

The Warsaw Jewish Council (1939–1943)

Summary

The volume 'The Warsaw Jewish Council' includes documents issued by the Warsaw Jewish Council, as well as those sent thereto. Also included in this volume are the German documents – the vast majority of which are of a normative nature, defining the 'legal' (in the Nazi sense of the word) competence of the Jewish Council. The volume also contains ephemera issued by the Jewish Council (such as an invitation to an artistic event organised by the Supply Section, a pass out of the ghetto, or food coupons) or other institutions (a blank identity card form, a tram ticket issued by the Municipal Board, or a heating allowance card). Texts presented here document the work of the institution administering the largest concentration of Jews in occupied Europe.

This volume contains almost all the documents related to the Warsaw Judenrat, preserved in the Underground Warsaw Ghetto Archive. Not included are only a handful of items already published in other volumes in the *Ringelblum Archive* series.

The volume is divided into two principal parts: Part One – the Jewish Council until July 22, 1942, and Part Two – the Jewish Council after July 22, 1942. The date of the commencement of the so-called Großaktion, the great killing operation, became a tragic turning point not only in the lives of the residents of the Warsaw ghetto, but also in the history of the institution of the Jewish Council. Part One documents the struggle for survival of the Jewish community, while Part Two illustrates the circumstances of the deaths of the Warsaw ghetto inhabitants. The two stages of the ghetto are separated by the dates of the 22nd and the 23rd of July 1942 – the date of the beginning of deportations of the ghetto dwellers to the Treblinka extermination camp and the date of Adam Czerniaków's suicide.

The documents are arranged within the main sections that are based on the organisational structure of the Council, with the hierarchical system of the Council replaced by the alphabetical order (due to the complex structure of the Council, such

a system seems the most transparent, although it should be noted that some sections listed in the table of contents did not exist simultaneously). Materials from individual organisational units of the Council are preceded by general documentation of a normative nature (notices) and correspondence. German normative documents are presented in separate sections (the bulk of such texts is included in Document 11 ‘Journal Bulletin of the Commissioner for the Jewish District’, and Document 2 Collection of Documents of the German Occupation Authorities of the General Government Regarding Compulsory Labour For the Jews) and German official correspondence. Here, the reader shall also find dramatic court records concerning charges against the Jews who broke the Nazi ‘law’ – i.e. who were caught walking without an armband or left the ghetto without a pass (Documents 46–48).

The reader of the volume shall find extensive correspondence of the Council with the supervising German institutions, primarily the Transferstelle and the Office of the Commissioner for the Jewish District (Documents 23, 26, and 41). Some of the documents provide an overview of the situation: Document 50, Adam Czerniaków’s memorandum ‘New Tasks for the Jewish Community in Warsaw and the Situation of the Jewish Population (March 26, 1940)’, and Document 29, a study titled ‘A Year Under The Commissioner For The Jewish District In Warsaw. Overview of Situation of the Ghetto under the Management of Dr. Heinz Auerswald (May 15, 1941 – May 15, 1942)’. Both documents address the dramatic deterioration of the living conditions of the Jews, hunger, disease, increasing mortality rate, etc.

Internal documentation of the Council forms an extremely interesting and informative part of the book. Found here are materials issued by many departments and agencies of the Jewish Council. Most extensively represented are the documents of the Order Service (Documents 79–86, including daily orders of Józef Szeryński, head of the Jewish police, from the time of the formation of the Order Service structure), Department of Production (documents from the period when the German concept of the economic exploitation of the Warsaw Ghetto was changing, and the Germans, in order to exploit the labour potential of the Jewish district, decided to establish workshops in the ghetto that would manufacture goods for the army, Documents 123–127), and Prisons (Documents 118–122 including documents recording executions carried out in prisons on Jews who ‘illegally’ went to the so-called Aryan side). Also featured in this volume are valuable materials on the Jewish forced labour, especially Document 99, ‘Report of the Labour Battalion for 1940’, providing a very detailed description of the organisation and tasks of the Council department, which coordinated the forced labour in German institutions (both in Warsaw in the so-called work details, as well as in labour camps outside the capital) of thousands of Warsaw Jews. There is also an extensive selection of material from the Supply Section dealing with food supply to the ghetto (included here are notices on the allocation of food, Document 133–135, and food ration coupons, Document 137–144). Among the most interesting documents are the bulletins

of the Department of Statistics (Document 115), with the attached weekly reports of the chairman of the Jewish Council, Adam Czerniaków (they were written in German for the Germans and then translated back into Polish for the Council officials). Czerniaków's weekly reports provide an especially detailed and dramatic description of the institution's struggle against constant problems: permanent lack of funds and Czerniaków's relentless efforts to obtain additional financing, the continued escalation of the German demands, and new challenges, such as budgeting for hospitals. An important part of the collection is the materials of the Jewish Population Registration Department (Documents 89–92, including lists of people arrested in connection with the Kott case).

Other departments and agencies of the Council, included such as: the Economic Council, Department of Cemeteries, Department of Control, Department of Housing, Department of Payments to Hospitals, Department of Subscriptions and Donations, Department of Religious Affairs, Department of Registration of Births, Marriages, and Deaths, Department of Hospitals, Department Health, and others.

The research material formed within the Jewish Council is particularly noteworthy, namely 'The Survey on Consumption' (Document 148), carried out by the Statistical Subsection of the Supply Section, and the reports of the Chemical and Bacteriological Institute of the Department of Health of the Jewish Council (Document 129). Especially the discussion of 'The Survey' paints a grim picture of the isolated community slowly dying of starvation.

The documents presented here also illustrate less known but important issues, such as the collection of taxes carried out by the Council at the behest of the Germans (Documents 105–107), or employment insurance for the Jews (correspondence with the Social Insurance, Documents 58 and 73; the reader shall also find here a financial statement of amounts transferred by the ghetto residents to the Social Insurance). There is an extensive selection of important documents concerning dramatic events in the life of the community of Warsaw Jews – constantly changing boundaries of the Warsaw Ghetto and the resulting necessity for the residents to move (numerous notices and other types of documents), or the 'fur operation', when in the last days of 1941, the Germans requisitioned Jewish fur and fur items for the Wehrmacht (Documents 8–9).

Documents 62 and 63 record the contacts of the Jewish Council with the Warsaw Municipal Board, and especially the moment when the City Cleaning Department withheld the services of rubbish collection and street cleaning and when the Jewish Council took over these tasks.

Especially interesting is the part that shows the inner life of such a large institution as the Jewish Council – emancipatory aspirations of the Supply Section and conflicts between its employees and other officials of the Council (Documents 149–151), as well as daily clerical work (e.g. Document 130 'Weekly Bulletin. For All Officers and Employees of the Department of Health').

The second part of the book contains documents produced during the so-called liquidation operation, during which approximately 300 thousand residents of the Warsaw ghetto were sent to the Treblinka killing center. The ‘operation’ is documented mainly by notices addressed to the population, which, although signed ‘Jewish Council’, were in fact German orders (Documents 159–163). The first document in this section is the ‘Report of the Jewish Council for the Period July 22 – September 30, 1942’ (Document 156).

The vast majority of the documents presented in this volume are published for the first time. We hope that these interesting materials shall be a stimulus for further research into the history of the Warsaw Ghetto.

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