

Testimony of Jakub Zilberstajn, Warsaw, Niska 35

Experiences in the Ghetto

After all the various decrees and edicts brought down upon the heads of the Jewish people, that which had been hanging over the Jews of Warsaw and which caused them to tremble in fear finally came to pass. It was on a gloomy, rainy Shabbes, 15th November, 1940, that the ghetto was created. A thing that had not existed for hundreds of years was once again brought to life: Jews may not live with Christians, everything must be separate, they must have no contact with the outside world, everything shut off and closed. A number of streets were separated out for Warsaw's Jews, so that upon rising on Shabbes morning people were shaking from the news that gendarmes were already standing at marked points and one could no longer go past them or into other streets. Although Warsaw's Jewish population was already prepared for this, people still continued to believe that perhaps this would not come about, simply because geographically, so we thought, Warsaw was not like Łódź, for example, or other cities, and then all our hopes were dashed when we went out into the street. The impression was frightening, terrifying; the streets full of people. A heavy cloud then covered our sky, the weather was frightening; the dull rain pouring down made our feeling even harder. Despair could be seen in everyone's eyes. How can we live like this, is it possible that we would have no connection with the Christian side and no trade, that we would not be able to conduct any exchange of products? It was impossible to understand how factories, for example, which produced exclusively Christian articles, would continue to work and live. And in this way the first few days passed, people wandering around completely resigned [to their fate].

Slowly life began to crystallize in the ghetto, it began to take on new forms, forms which no one could have predicted, a ghetto life was created, from various places goods were smuggled into and out of the ghetto, the so-called hideouts. Everyone started to arrange their affairs as was possible. I, for example, had a factory which had existed since 1927 producing various plates products. In wartime this became a product exclusively for Christians, so in the ghetto there was nothing I could do with my merchandise. So I had to make efforts to establish contact with the Aryan side. The only thing I could do was to establish links with my former customers by telephone. However, one cannot send packages through the telephone. Fate willed that

a few months before the ghetto I was arrested by the Gestapo and they took away my merchandise. My wife, through various interventions, managed to get me released from prison and upon my release I became acquainted with a Polish policeman, a Master Corporal, Stefan Białobrzęski. He was a driver, taking those arrested to Pawiak, and thus he also came into the ghetto. He also drove a passenger car for military business. On one occasion I telephoned him [and said that] should he be in the ghetto, he should come to meet me. And indeed, immediately on the next day he came. I laid out before him the plan, that in the ghetto I have nothing to do and I have my merchandise, which I can only sell on the Aryan side, and you are there; I have a wife with children and we need to live. He listened to all of this and declared that he weighed up exactly the difficulties involved in this and the threat to him, should he be discovered, and in spite of this he is willing to do everything for me and to help as much as he can. We decided that he would come to the door with the vehicle at around 12 at night and I would prepare the packages of merchandise. In truth around 12 at night the guard came and said that a car was standing by the door and I should come out. I straight away took out the packages of merchandise and he drove away immediately. This was the same vehicle as is used for people under arrest, which he drove to Pawiak, and from there he drove to me. He had to take the packages to his home in Praga, on Kępną Street, where he lived and the next day his wife attended getting the packages to the addresses as indicated. In this way it began and every few days he attended to everything for me and brought me the money that was earned, he did not want to take anything for himself except one time a present and my wife had to work hard to get him to accept that. And so he became a frequent visitor to my house and there was no day that he was not in our home and he became very familiar to us and the entire courtyard knew already that he took care of everything for me on the "other" side, and neighbors from the courtyard began to come and demand that he take their merchandise as well. Understandably, he couldn't accommodate everyone's request, apart from one neighbor from the other door, a certain Lichtenstein. He was burned in an air raid shelter. I will write more about him later. He was in business in ladies' bags and indeed on his behalf I asked that he [the policeman] also take with him his merchandise and with great toil was successful. He also arranged things for him and brought him money, but from him he did take payment. He was very pleased with this, because thanks to this he could survive. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the policeman. In this way ghetto life became more or less standardized and we had to adapt to life in the ghetto, the smugglers and the Jewish policemen, understandably, did good business, the most expensive delicacies they brought into the ghetto and there was a lot of business with the best beverages. More bars and nightclubs sprung up every day. The fashions of some of the women did not look like those of a ghetto, but rather like those in a first-ranking spa resort. The luxury grew day by day and meanwhile thousands of people died from hunger and need and with each step one took walking down the street were lying the dead bodies of people who died from hunger. The death toll grew higher daily. Pinkert's funeral offices grew bigger by the day and no one knew what to do. People moved the corpses with various hand carts and at the cemetery there was a terrible exhibition of thousands of people who came

to bury their relatives. And together with the hunger, death tore away every day hundreds of people through the typhus epidemic which at the same time reigned in the ghetto, so that the angel of death spread his wings of death over the entire Jewish population in the Warsaw ghetto, and there was no house which he did not visit. The so-called *parowkes* (steam baths) conducted in each courtyard helped little, a new *Placowka* (workplace or forced labor group) was created for the police and various sanitarians and doctors, and disinfection departments, for these all created a fresh source of earnings, to squeeze money out of people wherever possible.

And so ghetto life progressed and each in his own way thought how best to act. And the year 1941 came to an end. The trade between the ghetto and the outside world grew once again. A legal trade began in sending various products to the Aryan side through the *Transferstelle*, which was located on Dzika street behind the guard post. I myself began sending greater quantities of merchandise. In my factory we began to decorate for the Germans dishes of various sizes, large and small, and on a great scale, reaching tens of thousands. To this end there were wagons with a special concession which had the right to bring things into the ghetto and to take out the dishes which were ready. We didn't do badly out of this. Over time, as I furnished the Germans with [samples of] my workmanship, on the basis of this I received a certificate from the authorities that I must not be snatched on the street, as happened at that time, for work or to the camps. With my certificate I could go freely in the streets, without fear of the Jewish snatchers, the police. But all this didn't make anyone happy, in particular when the news spread around the ghetto from other towns, where deportations had begun. Jews were sent to an unknown destination. People were shaking when the news went around that from Lublin some of the Jews had been deported and that it happened so suddenly, just like all the German decrees came unexpectedly. Now people lost their heads, people were guessing of what it might mean. People then started to say that the provincial Jews would be transported out of the Warsaw ghetto, those that had come to the city during the war. Life became more difficult with every passing day. The night raids on various Jewish homes started. Every night the Gestapo would raid Jewish homes in the middle of the night and take out men into the yard and shoot them directly. No night passed that in the morning we did not hear of fresh victims. Every night when we went to sleep we were not sure if we would still be alive the next morning. The profits didn't stretch far enough, the hands also reached out to me. It so happened on a certain day that a Gestapo vehicle drove past the door and two officers in the Gestapo got out and going into the courtyard they came to my house. I was not at home, they knocked on the door and finding my wife, they asked her if Zilberstajn lives there. When my wife confirmed it, they asked where I was and receiving the answer that I had just left they began to carry out a search of my home which lasted more than an hour. Meanwhile coming in from the street I saw from afar the Gestapo car outside the door, I immediately and instinctively understood that the "guests" were in my home. By the door, obviously, a lot of people were gathered. Seeing me they did not let me go into my home, saying that the guests had been there a long time and that they were waiting for me. I tried to

get past but they would not let me. Thus standing outside the door for 30 minutes I saw how they went into the courtyard together with my wife. Going to the car they stood and spoke for a few minutes with my wife.

Translated by Rebecca Wolpe