

## **The History of Częstochowa Jews during the Holocaust and After as Documented in the Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute**

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Historians can point to numerous publications to prove that they have not overlooked Jewish life in Częstochowa. Yet there are some blank pages to be filled and it seems that the archival records at the Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH) can provide many valuable clues.

Few sources at ŻIH date back to the most dynamic times of Jewish life in Częstochowa, starting in the mid-nineteenth century and ending with the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany in September 1939. There are, however, numerous and important documents concerning the most tragic era in the history of Częstochowa Jews, namely WWII and the Holocaust, and also early post-war years marked with attempts to resume Jewish life. Thus all these materials relate prevalingly to one decade, 1939-1949, which is also a major focus of the present seminar. It was the time of the destruction of the vibrant community, whose life and work added to the common good, and also the time of short-lived hopes for reviving some remnants of Jewish life in post-war Poland.

The condition of Częstochowa Jews in the dramatic decade, their fate and their choices – in case of the few survivors, who could choose after the war – did not differ meaningfully from the fate of Polish Jews in general. Still there were some distinctive characteristics worth of notice and well documented in the archival holdings of ŻIH.

What made Częstochowa important in the overall picture of Polish Jews' tragedy in WWII?

The most obvious answer is the size of its ghetto, one of the most heavily populated. In the Generalgouvernement (GG) it was next only to the Warsaw ghetto. About 48,000 people were crowded into it, including over 20,000 Jews forcibly relocated from other towns and cities. No other major ghetto had such a big percentage of resettlers.

But there was also something else that made it a special place. It was the setting up of the Jewish Fighting Organization. Armed resistance movement was organized in just three ghettos and Częstochowa was one of them.

Częstochowa documents at ŻIH are to be found in nine collections: the underground archive of the Warsaw ghetto (the Ringelblum archive); in the collection of diaries and early testimonies of the survivors; in the files of the Elders' Board of the Częstochowa ghetto; in the papers of the American Joint Distribution Committee; in the files of Jewish Self-Help Society; in the original German files on the inmates of the HASAG-Peltesery camp; in the files drawn up at the Central Committee of Polish Jews just after the war; and last, in the post-war files of the Health Society (TOZ).

Data in the Ringelblum archive come from all spheres of Jewish life in German occupied Częstochowa. The mentions are dispersed, but meaningful. They provide crucial information on social stratification in the ghetto and a lot of facts and data on forced labor of Częstochowa Jews. No information is available after July 1942, the beginning of the liquidation action in the Warsaw ghetto.

Incomplete materials of the Board of Elders (Częstochowa Judenrat) also contain quite a number of useful information, including, for instance, about seventy 1942 personal files of Jewish auxiliary policemen. It is a very important source for a historian, who would like to study the background of Jewish policemen. Yet what seems the most interesting document of Częstochowa Judenrat is a handwritten, 300 pages long account of public events in the ghetto from early May 1941 to January 18, 1942. The log was compiled by

duty Judenrat officials, who day by day recorded the so-called situations, namely police actions, robberies, disturbances, disruptions of public services, fires, etc. The most striking feature of the log is the actual fact of it being routinely kept in an effort to simulate normal town life in the inhuman circumstances that were far from normal.

The files of the AJDC (Joint), which were discontinued after 1941 due to the declaration of war between the U.S. and Germany, include plenty of information on social and material situation in the ghetto, including lists of Jewish craftsmen, merchants, and intelligentsia there. The Joint data are very concrete and provide good insight into the ghetto reality.

The records of Jewish Self-Help Society, which was legally operating all over the GG (and, ironically, established by the German administration based in Krakow), cover the years 1939-1943. These files include a large amount of information on such spheres of ghetto life as food supplies, health care, vocational training, children's care, education – or rather lack of it, as an early April 1942 document states: “Thousands of children have been deprived of any schooling nor education for three years now. Housing conditions are usually terrible. Flats are extremely overcrowded, an average number of inhabitants per room is 5.85”. Other documents speak of the procedures at the ghetto hospital, of surgeries that were carried out there, of the orphanage, of the House for the Elderly, and almost all the other social welfare institutions. A letter of the Board of Elders to the Self-Help Headquarters in Krakow, dated April 4 1942, includes an overall survey of living conditions in the ghetto. Thus, by April 1, 1942, the 100 grams daily bread quota was reduced to 50 grams; potatoes were never supplied despite earlier declarations. The quota of sugar was 50 g per month. “Energy value of daily food ration was no more than 200 calories”.

The authors of the document concluded: “Generally, there is no significant difference between Jewish situation in Częstochowa and other towns of the GG. Crowded in their confined residential area, deprived for the most part of any chance of employment to earn their living, starving and suffering from diseases, with the war into its third year, Jews cannot satisfy their most basic needs, and try to survive below subsistence level”.

And yet – as we are now aware – Jewish ghetto in Częstochowa was better off as compared to the Warsaw one. In Częstochowa no bodies of starved to death adults and children were lying in the streets. It resulted from two factors: much more food could have been smuggled into the Częstochowa ghetto as it was not so hermetically sealed off. It was not walled up. Evidently, Jews caught outside the ghetto were sentenced to death, along with Poles, who extended any help to them, such as giving Jews food or shelter. There is the original announcement to this effect of the German administration in Częstochowa in our holdings at ŻIH. Nonetheless it was much easier to smuggle food into the Częstochowa ghetto than to the Warsaw one. And the mere extent of the phenomenon – the number of people imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto exceeded Częstochowa by ten times – made it easier to prevent starvation in Częstochowa.

Ita Diamant, in her fascinating memories *Moja czastka zycia*, published by ŻIH two years ago, recalled her astonishment upon arriving, of course illicitly, into Częstochowa from Warsaw at the time of the mass deportations from the ghetto there. This is how she described the contrast that struck her: “It seems so strange at first – no blockades, no one is hiding in cellars or attics, stores are open, coffee shops and candy stores display their delicacies, traffic as usual, with women dressed up and men in decent clothes. No three meters high walls and no feeling on being imprisoned in the ghetto, if not for the yellow signs by the exits and the armbands with Magen David” [p. 81]. Diamant observes also that: “When we arrived, hardly anyone in Częstochowa could believe that it would be same here as it had been in Warsaw. ‘There are so many people working in factories and

elsewhere – how could they deport us?’ – they said” [p. 79]. Yet no human reason nor logic came in useful in case of Nazis’ policy.

Materials of both the Joint and Self-Help Society include a lot of specific data on Jewish crafts in the ghetto. Their condition, production, and number of Jews employed were assumed to indicate hope for survival both from the perspective of Jewish subsistence and of the German economic profits gained by keeping ghetto inhabitants alive and working. As we know, similar hopes were cherished in Warsaw and Lodz. They all proved completely futile.

What matters is that in the light of all these records the ghetto no longer seems to be a black hole, a stop on the way into the gas chambers of Treblinka. On the contrary, it emerges as a community isolated, but bustling with life, in the horrendous situation desperately striving not only to survive, but also to save some dignity by keeping to the rules of social conduct. The most destitute, the elderly and children were taken care of in the ghetto. Yet the corruption of war times is also illustrated by these files. The Ringelblum Archive includes, e.g., a list of names of Jewish collaborators in the Częstochowa ghetto.

As for comprehensive information on the life of the Częstochowa ghetto, including resistance movement and Polish-Jewish relations, no other group of documents at ŻIH, and not only there, can surpass the several dozen testimonies of survivors, recorded by Jewish Historical Commissions just after the war. Most of the data on Jewish resistance in Częstochowa comes from these sources and I believe they have not been exhaustively studied yet. They provide an excellent overview of the general situation, prior to the great deportation to Treblinka launched on September 22, 1942, the next day after Yom Kippur, as well as after the action, in the residual small ghetto. The testimonies include accounts of disputes within the resistance movement, similar to discussions held in the Vilna or Białystok ghettos, over the question whether to take up arms to defend the ghetto or set up partisan units out of town. Advocates of the latter option were obviously hardly aware of other dangers awaiting Jewish partisans. I would like to recall a well-known case of two groups of Jewish fighters, who escaped from the residual Częstochowa ghetto in spring of 1943 heading for the forests surrounding Złoty Potok and Koniecpol to join partisan units there, but on their way were killed almost to a man by the Polish NSZ (National Armed Forces) group.

There was, however, the other side of the coin. Authors of testimonies spoke also of Polish underground organizations, namely People’s Guard, cooperating closely with the ghetto fighters. Ita Diamant, an escapee from the Warsaw ghetto and a courier between Warsaw and Częstochowa fighters, recounted in her memoirs quoted above, how two Polish families of Brusts and Gromuls were helping to hide her. After the war the two families were awarded the Righteous Among the Nations medals by Yad Vashem. The testimonies at ŻIH also refer to Polish help for Jews hiding in Częstochowa. Mrs. Ludwika Wiener, nee Dawidowicz, having escaped from the ghetto found temporary refuge at a Polish army captain’s, whose son had been a schoolmate of her son. In her own words: “These people sheltered me for several days for free and then provided me with Aryan papers at a minimum price [...] with a suggestion that I should try to get a job of a housekeeper or a nurse [in Warsaw]. And that was what I did.” These texts are swarming with names. Heroes of the resistance movement are not anonymous. (AŻIH 301/1936).

Its very special place in the history of the 1940s Częstochowa owes to the fact that the most numerous fixed group of Jewish survivors was found there upon the liberation. These were the HASAG Jews. They were not evacuated in time to the concentration camps in Germany proper, mainly to Buchenwald, nor did the Nazis have enough time to murder

them, as the January offensive of the Red Army reached Częstochowa sooner than they expected. The inmates of the Częstochowa HASAG camp included prisoners from another company labor camp in Skarzysko, brought to Częstochowa upon its liquidation. The archives of ŻIH hold the original German list of all HASAG prisoners (4,734 people altogether), not to mention very interesting testimonies of these survivors. Mojsze Grynszpan, a worker from Kielce, related the dramatic moments on the eve of the Red Army onset: “The Germans are getting ready to leave and we are driven to the evacuation roll call. The SS-men have already left, and Vernichtungskommando takes over. A group of us has made our minds to stay in the barracks and persuade others to do the same. A Jewish Lagerführer Jones turns up and drives the Jews out. Some obey, afraid to confront the Jewish police. The night has come. We go out and cry out: all Jews get back into the barracks [...]. In a few hours the Soviet army enters into town.” (301/7).

Liberated Częstochowa was in early 1945 a major center of Jewish survivors in Poland. At times their number amounted to over 6,000. Yet it soon began to decrease with more and more survivors departing. In spring of 1946 the number of Jewish inhabitants of Częstochowa and neighboring towns, such as Klobuck, Krzepice, or Włoszczowa, settled to about 2,200 people. After the Kielce pogrom of July 1946 this number dwindled rapidly to a few hundred in 1947, despite the arrival of shipments of Polish citizens allowed to return from the Soviet Union, including about 160,000 Polish Jews. In just five months, August through December 1946, the number of Jews in Częstochowa was reduced by half: from 2,222 to 1,117. The trend did not stop there. Exact statistical data can be derived from the reports of the Częstochowa branch of the Central Committee of Polish Jews [CKŻP] sent to the Warsaw headquarters of the organization and preserved at ŻIH. It is another collection of archival documents relevant to the history of Częstochowa Jews, in this case its post-war period.

Why did Jewish survivors flee Częstochowa after the war? Their motives were the same all over Poland, partly political and moral, because they did not want to live in the country regarded now as the cemetery of their nation, but prevailingly emotional, because they did not feel safe here. The files of the CKŻP include a series of 1946 letters from the Częstochowa Jewish Committee to the Warsaw headquarters describing the danger of taking the Częstochowa-Warsaw train for Jewish looking persons, who were last seen when armed men used to enter the train at minor railway stations, such as Kaminsk (between Radomsk and Piotrkow), and drag Jews out. In town Jews were also sometimes abused, called names, and threatened. Ultimately Jewish inhabitants of Częstochowa had to set discreetly up armed guard to protect themselves. The abundant correspondence on the subject is kept at ŻIH.

In prewar Poland, despite all the Polish-Jewish tensions heightened by the dynamic upsurge of anti-Semitic propaganda in the 1930s, Jews did not feel their existence was threatened, they did not fear for their lives. In the wake of the war, after having eye-witnessed the German atrocities at the times when Jewish life had not mattered at all and killing Jews went unpunished, some Poles gave themselves license to follow German example. Jewish ultimate insecurity was not hysteresis, it was well grounded in reality, such as: the wave of post-war pogroms in Poland, murderous assaults at Jews trying to come home to their towns and villages, killing Jews at repatriation trains on their way from the Soviet Union. Except for Upper and Lower Silesia, and major cities like Warsaw and Lodz, where Jews felt safe, in 1945 and 1946 Jewish centers in towns began to empty. This tendency to flee to Lower Silesia, big cities, or abroad, affected also Częstochowa, which was a medium center then. Census data reported to the central bureau of the CKŻP and kept at the ŻIH archives, are a good illustration here. The number of Jews in Częstochowa decreased rapidly later in 1945, when most of out-of-town former HASAG prisoners left.

In mid-1945 there were 1,384 Jews registered in Częstochowa. In 1947 their number decreased to 807, as compared to 89,000 all over Poland.

And thus Częstochowa, whose every third inhabitant was Jewish as late as in 1939, gradually ceased to evoke any hopes for a revival of Jewish life. The point was to have at least its true history recorded. The present seminar is a major contribution to this task.

I would like to conclude by referring to the words of the greatest Polish literary historian, Professor Maria Janion, who has often faced various moral issues, and in her book *Do Europy tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi* (2000) thus commented the total disappearance of Jews from the ethnic landscape of Poland:

“Poles witnessed the unbelievable crime, but – as the research indicate – for the most part did hardly notice it at the time it was perpetrated, and afterwards did not care much for the disappearance of ten per cent of prewar Poland’s population. How can we, then, revive the memory of what happened here, in the neighborhood? [...] The only way is to revise our own myths” [p. 164].

The process has been initiated. Under our eyes the most intense reconstruction of the true history of Poland has been going on for several years now. This history pictures Jews as its integral element for many centuries. Another product of this process is a renewed trust in such a manner of studying the history of one’s own country, freeing this history of lies and blank spaces. I will repeat: the present seminar is an important and optimistic symptom of this process.