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# Ray Menachem Ziemba

Source Packet

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שוב ושוב, כי הסומך על הנס לא יעשה עמו נס. ובכן, איך אפשר להאשים את אנשי האמונה ובראשם את רועי האמונה, כי סמכו והסתמכו על דבר האסור בתכלית. מתוך הכרה וידיעה פנימית, הנני קובע בבירור נחרץ, כי דוקא אנשי החזון, בעלי האמונה המופנמת והבלתי מתפשרת – הם אנשי המעש הרואים את המציאות נבוחה לכל רחבה ועומקה. מאידך, אנשי המעש נעדרי האמונה, ראייה מוגבלת לנגד עיניהם, פניהם אל המציאות העכשווית, עכשיו וכאן. בלי רחבות האופק הכלל ישראלית ויום המחר.

אנשי האמונה יצאו מתוך הנחת יסוד בסיסית: "נצח ישראל לא ישקר" – עם ישראל ישרוד. הצלחת הגרמנים, תגדל ככל שתגדל, זוועותיהם החייתיות יעצמו ככל שיעצמו, אין בהם משק כנפי נצח. מעשיהם רגועים וברי חלוף, במוקדם או במאוחר יתהפך הגלגל והם יפלו מטה מטה. חכמינו קבעו בתלמוד: "גזירה עבידא דבטלה", כל גזירה על העם היהודי, ככל שתהיה קשה וכואבת – סופה שתתבטל. נעים זמירות ישראל אומר בתהילותיו: "כי רגע באפוי", חרון אף הבורא יתברך משול הוא לחטיבת זמן מוגבלת, בבחינת "רגע". רגע זה יחלוף. שיר יהודי עממי בגיטאות בישראל: "מיר וועלין זיי איבער לעבין" – אנו נחיה אחריהם, אנו נבלה אותם.

מתוך ראייה מפוכחת זו, אשר העתיד רק אישר עד כמה היתה נכונה, מה היה מוטל לעשות בהווה? ידענו היטב, מה צופן העתיד, בכך לא היו כל ספיקות. קשה היה להחליט, מה יש לעשות בהווה. והעצה הפשוטה והברורה, היתה עצת נביא ה', האומר: "חבי כמעט רגע עד יעבור זעם", יש להצניע פרופיל, להסתגל להווה בכל היכולת. לא לעמוד בקומה זקופה כנגד הגל השוטף והמאיים, אלא לצלול מתחתיו. ברור, לא כולם ינצלו, רבים וטובים יאבדו. "כיון שניתן רשות למשחית שוב אינו מבדיל בין טובים לרעים". כל תינוק יהודי שאבד, עולם מלא אבד. אבל בו זמנית, כל יהודי נוסף שיצליח להנצל – עולם מלא ניצל.

אנשי המרי, יחמי ההתנגדות, לא הרקיעו בחזונם אל חופי העתיד. ההווה המרממות עמד לנגד פניהם, ואז בחרו באידיאת הגבורה: "תמות נפשי עם פלשתים". דמותו של שמשון הגבור וקריאתו ההירואית, דובבו את לב בני הנעורים, הם בחרו ב"מצדה" שניה.

ברם, שמשון היה באמת "גבור", שמשון ידע גם כי מותו הוא ודאי, בנוסף לזה שמשון היה אדם יחיד, שלא הזיק במעשהו לאיש מלבד לעצמו. לעומת זאת, האשמדאי הנאצי, כבש את כל פולין בימים ספורים בלבד, כנגדו עמד צבא מאורגן עם מטוסים, טנקים, רובים, ומאות אלפי חיילים. כל אלה התמוטטו "בין לילה". אם כן איפוא, מה ערך לו למרי ולהתנגדות. כאשר ברור בלא כל ספק שכושר העמידה לא יארך במקרה הטוב יותר מימים מספר. [מרד גיטו ורשא פרץ ב־18 באפריל 1943

— הגיטו כולו הועלה באש ביום 23 באפריל 1943. כותרת הדו"ח הגרמני ביום זה מציינת: "אין עוד גיטו יהודי בוורשא".

בגיטו וורשא שרדו כ-50 אלף נפש כולם הושמדו על ידי הפצצות מאטיביות מן האויב שהפכו את הגיטו כולו לעיר חרבות — כנקם על המרד. יתכן כי לולא המרד, היה חלק נכבד ניצל ושורד. האם יש זכות מוסרית להכריז על מרד, תוך העמדתם בסכנת מוות. נכון הוא, כי גם לולא המרד, היו רובם של יהודי וורשא מוצאים את מותם, בגיטאות, במחנות העבודה ובמחנות המוות. "רובם" אמרנו — אבל לא "כולם". האחריות הקולקטיבית של רועי ישראל, אנשי האמונה, אנסתם שלא לתמוך במבצעי הראווה, שמלבד ראוותנות אין בהם פתרון מוחשי ומעשי להצלת נפשות. הצלת נפש אחת מישראל שקולה היתה בעיניהם יותר מכל מבצע אחר — ויהיה גדול ומפואר. על אחת כמה וכמה, מבצע שאמור לסכן עם רב מישראל, במקומו באופן מידי וכתוצאה מכך גם במקומות אחרים.

רבים נזכרו בקביעה התלמודית: "הבא להרגך השכם להורגו". אבל החובה הראשונית היא, לבדוק היטב האם אתה חזק דיך, האם בידך להשכים להורגו? אולי כדאי יותר, להתחמק, לברוח ולהנצל. אף אם נניח כי היו מצליחים להרוג אלף נאצים, היתה צריכה להשאל השאלה: "באיזה מחיר?"

מבלי לנסות להאשים את קדושי השואה, ומבלי כל רצון לפגוע בזכרם הטהור. הם עשו את אשר עשו, מתוך ראיית ההווה, כל מי שלא היה שם לא יוכל להבינו, לפיכך אין לנו כל זכות מוסרית לדונם. אבל בראיה לאחור, היום כארבעים שנה אחר החורבן האיום, עולה ומזדקרת במשנה זוהר הגדלות המוסרית והראיה המפוכחת של אנשי החזון אישי האמונה.

### כי אם ברוחי אמר ה'

ברם, טעות ומשגה הוא לחשוב, כי אנשי האמונה לא בחרו בדרך ההתנגדות. חטא לאמת ההיסטורית הוא, לומר כי היו פאסיביים. הם בחרו וחיו בדרך הגבורה הנפלאה, הם התעלו לפסגות עלומות בהתנגדותם הנפשית, במלחמתם העיקשת רבת ההוד, לא היה סיפוק של "נקמת דם". אבל היתה בהם התבונה הברוכה והנאצלת שחישלה וחיזקה את רוחם.

כנגד החייתיות הנאצית, הזדקרה הגבורה הרוחנית הנאצלת של עם הנצח. כנגד חלאת האנושות, עמד האדם שבאדם עם כל שגב עליונותו. הרמן ראושנינג, מעוזריו הבכירים של בכור השטן היטלר ימ"ש, כותב מפיו של היטלר: "המצפון — המצאה יהודית הוא". ועוד: "אני משחרר את האנשים מכבלי הרוח, מן העיניניים הנאלחים

החזקת הנשמה בגוף. הצדיקים הללו הי"ד נשרפו בבתי משרפות עטופים בטלית ותפילין מתוך קריאת "שמע ישראל ה' אלוהינו ה' אחד". לא מתו מות שריפה הרג וחנק אלא -- מיתת נשיקה באהבה לה'. פשטו את צוארם. כר"ע בשעתו, לשחיטה בשמחה רבה בבחינת "כל ימי הייתי מצטער מתי יבוא לידי ואקיימנו ועכשו שבא לידי לא אקיימנה". נשמתך של קדושים אלו יצאה "באחד". הם נעלמו מחחת השמים אבל זכר קדושתם קיים ועומד וזכותם תעמוד לנו לנצח.

רק מתוך ידיעת המצב כמו שהי' יש להעריך את עלילת הגבורה של ההתקוממית הספונטנית בתוך הגיטו המעונה והמושפל. סו"ס נמצאו גואלים לכבוד העם הבזוי והשסוי, צעירי ישראל שלא יכלו לראות יותר בגסיסה ארוכה של מאות אלפי נפשות אחים ואחיות התאושו, ובאזור שארית כוחם השיבו גמול צודק למעניהם האכזריים. וכך הי' המרד של הגיטו הוורשאי לדרך מזהיר בתקופת החשכה ההיא. המורדים, יהודים מכל המינים, בונדאים, ציונים, מזרחיים ואגודאים -- שעמדו על סף הוודאות הגמורה של כליון וגוויעה מתוך יסורי-גיהנום לא חתו ולא זעו, אלא התחשלו בגבורה על-אנושית כדי לנקום דם עמם השפוך. במיתתם, מוות גבורים, קדשו שם ישראל המחולל. ואילו הי' בלב המרצחים טיפה אחת של דם אדם הי' צריכים לעשות מה שעשה אותו קלצטונירי של רומא בשעה שהעלה את ר' חנינה בן תרדיון למדורת האש: לקפוץ ולנפול לתוך האש.

ד. גירוש מן הגיטו. בשבי.

אני העני ממעש לא זכיתי להימנות בין מקדשי ה'. בהיותי נתין ליטא הפכתי עם כיבוש ליטא ע"י הרוסים מאליו לנתין רוסיא. הנתינות הרוסית הצילתני בתחילת המלחמה מצפוני הדורסנים הנאציים. מעמדי זה הועיל שיכולתי אחרי הקלה במחלתי להימסר כולי לעסקנות בצרכי הציבור האומלל. וזה גרם לבחירתי לנשיאה של אגודת הרבנים הכללית וכן של אגודת רבני וורשה. קשורי עם הרבנים בצ'כוסלובקיה ידניא וידידינו הרבים בארצות ניטרליות אחרות הכניסו לנו אמצעי כסף הגונים יחבילות רבות של אוכל ומזון שמהרתי לחלקם בין הרבנים והאדמוריים, חכמים וסופרים, בני ישיבות ותלמודי תורה נודעים, אשר בלעדי עזרה זו היו גוועים מרעב. מנהלי "הג'וינט" מר גוזיק ומר גיטרמן ז"ל עזרו לי הרבה יותר מכפי כחם. בעבודת העזרה לאנשי תורה עזרו לי הגר"מ זמבה והגרא"י מיזל זצ"ל (הי"ד) ופעמים רבות התוועדנו יחד בביתו של מר גוזיק הטוב והרחום לבקש עצות על מקורות עזרה נוספים. לפרקים נתוועדנו גם בביתו של ר' אברהם ווינגורט ז"ל, אשר גלה יחד עם משפחות רפפורט ופרנקל מביליץ לוורשה. כידוע גרשו היהודים מקראקו ומסאר ערי גליציה המזרחית. מגורשים אלה ועמהם מגורשי לודז' וערי

ולהציגם ככלי ריק שאין בו כלום כי אם גפשו, ואחר כך לכלות גם את גופם ונפשם בהרג ושמד וכל מיני מיתות משונות כידוע. **לעומת זאת**, הבריחה ליערות היתה רק ספק סכנה, כי כל מי שאזר עוז בנפשו והחליט לברוח, הרי בודאי חקר ודרש מקודם היטב לאן יהיו פניו מועדות, כי מזמן לזמן היו באים לתוך הגיטו פרטיזנים שהיו יודעים איך לצאת ולבוא והיו מוסרים סימנים לאחרים שרצו להצטרף אליהם איך למצוא את הדרכים ביערות המובילות למקום משכן הפרטיזנים, ואם כי כל הדרכים הללו היו בחזקת סכנה, בכל זאת הלא עינינו ראות שאפשר לעבור בדרכים הללו, והראיה מהפרטיזנים הללו שהיו באים ויוצאים באותו גפושם לתוך ומתוך הגיטו.

**והנה** בספר החינוך מצוה תכ"ה, להרוג ז' עממים מארץ כנען כתב, להרוג ז' עממים המחזיקים בארצינו טרם כבשנו אותה מהם ואף כי כבר עשינו בהם המחוייב על יד דוד מלכנו שהשחיתם כולם עד שלא נשאר מהם רק מתי מספר שהתפוררו וטבעו בין האומות עד שלא נודע זכרם כו' אף על פי כן לא תקרא מצוה זו מצוה שאינה נוהגת כו' ועובר על זה ובא לידו אחד מהם ויכול להרגו מבלי שיסתכן בדבר ולא הרגו בטל עשה זו מלבד שעבר על לאו שנאמר עליהם לא תחיה כל נשמה כו' ע"ש.

**וכתב** על זה המנחת חינוך שם, ויכול להרגו מבלי שיסתכן בדבר וכר וצ"ע נהי דכל המצות נדחים משני הסכנה מכל מקום מצוה זו דהתורה צויתה ללחום עמהם וידוע דהתורה לא תסמוך דיניה על הנס כמבואר ברמב"ן ובדרך העולם נהרגים משני הצדדים בעת מלחמה אם כן חזינן דהתורה גזרה ללחום עמהם אף דהוא סכנה, אם כן דחוייה סכנה במקום הזה ומצוה להרוג אותו אף שיסתכן וצ"ע עכ"ל המנחת חינוך שם.

**מערתה** לפי דברי המנחת חינוך הרי ברור, שהמלחמה הזאת שהגרמנים הארורים צאצאי עמלק ימ"ש הכריזו על היהודים לאבדם ולהשמידם, בודאי שהחיוב והמצוה מוטלים על היהודים להשיב מלחמה שיערה ולהשיב להם כגמולם ולעשות להם כאשר הם זוממים עלינו ומצוה לדרוף אותם באף ולהשמידם מתחת שמי ה'.

Warsaw Institute for Judaic Studies, who was both an intellectual and a romantic, lamented the fact that he had seen little heroism. We had behaved almost like sheep going to the slaughter. But the Zionist, Dr. Schipper, vigorously retorted, "It was impossible to resist. Everyone at first thought that not all of us would be destroyed, that some might yet be saved. We all know how the Germans practice indiscriminate collective punishments. Who could have taken the tremendous responsibility of endangering the lives of possible survivors and their relatives? Resistance would have brought destruction down on everybody!"

"We still would have risked nothing," interjected Dr. Schimkovits. "We should have resisted at the beginning when we still numbered half a million."

But everyone then had hoped the *aussiedlung* decree was not directed against themselves in particular. The Nazi murderers organized our systematic extermination with satanic cunning; they encouraged every individual to falsely believe they would survive. Only now, with hindsight, can we see their special categories and criteria for the shams they really were. They had promised us that *Judenrat* employees would be spared, as well as Joint employees, factory workers, and anyone capable of work.

So we were misled into believing that the danger of "deportation" loomed over only a small proportion of the Ghetto population. This made resistance less likely, since that would have meant the immediate and total destruction of everyone....

"During the first weeks of the *aussiedlung*," I point out, "there was a plan to set fire to the Ghetto. In the resultant general confusion, many would have managed to escape. It would not have been an easy task for them to recapture and arrest half

a million people. I still don't know why this plan was not carried out."

At this, Dr. Efraim Zonnenshein (now also a "clerk" in the archives) chimes in, "Well I can tell you, that plan could only work if the Polish population were on our side. Instead, the Poles actively desire our destruction so there was no *tachlis* to the whole plan."

"So what happens?" R. A. G. Friedensohn asks. "What shall we do now?"

Rav Menachem Ziemba declares, "At least we should not have gone voluntarily to the *Umschlagplatz*. We have tried to resist. But we fooled ourselves with wishful thinking. A people renowned for wisdom and intelligence lost all good sense. Throughout, we relied on 'perhaps, possibly, and maybe.' Our enemies spoke continually about our powerful brothers abroad who wielded so much influence around the world — Jews like Bernard Baruch, Morgenthau, and Hore-Belisha. Why didn't *they* remember us, their brothers and sisters threatened with extinction. So we dared to believe and hope that eventually rescue would arrive. If not for that expectation (which might have been logical in other circumstances) we might have behaved perhaps differently.

"We made the cardinal error of considering our enemies as stupid fools and thinking we would be too clever for them. *Pikchus* (cleverness) or sharpness is not the same nor as effective as wisdom. It didn't work for Korach the *pikeach*, and it hasn't worked for us. Perhaps we should have realized from the outset that the *Rasha* really did intend to destroy everything. From the beginning we should have used every opportunity and tactic to alert the conscience of the world. All we can do now is resist to the best of our abilities — we may not surrender ourselves voluntarily into enemy hands!"

I reminded everyone of Dr. W. Von Wiesel whom I met shortly before the War in Warsaw and Tarnopol. If only he was around now, he would surely know how to organize effective resistance. He had told me then with his inimitable fervor that he had only one aim left in life: he traveled from one *kehillah* to another to exhort the old and young alike: "*Yieden, lern sech shiesen!* — Jews, learn how to shoot!"

When I saw the discussion was not coming to any conclusion, I quoted the Rambam in his letter to the community of Marseilles: "...And this is what squandered our sovereignty, destroyed our Temple, prolonged our exile, and brought us to such a pass. Our ancestors, who are no longer with us, sinned after reading many books on astrology that appeared to show that this was important. They had imagined that this was a true science, a great skill with valuable benefits. Instead of learning the craft of war or capturing territory, they had thought the study of astrology would help them. So the *nevi'im* showed them how stupid and evil they were behaving...."

The Rambam clearly condemns the study of astrology — so popular then with both Jews and Arabs alike — in favor of preparing for battle. But we had always abandoned the practical for the abstract.

Eventually Rav Ziemba spoke again with great deliberation. "There are different ways to *Kiddush Hashem*. If Jews were now being forced to forsake their religion and they could save their lives by baptizing themselves — as was possible in Spain or during the Crusades — then our death alone could constitute a *Kiddush Hashem*. In fact, according to the Rambam (and that is the *halachah*) even if a Jew is killed for not denying his Jewishness, that, too, is considered a *Kiddush Hashem*. But today the only way to sanctify His Name is armed resistance!"

Everybody listens to the famous *gaon's* words with great respect. A heavy silence surrounds the gathering; the arguing is over, the die has been cast.

## Friday, January 15

### "The Sefarim Collectors"

Energetically we began the task of transferring all the *sefarim* from the abandoned Jewish buildings in Nalewki Street to the archives. Early in the morning, at 6:30 A.M., I organize the work detail.

Our group of "*sefarim* collectors" has grown. It now includes R. Yehudah Leib Orlean (previously *menahel* of Bais Yaakov Seminary, Cracow), Rabbi Eliezer Gershon Friedensohn (former editor, Bais Yaakov Magazine, Lodz), Gustava Yartzkah (a famous author), Yechiel Reisman, Dr. Edmund Stein (former director of the Warsaw Institute), Dr. Rothfeld (a former lawyer and senator), Dr. Wahl (a chief hospital director), Rav Shmuel Behr, Dr. Shmuel Schimkovits, Yonah Schiffer (Lodz Kehillah secretary), Marcel Reich, Aaron Ziemba, Shalom Saltzberg, Ch. Finkelstein, Alexander Rosenfeld, and Yitzchak Rosenstroich.

All day long we trail our two wheelbarrows through the orphaned streets of Muranowska, Zamenhof, Nalewki, Franciszkanska, Kopeicka, Nowiniarska, Swietojerska, and Bonifraterska. Around us is a deathly silence. The empty buildings gaze blankly at us in utter despair; the open windows without their glass look eerily reminiscent of an eyeless corpse.

Over all those many courtyards, previously bustling with so much life and vigor, hangs this ghostly stillness. It is almost as if the rows of houses were part of a funeral cortege which has become petrified into stone. The streets of the Jewish areas

vivid description of the roads to the Dead Sea and Jericho where the ancient biblical scene is coming alive again. Schipper talks of his future plans and whispers to me his secret — he has been promised a position at the Hebrew University. He also speaks glowingly of his political hopes for the future. Now after everything we have suffered, he asks, can anyone dare deny us a Jewish homeland?

→ Rav Menachem Ziemba is meanwhile writing his *chidushei Torah*. As he explains to me, "If not for Your Torah which is my pleasure, I would almost surely be lost through my suffering" (*Tehillim* 119). He shows me a responsa on the *Minchas Chinuch* which he has headed with the words: "B'ezras Hashem Yisbarach, during the days of wrath and destruction. Will You destroy the remnants of Israel? Second day of Selichos. To Your Judgment we stand today, for we are all Your servants." Then he turns to his son-in-law Rabbi Behr from Ozrakow to argue in learning. Afterwards in a discussion with Rav Shimshon Stockhammer he elaborates on the *Rambam's* view (in *Hilchos Deos*) on the duty to stay alive.

Later I hear him discuss the *Sefas Emes*, and he repeats the previous Gerrer Rebbe's explanation on the Divine promise to redeem the Jews from the "Sivlos Mitzraim — the tortures of Mitzrayim." "Sivlos" can also mean acceptance and resignation. But one must not accept the situation, one must not become resigned to one's fate.

The *rabbanim* immerse themselves in Torah study, the academics in various scientific disciplines, and Schipper, the inspired orator, vividly describes his future visions from Eretz Yisrael and the free world. But meanwhile an extremely difficult and depressing morning awaits us. ]

## Tuesday, September 8

### *Into the Trap*

We discovered that a number of prominent people have been caught in the blockade around Wolynska and Mila streets: Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, the religious leader Rabbi Zisha Friedman (the general secretary of Agudas Yisrael in Poland), the Piasznow Rebbe Rav Klonimos Schapira, the Bundist leader Mauricy Orzech, the author Isaac Bunim from Lodz, the Hebrew poet Yitzchak Katzensohn, the families of Rabbi Menachem Ziemba and Dr. Edmund Stein (these last two are here with us in the Kehillah building). Approaches are made to the *Judenrat* President Lichtenbaum that attempts should be made to rescue them. He agrees, but who should venture out to save them?

The choice falls on the Deputy *Judenrat* Secretary Nochum Remba, an energetic youngster full of initiative. He dons a white coat and pretends to be a doctor — though he has no medical training, we all address him as "professor" — and he begins negotiating with the Jewish ambulance driver. But he also insists on being accompanied by an archive official since he hopes to rescue those trapped by issuing them with false archive employment certificates. Since I am the archive director, I was volunteered for this dangerous mission.

The *Judenrat* issues me with a special document designed to protect me from the SS and their underlings. It soon transpires, however, that this document is absolutely worthless. Though we enter the *einkesselung* trap guarded by two *Judenrat* policemen, in reality their protection is useless and the two Jewish policemen fear for their own lives.

The scene that meets us is horrendous. Thousands of



and the community altogether.

[ Rav Menachem Ziemba, too, is sitting and writing. Now that he has been freed from the regular distractions of the Rabbinate, he has ample time to write *chidushei Torah*. I glance at the heading: "What I have been *mechadesh*, *b'ezras Hashem*, during the days of wrath under the heat of oppression on the subject of *Kiddush Hashem* according to both the *Rambam* and *Raavad*, *zt"l*..." Nevertheless he is not divorced from the present reality, and he encourages me to approach the *Judenrat* president again to see if there remains any chance of rescuing anyone from the *kesl* and bringing them to the Kehillah. Then he tells me a *vort* from the Kitzker Rebbe: both *eruvim* and *netilas yadayim* were enacted by Shlomo Hamelech. "*Eruvin*" also refers to involving oneself in worldly affairs, while "*netilas yadayim*" also refers to withdrawing from worldly affairs. Shlomo Hamelech was teaching us that one has to know when to apply each approach at the right time and place.]

Rav Shimshon Stockhammer, who officially is also the *Judenrat* Rabbi, enters with the information that the *Judenrat* has been allotted 2800 "numbers" and only holders of these numbers will be allowed to live. I run up to the *Judenrat* president's office to inquire what will happen to my assistants (only a few of whom are genuine archive officials, while the rest belong to the rabbinical and intellectual professions). I discover that they are all on the list to receive numbers, and so we are saved.

Suddenly my physical strength returns, and I race back with the glad tidings. But nobody is particularly overjoyed. The instinct for self-preservation may be foremost, but the concern for the general majority is also running very strong, particularly now when everyone is concerned for friends and relatives trapped outside. Fear stalks us all — fear for our families,

to the Kehillah building to bury those who had been shot. I manage to join this team and finally return to the *Judenrat*.

### *Life or Death for Judenrat Officials*

I enter my office in the archive section where Prof. Balaban, Dr. Schipper, Director Brandstetter, R. Menachem Ziemba, R. Shimshon Stockhammer, R. Dovid Shapira, and others await my tidings with bated breath. They are desperate to know what is going on "there" at the *kesl*. But I remain silent. Since I do not have any good news, I do not want to increase the despair. Besides, I am so weakened from hunger that I can hardly speak; indeed, I feel my last reserves of strength ebbing away. Everybody is sunk into the slough of deep despondency. Only R. Yehudah Leib Orlean, who paces the courtyard, refuses to succumb. He calms the others down and tries to infuse them with strength and *bitachon*.

Dr. Schipper is also optimistic. He does not actually talk about it, he just refuses to admit any news of our imminent destruction. Ignoring the bitter reality, he takes refuge either in the future or in the past (he is, after all, an historian). He is busy combing through the Kehillah's old files and is as comfortable as a fish in water. He can sit among the Kehillah archives delving and researching to his heart's content without disturbance — what more could he want? Why should he worry that we are surrounded by death?

He is totally immersed in the 1870s and the battles between the Warsaw Rav, Rabbi Yaakov Gesundheit, and the Na-thansohns, who led the Kehillah council. Schipper is about to complete his book on the history of the Warsaw Rabbinate, while the Germans are preparing to "finish" both the Rabbinate

and firm tread demanded respect. Even the barbaric Ukrainian militiamen were impressed. They left him alone and did not try to rush him. He walked slowly, his lips constantly moving, his eyes staring at the far distance."

→ (Today is *erev* Rosh Hashanah. A year has passed on and with it about two million Jews. As usual Jews still wish each other "A *gut yahr*," but they say it with little conviction or hope. What sort of a year can a young man look forward to, after having lost his wife, his four children, his parents, his brothers, his sisters, and now is left alone and forlorn in the world? Yet still the instinct for self-preservation reasserts itself. At least there should be an end to the ongoing destruction; at long last the *Ribono Shel Olam* should decree an end to our *tzaros*.)

When I meet Rav Menachem Ziemba, he quotes the *Gemarah*, "Even when the blade of a sharp sword rests against one's neck, one must still not despair from Divine Mercy." There is still hope... A *gut yahr*! Besides, I can prove to you that this year has to be an improvement on the last. Simple! There no longer remains three and a half million Jews in Poland to be tormented and murdered. So this year cannot possibly be as bad as the last. Let us hope it will be a better year!"

Yet when I repeated these comforting words to Dr. Schipper, he refused to accept them. "This is not true," he protested. "The remnants are still in mortal danger, terrible catastrophes are still possible. But I remain confident (Schipper is an incorrigible optimist) that those who have survived until now will live until the end! Why else have they carried out all these selections?"

Professor Balaban is busy organizing communal prayers for Rosh Hashanah at the *Judenrat*. Since the Ghetto has been reduced to only a few streets, all the synagogues are now

situated outside the walls. Balaban, the great historian, had always dreamt of being a religious minister like all his colleagues. Then he was ordained by Dr. Leo Baeck from Berlin, and the previous *Judenrat* president Czerniakow had appointed him to a position. So now he is busy collecting *machzorim* (of which there is no shortage in the Ghetto), *talleitim*, and a *shofar*. He has invited Mr. Sherman, *chazan-sheni* from the Tlomackie Street congregation, to serve.

Meanwhile the terror at the *kesl* continues. Terrified people are still in hiding in cellars and attics. Officially the "selection" is over and those who have been condemned have been taken away to the *Umschlag*. But these fugitives remain in hiding, since the area is still surrounded by Ukrainian auxiliaries dressed in German uniforms. Generally nobody here in the Ghetto really knows what has been going on between the streets Wolyńska and Miła. We still have no clear idea who remains there and where they are. But everybody realizes that a great tragedy has taken place.

## Sunday night, *motza'ei* Rosh Hashanah 5703, September 13

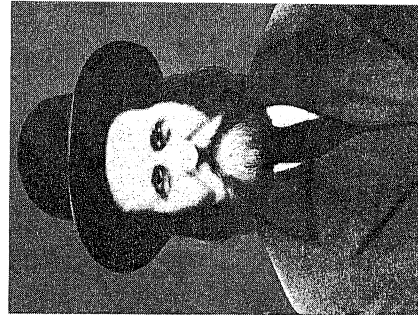
Rosh Hashanah also had its share of events. On the first day, the Kehillah Hall at 19 Zamenhof Street was filled to capacity as Chazan Sherman led the prayers. The congregation was mainly comprised of non-religious and assimilationists, but all were obviously deeply in earnest. I myself davened with a private *minyán* organized at Rav Menachem Ziemba's apartment. Our group included the remnants of the Warsaw's *rabbanim*, R. Stockhammer, R. Shapira, R. Yehudah Leib Orlean, R. Eliezer

exterminated in November, 1943). There had been some attempts to save him but they failed; I tried to alert the Swiss activists with equal lack of success.

## RAV MENACHEM ZIEMBA

Throughout the many vicissitudes of the Ghetto, Rav Ziemba's apartment remained a source of light, warmth, and encouragement. He had to move house five times — either because of the contraction of the Ghetto or for his own safety — but always his home was full of people seeking advice or reassurance. They were not disappointed. The wisdom and unshakable trust of generations was distilled in Rav Menachem's personality; with his genius, he had little difficulty in finding the apt phrase suitable for each petitioner and every occasion. All his sentiments were rooted in Torah sources and reflected the eternal truths. He combined the ice-cold logic and clear vision of the Lithuanian *lamdan* with all the fire and warmth of Polish Chasidim, fusing the *mussar* and perspective of Rebbe Yisrael Salanter with the sharpness of Kotzk *chasidus*. The Nazi terror did not break him; he remained a beacon of light amid the buffeting storm.

Even during those terrible months of July–September 1942, when the deportations accelerated to a frenetic pace, he never ceased his continual Torah study nor stopped producing new Torah insights. During



our oppressive plight, he drew his strength and inspiration from the Torah.

I once discovered a thick bundle of his writings (I was familiar with his handwriting). It had a whole section devoted to the subject of *Kiddush Hashem* (sacrificing one's life for Hashem) based mainly on the Rambam, though he quoted other early and later authorities, too. At the beginning it read:

*What I formulated with Hashem's help during these days of wrath. On the day they took away my beloved wife, who devoted her soul to educate our children in the ways of Torah and Fear of Hashem, thereby allowing them and myself to diligently study the Holy Torah....*

I remember the Sukkos of 1942. Under extreme danger, Rav Menachem broke open the roof of his apartment to construct a primitive *sukkah*. True, it was a tiny *sukkah*, but thousands of people passed through. On *erev Sukkos* I received three *esrogim* from Switzerland. Naturally, I brought them all straight to Rav Menachem Ziemba. (Later I sent one to the workshop of R. Avraham Hendel and the third to R. Berel Gefen at the workshop on 64 Niska Street.) Rav Menachem displayed great delight with his *esrog* and he was joined for the *tefillos* by the two remaining *rabbanim*, Rav Shimshon Stockhammer and Rav David Shapira. Immediately, the news spread, hundreds of Chasidim and *yeshivah bachurim* crawled through attics, tunnels, and cellars to perform the precious *mitzva*.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, there were repercussions. In Rav Menachem's apartment block lived a few officers of the Jewish police. They were furious at the gathering of illegals and "vilder" ("wild ones" as they termed all those without German

numbers or documents — usually young, religious Jews who remained underground to observe *kashrus* and Shabbos without interference). Most of the “masters” of the Jewish police were antisemitic assimilationists, and they arrested Rav Menachem Ziemba, R. Yehudah Leib Orlean, A. G. Friedenson, and N. Warsabiak, among others, and locked them up in the Jewish prison. They were released only after A. G. Ackerman approached the *Judenrat* president personally. (Naturally, this incident inflamed the hatred for the Jewish Police prevailing in the Ghetto.) As a punishment, Rav Ziemba had to leave his apartment in Muranow Street and move to 37 Nalewki Street.

I remember an earlier committee meeting for *Ezras Torah*, on the eighth day of Chanukah, 1942. Besides Rav Ziemba, there was R. Stockhammer, R. Shapira, R. Yosef Konigsberg, Senator Yaakov Trokenheim, R. Y. L. Orlean, Josef Scharanski, A. G. Friedenson, and Ackerman. Rav Menachem spoke on the subject of the solitary flask of oil — if something survives with its purity intact, it can light the whole world. Then the meeting got down to practicalities. During the lull in the deportations, at the beginning of winter, many Jews had arrived in Warsaw from the nearby towns that had recently become “*Judenrein*.” These included many *yeshivah bachurim* and a few *rabbanim*. R. Yosef Konigsberg with his customary vigor began organizing *shiurim* for them. These soon developed into full-fledged yeshivos — thanks to Rav Leib Landau (formally of Kolbeil) and Rav Arie Frumer (formally of Kozielglov), both of them previously *roshei yeshivah* of Lublin. The *Ezras Torah* committee was now set up to supply the yeshivos with food and other necessities. Most Jews responded generously to the appeal to help these yeshivos — and not only religious Jews. All Ghetto Jews recognized the importance of the underground yeshivos. The directors of the

Joint, Gitterman and Guzik, donated money and Abraham Gefner, director of the *Judenrat* Supply Department, offered food at cost price.

(Obviously Rav Menachem Ziemba was the guiding spirit behind all these projects. Jews hid in “bunkers” and bolt-holes, in cellars and attics, in cold and fear, and learned Torah in depth and with dedication. He visited the clandestine yeshivos in Nalewki, Nowolipie, and Mila Streets — testing the *yeshivah bachurim* and spurring them to greater achievements. In the Mila Street Yeshivah, they would learn right through the night. Outside panic reigned, no one knew what the unnatural lulls signified, everybody feared what the morrow would bring. The *gedolei Torah*, Rav Menachem Ziemba and his *talmidim*, ignored this bitter reality to soar to the spiritual heights of Torah and *yiras Hashem*.)

Until April 1943, I was in constant contact with Rav Menachem Ziemba, and for a short time he was officially a clerk in my Records and Archives Office. By January 1943, when it was obvious that the enemy intended to destroy all Jews — I, together with R. Zisha Friedman and Simcha Rapaport, began pleading with the Swiss activists to provide South American passports. We wrote to R. Chaim Yisrael Eiss, Rabbi Dr. Saul Weingort, and others. (Likewise, from Warsaw and later from Vittingort, I personally alerted Dr. Abraham Silberstein in Switzerland on behalf of Dr. Stein and Dr. Schipper.) After a long delay, amid fear and trepidation, those passports finally began to arrive, though very slowly.

When Rav Menachem Ziemba received his passport, he began to consider his options carefully. What, he pondered, would be the fate of his manuscripts? Besides, was it permissible to surrender oneself to the enemy — to enter the Pawiak Prison

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Yet, when a delegation representing thousands of Jews employed in the ghetto workshops called on him and asked him whether they should agree to move to the labor camps, Rabbi Zemba hesitated to assume sole responsibility for their fate. He called a meeting of the ghetto's remaining rabbis and communal leaders to discuss the question. At this meeting he repeated his personal conviction that the Jews of Warsaw should not let themselves be misled by the Germans. When one of the participants in the discussion ventured the opinion that caution was in order when it came to disseminating such a categorical view, Rabbi Zemba replied that he considered it his duty to warn his community of the Nazi trap.

Some heartrending scenes took place at the rabbi's apartment. One day a young couple appeared, both of them in tears. The husband wanted to give his wife a divorce. No, they were not unhappy together; the problem was something else. The husband had an opportunity to smuggle himself out of the ghetto into the Aryan sector and, naturally, had wanted to take his wife with him. But the young woman was afraid that her pronounced Jewish features would give them both away. Besides, her parents were in the ghetto and she did not want to abandon them to almost certain death. But she did not want her husband to lose his chance to escape because of her. At first, her husband had refused to leave the ghetto without her. Finally, however, he had acceded to her tearful pleas that he save himself, but only under the condition that they first go to the rabbi and obtain a divorce. If they were to be separated, he pointed out to his shocked wife, and he were to be killed, she probably would have no way of establishing beyond all doubt that he was not, in fact, alive somewhere. In that case, under Jewish law, if she survived she would remain forever an *agunah*, neither wife nor widow, unable to rebuild her life in a new marriage. By divorcing her before he left the ghetto, her husband wanted to protect her from that tragic fate. If she

would not consent to the divorce, he would not leave her. Rabbi Zemba understood only too well what he had to do. With tears streaming down his cheeks, he wrote out the bill of divorcement.

A young man, accompanied by his aged mother, came to Rabbi Zemba with a strange request. He wanted the rabbi to persuade his mother to undergo baptism. The young man had been assigned to a labor detail outside the ghetto. There, he had met a Polish gentile who had offered to hide him and his mother at his home. The Gentile wanted to be paid, of course, but that was not the main difficulty. The problem was much more delicate than that. It had occurred to the Gentile, a devout Catholic, that it would be a sin for him to give shelter to Jews. He had therefore informed the young man that he would be able in good conscience to save him and his mother from the Nazis only if both of them would agree to be baptized in the Catholic Church. The young man was ready to take that step in order to remain alive, but the old woman cried bitterly, sobbing that she would rather die as a Jewess than live as a gentile. Her son argued that in times such as these, anything was permitted if it offered a chance of survival. But Rabbi Zemba said to him: "Your mother says she wants to remain alive only if she can live as a Jewess. Do you really expect me, then, to tell her to end her days as a gentile?"

Meanwhile, the dreaded date — April 20 — was drawing closer. About three weeks before Passover, Rabbi Zemba called another meeting of rabbis. Among those who attended were Rabbi Goldschlag of Sierpetz, Rabbi Landa of Kolobiel, the rabbi of Wolle, Rabbi Beer, and Rabbi Eliezer Itche Meisels, grandson of the renowned Rabbi of Lodz. They decided to proclaim the day before the New Moon of Nisan as a day of repentance, prayer and charity to avert the fate that threatened the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto. On that day, the Jews were to fast in

repentance of past misdeeds, to read a prayer composed by the rabbis especially for the occasion, and to donate money to the community so that no Jew in the ghetto would be prevented to buy Passover foods because he could not afford them.

Of course there was no way of making the rabbis' decision public, but the word spread quickly through the ghetto. On the day before the beginning of the Passover month, Jews throughout the ghetto gathered in back rooms and basements to offer their prayers. The apartment of Rabbi Zemba was filled almost to bursting with men and women who wept and prayed in a desperate plea for Divine mercy. I had heard my uncle preach many times before, but never had I heard him deliver such a soul-stirring appeal to hearts and minds as he did on that day.

He urged us all to have faith and not to give way to despair. As his text, he chose the last verse of Psalm 1: "For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, and the way of the lawless shall perish," and gave his own interpretation of the original verse to meet the need of the hour. "The way of the righteous," he explained, "is to know the Lord, to understand that His ways are perfect. The Master of the Universe knows what He is doing. It is only right, therefore, that we should put our trust in Him. To give up hope, to insist that all is lost, that we are doomed to perish — that would be the way of the lawless. The greatest sin of all is to cease trusting in the Lord. The preachers of despair are twice guilty: By spreading the message of despondency, they not only sin themselves but cause others to sin as well. Therefore, do not say, 'We shall perish' but 'We know that the ways of the Lord are just and righteous altogether.'"

During the weeks that followed, Rabbi Zemba demonstrated to us by his own example how we should show our trust in God and at the same time serve notice on

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our foes that we were not about to surrender. We were to be prepared for all eventualities, but even as we made our plans for the hour of decision, we were to carry on a normal life as a community of proud Jews, observing the Law of God. Passover was approaching and Jews needed matzo, wine, and other foods with which to observe the holiday properly. Rabbi Zemba appointed a special Passover committee consisting of three outstanding communal leaders: Jacob Trockenheim, who before the war had been a wealthy industrialist and a member of the Polish Senate; Joseph Koenigsberg, who had been a prosperous manufacturer and president of the Yeshiva of Lublin, and Eliezer Gershon Friedenson, former editor of the *Beth Jacob Journal* and member of Warsaw's Jewish Community Council. Under the most adverse conditions imaginable, these men labored selflessly to procure Passover foods and make them available to as many Jews as possible. The apartment of Rabbi Joshua Perlow,\* the Novominsker Rav, directly across the street from Rabbi Zemba's house on Kupiecka 7, was converted into a depot for Passover foods. All day long, crowds streamed into the building with scrips to pay for the wine and matzo, and emerged with their bags filled. Despite the constant uncertainty of uncertainty and apprehension, the ghetto seemed to be taking on a holiday mood.

Then, on the day before the first Seder, the suspense broke. A Polish policeman spread a rumor that the Polish police had received orders from the Germans to take up stations at the ghetto walls at midnight. Everyone understood what that meant. The people vanished from the streets into their homes, gathering their last possessions for the move to their hideouts. Meanwhile, the members of the resistance movement made their final preparations for the confrontation with the enemy. They stationed men

\* His brother, R. Nahum Perlow, was to survive the war and settle in Brooklyn, where he died at an advanced age in 1976.

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detachments marched into the ghetto. They were met by a hail of gunfire from rooftops and hideouts. Momentarily caught off balance, they withdrew to regroup their forces. Thus began the battle of the Warsaw ghetto.

As one of the central figures in the ghetto, Rabbi Zemba had been the object of constant surveillance from the Germans. As a consequence, he had not been able to participate directly in the preparations for the battle. But his chief lieutenant, Joseph Koenigsberg, had served as one of the principal advisors of the resistance movement, and when the movement had launched a drive to raise funds for arms, Rabbi Zemba had been one of the first contributors. For months, the attic of Kupiecka 7 had been used by the Jewish resistance movement as a hideout and observation point. Now, it was to serve as a shelter for Rabbi Zemba.



at various strategic points and sent others on reconnaissance errands. Members of the underground also circulated among the workers in the ghetto workshops, keeping them informed of the latest developments but at the same time doing everything possible to allay fears and to prevent the outbreak of panic.

At ten o'clock that night the Jewish underground learned from reliable channels that the rumors about the impending German occupation of the ghetto were true. Within minutes, couriers were on the way to pass the word to the people in the workshops and the ghetto dwellings.

By midnight all the members of the Jewish resistance had taken up their battle stations. Almost every roof in the ghetto was manned, mostly by young boys who had never even come within touching distance of a rifle before but who were now as calm and ready for battle as seasoned veterans. They had vowed to themselves not to go to their deaths without a fight. If all hope of survival were to vanish, they would kill as many of the Nazi murderers as they could before using the last bullet to end their own lives. On second thought, they said, even that final bullet should not be squandered; it, too, could serve to put a Nazi out of the world. For themselves, they could always swallow a dose of potassium cyanide if all else failed. Almost everyone in the ghetto had managed to obtain enough of the poison for personal use if and when circumstances would demand it. The young men bade farewell to their loved ones. Not a word was uttered; only eyes met in silent leavetaking. The young men did not weep. They gritted their teeth and climbed to the rooftops with firm steps. Some carried revolvers or machine guns, others were armed with homemade Molotov cocktails, and those who could find no other weapons took with them bottles of acid and even toy pistols to fend off the enemy.

During the early hours of Passover eve, the first Nazi

The battle raged all that day. Gunfire was met by gunfire and the ghetto resounded with the noises of war. Again and again, the Germans tried to force their way into the ghetto, but each time they were compelled to retreat.

Rabbi Zemba found himself sharing his shelter with about 100 others, men and women, representing every segment of the ghetto population. With some of them, the rabbi had little, if anything, in common. But this did not trouble him. He was sufficient company unto himself — or perhaps he sensed the presence of another, higher Being. Only when I observed him there in the packed attic did I understand what he had once said to me when I expressed my resentment at seeing a well-known member of the Jewish community taking up his precious time with trivialities. I had marveled at my uncle's patience, but he had replied, "God, praise be to Him, gave me a very healthy mind. If I talk with someone and he begins to bore me, I am able to pursue my own thoughts even while I listen to him." So, too, it was now, on the eve of Passover in the Warsaw ghetto. The attic hideout was filled with all manner of people, but Rabbi Zemba was able to preserve his spiritual privacy.

Night fell. The Passover holiday had begun. The rabbi glanced at his watch and asked whether everyone in the attic had with him his personal portion of matzoth required for the observance of the Seder. Already weeks before, he had prepared for himself matzoth small enough to keep in his coat pocket at all times and had urged everyone else to do likewise. "We don't know where we will be when Passover comes," he had said. "But if we keep some matzoth with us wherever we go, we will be able at least to observe the precept of eating matzoth on the Seder nights no matter where we go."

At long last, there was a lull in the shooting outside. The rabbi led us down the steps into his apartment to celebrate the Seder. He recited the Haggadah with unusual

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devotion, frequently interspersing the traditional text with profound, erudite comments of his own.)

During the early hours of the next morning, the first troops and tank divisions, succeeded in breaking into the ghetto. Unwilling to risk additional German casualties in hand-to-hand combat with the Jews, they had decided to blow up the ghetto, house by house. But the valiant young Jews continued to fight. In some places, such as the bristle factory on Swientojazka Street, the Germans found themselves engaged in fierce battles. Small bands of Jewish fighters flung themselves upon the Germans, killing as many as they could before they themselves were gunned down by the well-armed invaders. Among the heroes of these street battles were the Rodal brothers of Muzonowska Street.

During the days that followed, the Germans sent airplanes to shower the ghetto with phosphorus bombs and other explosives. Within minutes, wide areas of the ghetto were in flames. Walls came crashing down. Roofs collapsed, burying dozens of Jews beneath them. Women and children, trapped in the burning houses, jumped from windows.

On Saturday morning, the third intermediate day of Passover, the buildings on either side of Kupiecka 7 caught fire. When the flames began to lick at our attic, panic broke out. Some, terrified at the thought of being suffocated by the smoke or trapped by the fast-spreading fire, wanted to leave. But Rabbi Zemba ordered them not to go. "Try to put out the flames!" he commanded, and took the lead himself, carrying buckets of water. The people listened to the rabbi and did not leave the hideout.

But by noon the attic was filled with smoke and the flames had reached the steps leading to the attic. Now, at last, Rabbi Zemba led us out of our shelter. But where could we go? We knew that in the streets outside the SS

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men were waiting to kill the Jews as they emerged from their burning homes. We went down into the basement of the house but we knew that we would not be able to stay there long. We therefore decided, during the next brief lull in the firing, to make for the building across the street, where Reb Beer, the rabbi of Wolle, had been hiding out.

When the firing seemed to have abated for a few moments, Rabbi Zemba's daughter, *Rebbizin* Rosa Weidenfeld,\* looked out the basement window. Apparently not aware that there were 55 men in front of the house, she told us to follow her out of the basement and into the adjacent building. She led the way. We saw her signaling to us with her hand. Tragically, we mistook her signal to mean that it was safe for us to proceed. And so we went after her, led by Rabbi Zemba, who was holding his five-year-old grandson, Yankel Ber, by the hand. Suddenly, we heard gunfire, followed by wild screams, coming from the ruins of Nalewki 39. For a split-second, we did not realize what was happening. Rabbi Zemba, only a few steps ahead of us, had fallen to the ground. But we were not able to stop; the steady gunfire drove us back into the basement we had left only moments before.

Until the late afternoon we did not know what had happened to Rabbi Zemba. We hoped against hope that he had merely tripped and fallen, and had somehow managed to escape.

After nightfall, we cautiously ventured outside to see whether there was any trace of the rabbi. We did not have to search for long: his lifeless body lay on the pavement in front of the building.

Somehow, the news of the rabbi's death spread from hideout to hideout. Unmindful of the danger, dozens of his friends and admirers crept out of their shelters to pay

\* A daughter-in-law of the late Rabbi of Tchebin, she survived the war and is presently living in Israel.

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their last respects to their teacher. Several Torah scholars, constituting themselves as an *ad hoc* court of religious law, decided that Rabbi Zemba's remains should be placed into a temporary grave in the courtyard of Kupiecka 7. As soon as conditions permitted, the scholars ruled, he should be reinterred in the Jewish cemetery.

Late that night, by the eerie light of flames veiled in clouds of smoke, we buried Rabbi Menahem Zemba. Among those present at the scene were two of his daughters, one son-in-law, Reb Beer, and his youngest son, Rabbi Aaron Naftali Zemba,\* who recited the mourner's *kaddish*.

Thus ended the life of Rabbi Menahem Zemba, who by his own great example taught his disciples how to live — and, if need be, to die — with the dignity befitting proud, upright Jews.

*Based on the story by Rabbi Abraham Zemba in Pesach Almanakh (New York, 1961).*

\* He, too, was to die in the ghetto.