

The Last Stage of Resettlement Is Death

Summary

The first part of volume 13 contains nine documents from the Ringelblum Archive which describe the six-month detention of around 4,000 Jews in Fort II of the Modlin Fortress in Pomiechówek, a town just north of Warsaw, across the Vistula River. These documents, which comprise individual testimonies, minutes of interviews with prisoners, and a study based on interviews, were registered by Oneg Shabbat collaborators during their quarantine at Leszno Street 109 and at the shelter at Stawki Street 9 in the Warsaw Ghetto. The collection is supplemented by a list of people murdered or deceased in the camp.

From the information in these documents emerges a consistent picture of life in Pomiechówek, although there are differences that stem from individual experiences. Their gehenna began in the first week of July 1941, when in several places in Ciechanów district where there were large concentrations of Jewish people (namely, in Płońsk, Nowy Dwór, Nowe Miasto, Zakroczym) a document-checking operation was launched in order to eliminate people who were not permanently registered as living there. In many cases these were people who at the beginning of the war had fled south across the Vistula River to nearby Warsaw, and upon return to their homes were unable to produce the appropriate documents. The document-checking was accompanied by disinfection of clothing and flats, together with forced hours-long baths in the Vistula River (in Nowy Dwór), or by going through the so-called “gates” made up of club carrying Gestapo functionaries (e.g., in Zakroczym and Płońsk).

Those unregistered as residents were directed to the Fort in Pomiechówek. The first to be brought there were in a group of about 2,000 Jews from nearby Nowy Dwór on July 6. Another large party of around 1,200 was brought in from Płońsk on July 9. It is estimated that in this camp, also called a “ghetto” or “prison”, approxi-

mately 4,000 Jews were detained. They lived in extremely harsh and cramped conditions, with no access to either drinking water or food. The situation was further exacerbated by the cruel treatment of the “storm troopers”, mostly local ethnic Germans and the Jewish policeman, Majloch Hoppenblum. Many prisoners lost their lives in the camp, due either to the conditions or to the guards’ cruelty. The sick had particularly slim chances for survival.

Aid to those in the camp, primarily in the form of food, was organised by Jewish Councils from the nearby towns, primarily from Płońsk. The head of the local Judenrat, Jakub Ramek, was also instrumental in the transfer of Majloch Hoppenblum from Pomiechówek, a particularly cruel policeman who tormented the prisoners.

The detention in Fort III lasted about 6 weeks. Probably due to the intervention of Jewish Councils and local residents associations of the individual towns who were in the Warsaw Ghetto, the German authorities gave their permission to leave the camp. The prisoners were driven by horse-drawn wagons to the border of the General Government. On their way the straw from the wagons was set alight, with the weak and infirm being driven forcibly into it. Having crossed the border, the Jews arrived at the Ludwisin ghetto. Around 200 people, mainly from Nowy Dwór remained there, while 1,200 continued on to the Warsaw ghetto between August 15 and 20, 1941.

In the second part we publish a small collection of ten documents (and abstracts of seven other previously published ones) concerning two extermination centres located in pre-war Polish territory – namely, in Chełmno nad Nerem (chapter I) and Treblinka II (chapter II). These include: testimonies of refugees from those camps (and in both cases they concern the first month of the camp machinery’s operation); a report based on those testimonies (concerning Chełmno); several letters that warn of the oncoming Holocaust; testimonies of people who had not been in the camp, but had obtained first-hand knowledge from the refugees; along with an article published in an underground periodical and sketches of the Treblinka camp. The underground Warsaw Ghetto Archive, as in the second preserved underground Archive of the Białystok Ghetto, contains therefore only few materials concerning the extermination centres. Neither collection contains a description of the Sobibór or Bełżec camps, and even their names appear very rarely in the ghetto refugees’ testimonies.

One of the first refugees from Chełmno was Szlamek, the author of a testimony published here (doc. 1a), and the earliest known and recorded testimony of a refugee from an extermination centre. The testimony ends with information about meeting a “visitor from the hereafter” – as he called himself – a rabbi from Grabów. A summary of a letter written by the Grabów rabbi, Jakub Szulman, is also published (abstract, doc. 4). Apart from the text of the testimony, the Warsaw Ghetto

Archive documents also contain a certificate of residence for Szlamek under his false name Jakub Grojnowski (doc. 1b), along with a photograph of him bearing a dedication to the Wassers (doc. 1c). Szlamek, whose real first and last names were established only a few years ago, was Szlama Ber Winer from Izbica Kujawska. After he had escaped from Chełmno, Szlamek reached the Warsaw ghetto – and it was there that Hersz Wasser, Oneg Shabbat secretary and at the same time an employee of the Central Refugee Commission, recorded his shocking story. From Warsaw Szlamek went to the Zamość ghetto, where his brother's wife Fela Bajler lived. On April 11 or 12, 1942 Szlamek was gassed in Bełżec, where he had been deported during the first liquidation operation in the Zamość ghetto. Szlamek's testimony is the basis of the first Oneg Shabbat report of mid-March 1942, "Wypadki chełmińskie" (the Chełmno incidents) (abstract doc. 8), written by Hersz Wasser. A copy of this report reached the Jewish Affairs Desk of the Information Department of the High Command of the Home Army, and thus thanks to Oneg Shabbat, information about the Holocaust reached the Polish Underground State. Apart from Szlamek's testimony, the Warsaw Ghetto Archive preserves other sources on the Chełmno camp. For instance: Uszer Taube's testimony, published in full in the *Ringelblum Archive* vol. 9, we here publish in summary form (doc. 7); the testimony of the Dąbie refugee Lajwe Wołkowicz (abstract, doc. 8); as well as letters written by Róża Kapłan (abstract, doc. 3), Fela from Kutno (abstract, doc. 5), and Gelbart (abstract, doc. 6). On the other hand, a study in German, which is also included among the Warsaw Ghetto Archive documents (and is published in Polish translation in this volume – doc. 2), is also primarily based on Szlamek's testimony and other documents mentioned above, but it is not a translation of the "Chełmno incidents" report. We have no information as to who wrote it. Perhaps its author was also Hersz Wasser. The name "Chełmno" also appears in other documents preserved in the Warsaw Ghetto Archive, just as do the names of the first refugees: Abram Roj, Szlama Winer (Wiener, Szlamek), and Michał Podchlebnik. In order to become acquainted with them, the reader should consult vol. 1 of the *Ringelblum Archive* (*Letters on the Holocaust*), edited by Ruta Sakowska, and vol. 9, *Territories Incorporated into the Reich: Warthegau*, edited by Magdalena Siek.

In chapter II we publish eight documents on the Treblinka extermination centre, called Treblinka II, to distinguish it from the forced labour camp that had existed from 1941 alongside the nearby gravel pit (Treblinka I). Among the documents in this volume we find the previously unpublished first escapee testimony of Dawid Nowodworski (doc. 10); two testimonies (doc. 11 and 12) by unknown authors (one was probably Jakub Rabinowicz, both testimonies were written in September 1942); a full and an abbreviated version of Jakub Krzepicki's testimony; as well as handwritten sketches of the camp with explanations made by the refugees (doc. 13 and 14, 15 and 16) and an article from the underground periodical *Głos Warszawy* (doc. 17). The echoes of Krzepicki's testimony can be found in the post-war essay

by Rachela Auerbach, *Treblinka. A Report*. Auerbach was the Oneg Shabbat collaborator who had spoken with Krzepicki and written down his detailed testimony about his stay in the camp, how he escaped, his wanderings, and his return to the Warsaw ghetto. We do not know much about the author besides what he said about himself in the testimony itself. He was a young man from Gdańsk, and in 1939 he fought in the September campaign against the Nazis, was taken prisoner, escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp, and then made his way to Warsaw. He worked in the artificial honey and sweets factory “Palma”. On August 25, 1942 he arrived in a transport at Treblinka, from where he escaped several weeks later and returned to Warsaw; he was Rachela Auerbach’s neighbour. We do not know how or when he died. But neither he nor Dawid Nowodworski were the first to escape from Treblinka: however the others – even if they did indeed manage to return to the Warsaw ghetto – left no testimonies.

The camp name Treblinka II is mentioned in many other Warsaw Ghetto Archive documents. Information about the death factory reached ghetto dwellers and was recorded in testimonies or other documents collected by Oneg Shabbat collaborators. Readers who are interested in finding all the Warsaw Ghetto Archive documents which mention the extermination centre Treblinka II outside of those in the *Ringelblum Archives* vol. 1 (*Letters on the Holocaust*, edited by Ruta Sakowska), may wish to consult vol. 6 *General Government. Testimonies and Documents*, edited by Aleksandra Bańkowska, and vol. 11 *The People and the Work of Oneg Shabbat*, edited by Aleksandra Bańkowska and Tadeusz Epsztein.

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