 373. In his testimony, Fritz Friedel stated: “Zimmermann argued that the Jews should be left in Białystok since almost all of them worked for the army.” Friedel testimony.


9. Friedel wrote in his testimony that Heimbach, chief of Gestapo in Białystok, told him that Herbert Zimmermann had informed him [Heimbach] that Himmler had appointed Globocnik to deport the Jews from the Białystok ghetto. See Friedel testimony.


12. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, pp. 180, 299–300, TR-10/813, pp. 157–58. Heinz Errelis, who participated in the akció, testified that a commando from Lublin, a police regiment, and a Ukrainian battalion were enlisted to help the local security police with the evacuation. See Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/813, p. 170.


18. These data are taken from a report Odilo Globocnik sent Himmler on January 5, 1944, and from an Ostindustrie report dated March 13, 1944. See Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, pp. 301–2.

19. Both Friedel and Heimbach confirmed this in their testimonies. See ibid., TR-10/661, p. 302; Friedel testimony.


25. Ibid., p. 159.


31. Friedel testimony. This was before Globocnik visited the ghetto, when Zimmermann still advocated leaving the Białystok ghetto intact.
32. Friedel testimony. See also Mark, *Oyfshtand in Bialystoker Geto*, p. 375.
37. Ibid., p. 163.
41. Ibid.
42. Szymon Datner, “Bialystoker Yudenrat Meldungen,” *Blæter far Geshikhte* 4, no. 4, (October–December 1951): 91. See also Mark, *Oyfshtand in Bialystoker Geto*, p. 378. Each police unit in the Occupied Eastern Territories operating under a senior SS-commander had an armored unit and a number of armored vehicles.
46. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ba-Delekah*, new ed., pp. 13–14. The above is taken from a manifesto composed by Tenenbaum on January 13, 1943, for publication on the day the Germans began the liquidation of the ghetto. On January 13, 1943, Tenenbaum wrote in his diary: “I wrote a manifesto calling for a stand and defense. This is the already the third manifesto I have written—the first was in Warsaw, the second in Grodno, and the third, here in Białystok.” See ibid., p. 15; “Pirkei Yoman al Peulot Tenuat Dror be-Geto Białystok,” January 1943, YVA, M-11/4.
48. Mark, *Oyfshtand in Bialystoker Geto*, p. 380, based on the testimony of Shmerel Greenstein. Nowak wrote that Barash tried to oppose the evacuation, and received a slap on the cheek. See Nowak, *Moja Gwiazda*, p. 119; Reizner, *Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum*, pp. 164–65; Shamai Kizelstein, interview by author, September 1993, Author Collection. See also Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/813, pp. 60, 163–64, TR-10/661, p. 303. Hirsh Ognik, who worked in the ghetto as a fireman, testified at the war crimes trials held in Germany after the war that the Germans promised the Jews they would remain alive and told them that since they were going to work in Lublin, they had to take with them the industrial equipment they had used in the ghetto. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA TR-10/813, p. 164.
50. Yisrael Prensky testimony, June 16, 1991, YVA, 03/6637, p. 49 ff; Krakowska


52. Ibid., p. 285.


56. Ibid., p. 285.


64. German legal material points out that at the time of its destruction, there were some 30,000 Jews in the ghetto. Michalsen, in his testimony, estimated 25,000, while, Tenenbaum in a report after the February aktion, estimated 28,000 Jews, including refugees from Grodno. Since there were no far-reaching changes in the ghetto from February to August, one may assume that the number estimated by Tenenbaum on April 2, 1943, was valid also for August 1943, and that it was the most accurate estimate. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, pp. 307, 313; Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dappim min ha-Delekeyah*, new ed., p. 76.


66. Kizelstein interview, Author Collection.


68. See Nazi Documentation, YVA, (DN) 051/14-7, p. 10.

69. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, p. 331. Heinz Errelis, who came to Bialystok from Grodno in March 1943, was responsible for setting up an auxiliary police unit of Belorussians. In his testimony, he said that on the first day of the evacuation, the unit helped guard the closed ghetto. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/813, p. 170.
70. Mark, *Oyfshtand in Bialystoker Geto*, p. 413.


73. Ibid., Anshei ha-Mahteret, p. 290.

74. Grosman testimony, YVA, 03/8650, p. 234. In her interview with the author, 1992, Bronka Vinizka Klibansky stated that she met Grosman on the Aryan side of the city at approximately 10:00 a.m. Author Collection.


80. Reizner, *Umkum fun Bialystoker Yidntum*, pp. 181–83, 187, 197–200. Reizner stated that the Judenrat secretary, Raphael Gutman, committed suicide together with his wife even before they were taken to the cemetery. A German called Lotze, a top official of the Transportation Department of the Sipo in Bialystok, testified that once when he drove Heimbach to the ghetto on a tour of inspection, he saw wagons loaded with hundreds of Jewish corpses. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/813, p. 172.

81. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, p. 305. According to German sources, at least 300 Jews were killed in incidents relating to the paper factory. See ibid, p. 314.

82. YVA, TR-10/813, p. 165; YVA, TR-10/661, p. 308. The train schedule was as follows: On August 17, trains 200 and 201 departed. On August 18, trains 202 and 203 departed. On August 19, trains 204 and 205 departed. On August 20, one train only—number 206—departed. On August 21, trains 207 and 208 departed. On August 22, trains 209 and 210 departed, and on August 23, one train—number 211—departed, for a total of 12 trains. Two other trains transporting Jews from Bialystok arrived in Auschwitz on August 29 and 31. *Hefte von Auschwitz*, no. 6 (1962): 59.


85. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, p. 309.


88. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, p. 309. The testimonies of survivors who testified at trials held in Germany after the war clearly show that during the evacuation, hundreds of Jews were killed both in the ghetto and in Pietrasze Fields. See ibid, p. 315. There is no way of accurately estimating the number of Jews who perished in Białystok itself during the deportation. If we compare the events of the final deportation to those of the February aktion during which almost 1,000 Jews died in the ghetto, we may assume that at least twice as many died in the final deportation in August. For the children, see below.


90. Ibid.


92. Indictments and Verdicts, YVA TR-10/661, p. 312.


94. Ibid., p. 425.

95. Ibid., pp. 424–25. The German document from the Reich Propaganda Ministry in Königsberg also mentions that “in one place, an underground bunker eight meters deep was dug by a group of Jews.” See Yediot Yad Vashem; Klibanky interview, Author Collection.

96. These versions are based on interviews by the author with Efraim Kissler, Haika Grosman, Bronka Vinizka Klibansky, Eva Kracowska, and Shamai Kizelstein, among others, Author Collection. See also Mark, Oyfshtand in Białystoker Geto, pp. 426–28; Reizner, Umkum fun Białystoker Yidntum, pp. 194–97.

97. Mark, Oyfshtand in Białystoker Geto, pp. 429–30. In another testimony, Kissler stated that Friedel ordered five Jews to be removed from the group and marched toward Kupiecka Street. When three of them began singing the “Internationale,” an incensed Friedel ordered them to be shot. See “Białystoker Nazi-Talyon Friedel, Farmishpet tsum Toyt,” Białystoker Shtime, January–February 1950, p. 19. See also Pessah Borstein, “Die Letste Oyfshtendlers in Białystoker Geto,” Fun Letstn Khurbn (Munich) 7 (May 1948): 71–74. Srul Abramson testified at Friedel’s Trial that it was Friedel himself who gave the order to shoot the Jews and ordered the wagon drivers to collect their corpses. See Friedel Trial, p. 6.

98. Mark, Oyfshtand in Białystoker Geto, p. 430.

99. Ibid, p. 431. The circumstances surrounding the death of Yudita Nowogrod ska are not clear. Reizner claims that she was killed in a skirmish on the first day of the revolt. See Reizner, Umkum fun Białystoker Yidntum, p. 172.

100. Tuvya Citron testimony, Investigation of Nazi Crimes, YVA, TR-11/0116; Tuvya Citron testimony, “On the Białystok Ghetto Uprising, the Liquidation of the Hospital” (in Polish), February 1946, YVA, M-11B/140; Tuvya Citron, “Di Evakuatsye fun Shpitel bay der Likvidatsye fun Białystoker Geto,” August 1944, YVA, M-11B/87. Srul Abramson testified at Friedel’s Trial that Friedel gave the order for all people to be evicted from the hospital, and that he and his aides shot
anyone who resisted. See Friedel Trial, p. 6. On the same topic, see also Mira Knyazhev testimony, Friedel Trial, p. 6.


107. Ibid., NG-4786, Microfilm JM/2031. One of the paragraphs refers to an appeal by the French government. Apparently, the French government proposed sending 2,000 Jewish children out of France, 500 out of Holland, 500 out of Belgium, and several hundred from Switzerland to Palestine via Portugal. Another paragraph mentions an appeal by the Argentine Government to allow 1,000 Jewish children to leave the Reich for Argentina.

108. Ibid.


110. Ibid., p. 201; Kovyak, “Der Goyrl fun di Bialystoker Kinder,” p. 34. Datner also wrote that Friedel was the one who implemented the children’s aktion. See “Annex to Friedel Trial,” p. 18.

111. Shprung Levkovitz testimony, Author Collection. See also Citron, “Der Tragisher Goyrl,” p. 13.

112. Shprung Levkovitz testimony, Author Collection. See also Hadassah Shprung Levkovitz, “Der Letzter Veg di 1,200 Bialystoker Kinder,” *Fun Letztn Khurbn* (Munich) 7 (May 1948): 74–79.


114. The witnesses all agree that the journey took three days, although there is some confusion concerning the exact date the train left Bialystok and whether it arrived in Theresienstadt on August 24 or 25. See Indictments and Verdicts, YVA, TR-10/661, pp. 326–29, TR-10/813, p. 184.

115. Shprung Levkovitz testimony, Author Collection.


117. Shprung Levkovitz testimony, Author Collection.

118. Ibid.


120. *Hefte von Auschwitz*, no. 6 (1962), 69.

121. See Josef Lanik, *Co Dante Nevidel* (Osveta-Bratislava, 1964). Citron also wrote that when he was a doctor in Auschwitz, one of the Jewish members of the Sonderkommando in the camp told him that on Yom Kippur eve, children from
Białystok arrived in Birkenau and were immediately killed. See Citron, “Der Tragishe Goyrl,” p. 13. “In the transport of the Reich Main Security Office, 1,260 Jewish children and 53 chaperones from Theresienstadt arrived [in Birkenau]. They were killed in gas chambers on the day they arrived.” Czech, *Kalendarium der Ereignisse*, p. 623.


123. Andro Steiner testimony, Bratislava Documentation Center, YVA, M-5/165. See also Eichmann Trial, TR-3/281; Andro Steiner testimony, n.d., YIVO Archives, New York, copy in Author Collection.


125. Reizner, *Umkum fun Białystoker Yidntum*, pp. 204, 209. See also Krakowska testimony, YVA, 03/5357; Shtrauch testimony, YVA, 03/6013; Prensky testimony, YVA, 03/6637.


128. Shtrauch testimony, YVA, 03/6013.

129. Reizner, *Umkum fun Białystoker Yidntum*, pp. 207–8. Dov Piray of Dror, who was not an active member of the underground, managed to infiltrate the small ghetto. According to him, there were about 700 to 800 Jews in the small ghetto. See Piray testimony, YVA, 03/6181, pp. 55, 61.

130. Reizner, *Umkum fun Białystoker Yidntum*, pp. 213–14. It is hard to estimate the exact number of Jews remaining in the small ghetto. Reizner gives a higher number of 1,200, but there were probably no more than a thousand.

131. See Zofia Leszczynska, *Kronika obozu na Majdanku* (Lublin, 1980), p. 197. Leszczynska argues that this was the last transport to leave Białystok for Lublin. Other Polish researchers agree. See Kielboń, *Migracje ludności w dystrykcie*, pp. 154–55. The German document on the Białystok ghetto revolt states that on September 8, 1943, the purge of the ghetto was completed. See *Yediot Yad Vashem*, December 1963. See also Kizelstein interview, Author Collection.


9. A Comparative Study of the Bialystock Ghetto and Others (pages 277‒293)

1. Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, pp. 65‒78.
2. Ibid.
5. Ungar, Łódź, pp. 96‒112.
11. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, Dappim min ha-Delekah, new ed., p. 67. Gens assumed that such a turning point would occur in December 1943.
12. In a conversation with Datner in Warsaw in April 1983, he explicitly stated: “Today I would not have written about Barash what I wrote after the war.” In a similar vein, Grosman spoke warmly of Barash to her friend Israel Gutman. That was on the day she lost consciousness after a serious accident.
17. Arad, Ghetto in Flames, pp. 268‒69.
18. Similar processes took place in Otwock, Nowy Sącz, the Radom ghetto, and other places. On these ghettos, see Weiss, “Relationship between the Judenrat and the Jewish Police.” p. 177.
22. Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, pp. 113‒114.

Epilogue (pages 294–394)

7. Rabin, Grodno, p. 598.
8. Kot, Khurbn Bialystok, p. 82. See also Shmuel Goldberg testimony, January 4,


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