

Fate of the Lodz Jews (1939–1942)

Summary

The tenth volume of the complete edition of the Ringelblum Archive contains the many-layered and many-sided picture of the fates of the Lodz Jews in the years 1939–1942. The forty eight documents included here constitute a relatively small but important part, supplementing the voluminous collection of documents of Jewish inhabitants of Lodz, now in the holdings of the Lodz State Archive, in the files of the Superior of the Elders of the Jews (No. 278) and in the files of the city of Lodz: Gettoverwaltung, 1939–1945 (No. 221).

The materials included in this volume belong mainly to the broad stream of literature of the personal document, found here in reports, memoirs and letters. In addition to these, there is poetry and official announcements, as well as rhetorical forms in the three versions of the speech by Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski, delivered in front of the representatives of the Lodz landsmanshaft in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The volume is divided into four parts. The first one, including documents Nos. 1 to 23 presents a story on the fate of the Lodz Jews starting from the last days of August 1939 until the establishment of the ghetto in February, 1940. It starts with reports about fleeing the city under bomb attack. These flights were usually unsuccessful, for various reasons. After returning to German-occupied Lodz, the refugees experienced persecutions and cruelty, along with thousands of the Jews who had remained in Lodz. In virtue of the subsequent German decrees, their bank accounts were blocked, both their personal and business belongings were taken away, their apartments were requisitioned and they themselves were caught and forced to work while enduring the sadistic methods of various German military units. As a result of round-ups, like the one which took place in November 1939 when several dozen frequenters of café Astoria, popular among the Lodz intelligentsia and artistic milieu, were arrested, many important Lodz personalities were taken to prison, and part of them were shot.

Also in November, many Jewish officers and social and political activists were imprisoned in the Radogoszcz camp. Two interesting reports about this camp were authored by a “former chairman of the Association of Manufacturers”, as he presented himself. He was arrested on November 8, 1939 and imprisoned in Radogoszcz a few days later. Still in November, the religious community of Jewish Lodz suffered a great loss. The Germans burnt three synagogues. In this volume, anonymous authors of two reports outlined the symbolic significance of the destruction of the one in the Old City. These reports are supplemented by the testimony of Szolem Trajstman, a well known Lodz rabbi, who described hour-long interrogation by the Gestapo. Trajstman, himself spared by the Germans, told about the tragic fate of persecuted Lodz rabbis.

The subsequent stage of the persecutions were forced resettlements which started in December 1939. The deported from Lodz were sent to Galizia (some transports went to the Zamosc region). One of the authors, a teenager youth, went first to Jaslo, and then to Tarczyn.

In the second part of the volume, the documents numbered 24 to 48 include texts on the resettlement of the Jews within the city area, i.e. about the first stage of preparations for the establishment of the closed district, and then about the ghetto and living conditions there. Among these materials, the most significant seems to be the testimony of an officer, hiding under the initials D.T. He was a member of a group whose task was accommodating the first Jewish groups arriving to the area of the about to be formed ghetto. His reports are written in the spirit of a soldier who had acquitted himself well. Sharp contrasts are to be found in dramatic anonymous notes from the turn of February–March 1940, when the Germans decided to accelerate the forced transfer to the ghetto which until then had proceeded at a steady pace. Particularly shocking are the descriptions of a two-day long slaughter on March 5-6. Various German units broke into houses on Piotrkowska and Zawadzka Streets, wounding and murdering their Jewish inhabitants.

A significant part of the second chapter are announcements and decrees issued by Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. There is also description of the official ghetto currency, official prints and the full text of a calendar for the year 1942 published in the ghetto. Their official tone is paralleled by individual reports of the Lodz Jews who succeeded, under various circumstances, to leave the closed district and to reach Warsaw. There are also coded letters to relatives and friends in the Warsaw and Czestochowa ghettos. The official persuasive message of Rumkowski's speech clashes with unofficial, satirical and occasional poetry, circulating in a limited number of copies and aimed at the Superior of the Elders of the Jews and members of the ghetto administration.

The volume is provided with a glossary, personal and geographical indexes, a list of street names, and a bibliography.

Translated by Jacek Sawicki