

# September 1939 and POW camps. Kalisz letters. Płock letters

---

## Summary

This volume consists of three parts containing material from the Ringelblum Archive covering a number of issues. The first part consists of documents relating to the German aggression against Poland in 1939, the other two parts are collections of letters.

Information about the course of the September campaign is found in many of the ARG materials, for example in the volumes devoted to Polish areas incorporated into the Reich, but also in accounts collected in the General Government and territories occupied in 1939 by the Soviet Union (published herein in the following Ringelblum Archive volumes: 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10). In this collection 31 texts have been selected, whose authors mainly describe the events of the first months of the war. They mostly cover warfare, but significant focus is also given to testimonies concerning the fate of Jewish soldiers – POWs. It is assumed that nearly 100,000 Jewish soldiers took part in the September campaign. About 7,000 of them were killed, including about 100 officers. Approximately 20,000 were captured by the Soviets, including 150 officers who were killed in the spring of 1940 in Katyn, Kharkov, and Mednoye. Many of the campaign participants (about 60,000) were taken into German captivity and spent several months imprisoned in POW camps; most of them were released in 1940. They were sent to ghettos in the General Government and later died in the subsequent deportations. Out of all POWs, the only ones to survive were officers imprisoned in Oflags (about 300 men).

The German aggression against Poland on September 1, 1939 not only started another world war but was also a prelude to the Holocaust. When they started the war, the Germans had not yet made a final decision regarding the treatment of the Jewish population in the occupied areas; however, one of the stated objectives of the aggression was gradual isolation, mass deportations, and concentration of the Polish

Jews in selected regions of the country. Repressions began with the outbreak of war, but methods and the scale of persecution developed over time. Contributors of the “Oneg Shabbat” attached great importance to collecting information about German crimes, but they were interested not only in recording violence and death. They also dealt with many other things, wanting to show the entire context of the ongoing war.

Even a cursory reading of the collected documents enables one to realise the enormous diversity of topics and methods of describing similar events. Here, one finds information about particular aspects of warfare, the situation at the front, the fate of individual military units, as well as harrowing descriptions of destruction, death and human tragedies brought about by the war. At the same time, there are images of everyday life, interpersonal relations, cooperation and conflict, interaction between the military and civilians, victors and the defeated, etc. The authors of the documents share their comments and opinions on the organisation and methods of defence against the Germans. Military historians will find in these materials many important details about the ongoing war told mainly from the perspective of ordinary soldiers. No less varied are accounts concerning captivity in the POW camps. Jewish soldiers went into internment along with their comrades in arms, the Poles, but already in the first days of captivity they were treated worse and often isolated – too often by their own Polish colleagues.

Authors of the documents hailed from very different social milieux. Different worldviews, education, and interests affected the content of all documents. Particularly interesting in this context is the assessment on Polish-Jewish relations. One does not find in these texts a uniform assessment of these relations, but rather a catalogue of opinions resulting from many factors.

Part two of Volume 15 contains a collection of letters under the title of the “Kalisz letters”. It is a collection of private and official correspondence from the period from August 16, 1939 to December 31, 1941. According to the 1942 list drawn up by a member of the “Oneg Shabbat”, there were originally 146 documents in the collection; some were destroyed while they were buried in the ground, and some letters are partially undecipherable due to significant damage and missing fragments. It is possible that part of the current collection also includes letters from a different ARG set. In total, the collection includes 93 documents today. The collected letters were sent from 63 localities in the Warthegau and the General Government, as well as from Belgium, Brazil, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Mexico, Romania, Sweden, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Some of those letters were sent from POW camps. They are mostly private letters from and to the Jews of Kalisz. In the case of about a dozen people some basic information has been established, but most of the senders and recipients remain anonymous, even though we know their names and addresses.

Part three of the volume contains 40 “Płock letters”, which were sent between February and June 1941 by the Jews deported by the Nazis in early 1941 from Płock

to cities and towns in the Radom district of the General Government (Białaczów, Bodzentyn Chmielnik, Częstochowa, Daleszyce, Drzewica, Łączna, Suchedniów, Wierzbnik-Starachowice, Żarki and Żarnów). The letters were addressed to activists of the Płock Landsmanshaft Committee in the Warsaw ghetto, mainly Fiszel Fliderblum and Eliaz Zylberberg. In addition to requests for financial assistance, these letters contain dramatic descriptions of the deportation of Jews from Płock, their stay in the transit camp in Działdowo, and the situation of the deportees in their destinations. The correspondence also describes the activity of self-help of the Płock Landsmanshaft associations in many localities, as well as their contacts with the central Płock Landsmanshaft Committee in Warsaw.

*Translated by Jerzy Giebultowski*