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**April 19-May 16, 1943. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising**

**„My dream has come true. Jewish self-defense in the ghetto was a fact. Jewish armed resistance and vengeance have become reality. I was a witness of great, heroic struggle of Jewish fighters”, wrote Mordechaj Anielewicz on 23 April 1943 to Icchak Cukierman, responsible for contact with Polish underground, who remained outside of the Warsaw Ghetto at that time.**

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the first urban revolt againt the Germans in occupied Europe, continued. Izrael Gutman, historian of the Holocaust, but above all – an insurgent wrote: „No act of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust fired the imagination quite as much as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April 1943. It was an event of epic proportions in which a group of relatively unarmed, untrained Jews managed to lead a military revolt against the Nazi war machine.” (*Resistance. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, p. XI).

In order to present the genesis and course of the Uprising, it is necessary to describe the situation in the Warsaw Ghetto after the Great Deportation in summer of 1942.

**The period between the Great Deportation and the uprising**

Between 22 July and 23 September 1942, Germans deported about 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to the death camp in Treblinka. Nearly day after day, cattle wagons crowded with people were departing from the Umschlagplatz at Stawki street.

After the „action”, the social structure of the ghetto changed. Majority of children and the elderly were murdered. Most survivors were young, able to work, traumatized by the brutal liquidation of the ghetto and by losing their loved ones.

The ghetto after the „action” functioned differently than before. First, its topography changed. The Germans reduced the size of the ghetto to only a few quarters (altogether 295 houses), in which lived and worked about 35,000 Jews, employed in German production workshops („szop”). The closed Jewish district was created out of enclaves of the central ghetto (Stawki, Muranowskiego Square, Franciszkańska, Gęsia, Smocza streets), brushmakers’ workshop area (Nowolipki, Mylna, Leszno, Żelazna streets), Large Többens workshop (Ceglana, Twarda, Prosta, Żelazna streets). The ghetto functioned more like a labour camp than a residential district. The workshops, which hired about 35,000 people, imposed severe conditions: working from 6 AM until 5 PM, absence at work was punished by losing one’s daily food ration. The order in the workshops was secured by the Werkschutz – factory guards comprising of German, Ukrainian and Jewish units. Nearly 4 thousand people worked at the *Werterfassung*, an office responsible for repossession of goods after victims of murder. Between the central ghetto and the main workshop area stretched an uninhabited, „wild” area, a hiding place for about 25,000 unemployed Jews. The area from Leszno street southwards was nearly completely reincorporated into the „aryan” part of the city.

The Jewish Council (German: *Judenrat*), after Adam Czerniaków’s suicide led by Marek Lichtenbaum, was reduced to less than twenty units, employing ca. 2800 people. The Council lost its respect among the prisoners of the ghetto in favour of underground youth organizations, which had been supporting armed resistance since the first days of the Great Deportation. During the meeting of two generations of ghetto conspiration (22 or 23 July 1942), when the actual goal of deportations wasn’t yet recognized, the opinion of older activists prevailed – they advised against fighting the Germans out of concern for the situation of people in the ghetto. On 28 July, youth Zionist organizations — Akiba, Dror, Gordonia, Hashomer Hatzair and Hanoar Hacijjoni founded the Jewish Combat Organization.

After the Great Deportation, nobody had any doubts that further deportation would follow. Armed resistance became a seriously considered option. One of the key figures in setting things in motion and in uniting the conspiration movement (whose many members were lost due to the deportations), was Mordechaj Anielewicz (ps. „Marian”, „Malachi”). Before the war, Anielewicz belonged to the management of Hashomer Hatzair. When the war began, he remained in the Soviet occupation zone near the Romanian border, where he was arrested by the Soviet for a short time. He managed to flee to Vilnius and to return to Warsaw in January 1940. In the Warsaw Ghetto, Anielewicz continued his work for Hashomer Hatzair – he edited underground press, organized seminars, worked with the youth. From June until mid-September 1942, when the Great Deportation took place, Anielewicz stayed in Będzin and Sosnowiec, where he was organizing resistance groups. After his return to the Warsaw Ghetto, he became the commander of the Jewish Combat Organization.

**Jewish Combat Organization**

According to the statute of the JCO from 2 December 1942, the organization’s main goals were: armed resistance during deportations, terrorist actions against Jews who collaborated with Germans (police, community officers, Werkschutz members), and defending Jews employed at the workshops.

One of the JCO’s first decisions was to judge and sentence Jews who collaborated with Germans during the Great Deportation. On 29 October, Eliahu Różański from Hashomer Hatzair executed a death sentence on Jakub Lejkin, chief of the Jewish police during the deportation.

The next key task for the JCO was to obtain arms and to get in contact with the Polish underground state. In August or September 1942, Leon Feiner of Bund and Zionist Menachem Kirszenbaum met Jan Karski, emissary of the Polish government in exile. During the deportations, the JCO sent Arie Wilner („Jurek”) to the „aryan side” to establish contact with the Home Army. After long attempts, in October Wilner managed to get in contact with Henryk Woliński („Wacław”) from the Jewish Department at the Information and Propaganda Office of the Home Army. In response to the HA’s suggestions about negotiations with one organization uniting all the Jewish political faction, the JCO expanded. It comprised members of Hashomer Hatzair, Dror, Akiba, Gordonia, Bund, Poale Zion Left, Poale Zion Right, Hanoar Hacijjoni and Polish Workers’ Party.

**Jewish Military Union**

The JCO was supposed to be joined by revisionist from the New Zionist Organization and their youth department, Betar. Conditions imposed on revisionists became an obstacle against agreement. Revisionists were supposed to join the JCO as individuals, not as a group, also the JCO believed that leaders should be chosen from political activists, not members of military (as preferred by the revisionists).

Most likely in Autumn of 1942, revisionists have founded the second combat organization in the Warsaw Ghetto – the Jewish Military Union. Both organizations had agreed to cooperate in future struggle. The JMU was led by Paweł Frenkel, a young member of Betar. Soon before the uprising, the JMU comprised about 260 members, from whom we know only few by name: Icchak (Józef) Bielawski, Józef Grynblatt, Eliahu Halberstein, Salek Hazensrung, Arie (Leon) Rodal, Natan Schulz, Michał Strykowski, Dawid Wdowiński.

The revisionists tried to contact the Polish underground structures, but eventually, unlike the JCO, they did’t officially cooperate with the Home Army.

**January self-defense**

At 6:30 AM on 18 January 1943, German troops have entered the Warsaw Ghetto. According to an order from Himmler, they were supposed to reduce the ghetto population to 8,000. The Germans, like during the Great Deportation in July, called residents of tenement houses to walk down to the yard and show their employment cards. They wanted to identify the Jews who remained in the ghetto illegally, according to the occupant’s law.

The Jews decided that the next deportations are about to begin. Only few people decided to o down to the yards, others went into hiding and use passive resistance. In such circumstances, the Germans decided to arrest people regardless of their proof of employment (for example patients of the hospital at 6/8 Gęsia street), in order to meet the requirements.

Due to lack of communication between members of the JCO, actions weren’t coordinated. Insurgents from Hashomer Hatzair — Mordechaj Anielewicz, Eliahu Różański, Margalit Landau, Mordechaj Growas joined a group led to the Umschlagplatz. On the corner of Niska and Zamenhofa streets, they opened fire and attacked the Germans who were convoying the group. As a result of the shooting, only several fighters escaped alive, but part of the Jewish civilians managed to flee. The next attack took place at 58 Zamenhofa street, where members of Akiba and Gordonia lived. During the action, which took four days, fights took place at 40 Zamenhofa street, 34, 41 and 63 Miła street, 22 Franciszkańska street. Approximately 12 Germans were killed. The losses on the Jewish side were much higher. At the Umschlagplatz itself, 60 Bund members who refused to get in the carriage, were shot. These days were written down in history as the January self-defense.

**Preparations for the defense of the Warsaw Ghetto**

The January self-defense brought losses in people, but it was considered as a great success of the Jewish resistance, which broke the psychological barrier of fear. It proved that the JCO can fight against the Germans. They still lacked training and arms. The time remaining until the next action – the Jews believed that it would certainly take place – was supposed to be spent on preparations.

Until January 1943, the JCO had a loose structure. Its members (about 600) were organized into combat groups of 10–12. Some of the groups lived together, others – separately. After the „January action”, the groups became barracked, which in the Warsaw Ghetto conditions meant living together. They took observation shifts, broke walls in basements and attics to be able to move around the ghetto without leaving buildings. They were preparing for guerrilla war in urban conditions, aware that the day of the next combat was not up to them.

An urgent question was arming and training. The Home Army gave the JCO 50 guns, 80 kilos of explosives for petrol bombs, and an unknown number of grenades. The JCO was also buying arms on the black market. The funds were extorted from smugglers who made fortunes in the ghetto; the JCO also robbed the Jewish Council’s till. Before the uprising, each member of the JCO was armed with a personal gun. The insurgents had 2,000 grenades, 10 rifles, 1 machine gun and an unknown number of homemade petrol bombs, often made out of light bulbs.

Civilians were preparing for another deportation by building bunkers. Some of them were provisional, but usually they were intended to serve as long-term shelters. Part of them was equipped with electricity, running water, ventillation and a large supply of food.

One day before the uprising, the headquarters of the JCO were located at 29 Miła street. Apart from the chief of the JCO, Mordechaj Anielewicz (Hashomer Hatzair), there were present: deputy chief Icchak Cukerman (Dror), who right before the uprising escaped to the „aryan side” to work as a liaison with the HA, after Arie Wilner was arrested; Berek Szajndmil (Bund), and later Marek Edelman (Bund) responsible for intelligence; Hersz Berliński (Poale Zion-Left) responsible for planning; Johanan Morgenstern (Poale Zion-Right) from the financial department and Michał Rozenfeld (PWP). On 19 April 1943, the JCO was grouped into 22 units of 10–12 men and women aged 19–25. The political leadership belonged to the Jewish National Committee, which comprised all the JCO’s political factions aside from Bund. The platform of cooperation between the JNC and the JCO was the Coordination Commission.

The headquarters of the JMU were located at 7 Muranowski Square. The organization led by Paweł Frenkel, about whom remains very little information, comprised about 260 people.

In the central ghetto area fought 9 units of the JCO, led by Izrael Kanal. In the brushmakers’ workshop – 5 JCO units led by Marek Edelman and a JMU unit under the command of Chaim Łopata. In the Tobbens and Schultz workshops – 8 JCO units led by Icchak Cukierman (later, during the uprising, by Eliezer Geller) and a JMU unit led by Pinchas Taube.

**The defense of the Ghetto**

In the early morning on 19 April 1943, German troops entered the Warsaw Ghetto again. Their task was to deport part of the Jews to labour camps in Lublin region. The insurgents, having learned from the experiences of the January self-defense, were observing movement around the ghetto walls and the gates. They notice German troops gathering at night. Liaisons ordered the civilians to go to their bunkers and shelters.

The liquidation was commanded by the head of SS and police in Warsaw, lieutenant Ferdinand von Sammern-Frenkenegg. Under his command served a unit of grenadiers and SS cavalry (821 soldiers, 9 officers), police units (228 gendarmes, 6 officers), Wehrmacht artillery and sappers (56 soldiers and 3 officers), Ukrainian units (335 soldiers, 2 officers) and other support units of the police. They had altogether 1174 rifles, 135 automatic pistols, 69 light machine guns, 13 heavy machine guns, 3 assault guns, flamethrowers, artillery, tanks.

The Germans entered the Warsaw Ghetto in two columns. The first one went down Nalewki street. At the corner of Nalewki and Gęsia, the soldiers were attacked with petrol bombs and grenades. The fight took about 2 hours and resulted in an escape of the Germans, who left their killed and injured on site. It was an undisputed victory for the Jews. The second battle took place at the crossing of Zamenhofa and Miła. The insurgents used petrol bombs again. The Jews attacked two tanks, burning down one of them. They forced Germans to withdraw again.

On the same day, 19 April, general Jurgen Stroop replaced lieutenant von Sammern-Frenkenegg. Germans entered the ghetto again to meet resistance on the corner of Nalewki and Gęsia and on Muranowski Square. The Muranowski Square was defended by revisionists from the JMU, who had a machine gun. After the first day, the insurgents lost one person, while Stroop – 12. This day was a definite victory for the fighters.

The next day brought combat in the brushmakers’ workshop. The gate at Wałowa street was rigged to blow up. The bomb exploded when the Germans tried to enter the building. At the second attempt, they managed to circle a group of insurgents. Michał Klepfisz distracted the Germans to help his comrades escape. He died of machine gun fire. For his courage, he received the Virtuti Militari order.

Fights were taking place at Miła street and in the main workshop area. Two flags – a white and red and a blue and red one – were placed on the Muranowski Square. Germans tried to negotiate with the fighters, and after failing to achieve an agreement, they cut off electricity, water and gas in the ghetto area.

Germans began to change their tactics. They withdrew tanks which were difficult to maneuver in the city, they ceased to move in large, dense groups, which were easy to attack. The insurgents moved to the next phase as well. In order to attack off guard, they moved around the ghetto using corridors made in attics and basements. On 21 April, fights at the brushmakers’ workshop were taking place. The German sappers, looking for landmines, were finding bunkers instead. Stroop decided to burn down the entire workshop to destroy passages between hideaways. Fights continued in the central ghetto, at Zamenhofa and Miła. On 21 April, revisionists from the JMU fled the ghetto through a tunnel leading to a house at 6 Muranowska street.

When Stroop realized that the entire ghetto area is a labyrinth of interconnected corridors, basements and underground bunkers, he decided to change the tactic. He ordered to burn one house after another, forcing insurgents and civilians to leave. The fire in the ghetto broke the insurgents’ defense line. They left their positions and his in bunkers, which became their strongholds. The headquarters of the JCO moved to a bunker at 18 Miła street, a giant, 6-room shelter which belonged to Szmul Oszer, a smuggler. About 300 fighters, Anielewicz included, managed to hide there. On 8 May, the bunker was discovered. Germans spread gas inside and circled the exits. The fighters, convinced that they found themselves in a hopeless situation, decided to commit mass suicide. Yet the sixth exit proved to be safe. Several insurgents managed to flee safely.

On 8 May, a group of JCO fighters was found by Symcha „Kazik” Rotem, who led them out of the burning ghetto through canals, with help from sewer workers. On 10 May, part of the group came out to the surface at 10 Prosta street. They were picked up by a prearranged truck. The rest was supposed to be picked up by the next car. Because help failed to appear, the fighters left the canal and hid in the ruins. When Germans were informed and arrived at Prosta street, all the Jews were killed in combat. There were plans of returning to the ghetto to rescue more insurgents, but the operation wasn’t eventually accomplished.

Stay in a bunker, regardless how comfortable, was a horror. The hideaways were crowded, lacking air and water. They required silence. Certain people were thrown out – such as mothers with children – because they could lead to discovering the bunker. Still, it was fire from the burning ghetto and gas spread by the Germans which forced the Jews to leave their hideaways. Afterwards, they were taken to the Umschlagplatz, from where they were sent to labour camps in Trawniki, and Poniatowa, or to Majdanek. About 7,000 people were sent by Germans to the death camp in Treblinka. Another 7,000 were killed in the ghetto, right after leaving their hiding places. In his final report from liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, Jurgen Stroop claims that 56,056 Jews were found in bunkers and shelters. Historians believe that this number is exaggerated.

**Further lives of the insurgents**

Members of the JMU, who left the ghetto through a tunnel at Muranowski Square in the early days of the uprising, found a shelter in a villa in Michalin, near Warsaw. They tried to join the Polish underground – without success. After several days, they were discovered by the German gendarmerie and blue police. They tried to escape and disperse. In the next few days, fights were taking place in Otwock, Rembertów and in the Mlądz commune. About 56 members of the JMU were killed. Another group, who were hiding in Warsaw, were handed over to the Germans.

Members of the JCO, who managed to escape the ghetto through canals and get out at Prosta street, fled to the forest near Wyszków, hoping to join Polish partisans. A group of insurgents – including Marek Edelman, Icchak Cukierman and Cywia Lubetkin remained in hiding in Warsaw, and when the Warsaw Uprising broke out, they took part in the combat in the People’s Army units.

**Polish accounts**

Cooperation between the JCO and the HA involved not only providing arms, but also support in combat against the Germans. On 19 April, about 7 PM, a group of Home Army soldiers, led by lt. Józef Pszenny „Chwacki”, tried to break the ghetto wall at Bonifraterska street. The action began too late, and the crowd of onlookers which gathered there hindered the intervention, which eventually led to failure. On 20 April, a group of People’s Army soldiers, led by Franciszek Bartoszek „Jacek”, attacked the German artillery sodiers at Nowiniarska and Franciszkańska streets. Again, the operation failed due to the crowd on the street. On the same day, a group of People’s Guard soldiers under Jerzy Lerner’s command tried to break the ghetto wall near Okopowa and Gęsia, but with no success.

These examples proved that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising caused great interest from the people of Warsaw, who stood by the ghetto walls, listening to shootings, observing the fire from the burning city. The uprising was widely commented by the underground press. Commenters, regardless of their political opinion, were impressed by the struggle in the ghetto, often unfairly juxtaposing the April events against the attitudes of Jews during the Great Deportation. On 22 April, the Świt radio station from London broadcast a program about the heroic struggle of the Warsaw Ghetto. On 4 May, Prime Minister Sikorski gave a speech on the BBC, which fell on deaf ears: *I’m asking my fellow countrymen to provide help and support to the murdered, and at the same time, I condemn these atrocities in front of the entire humankind, which has remained silent for too long*. On 12 May, in protest against the indifference of the world, Szmul Zygielbojm – a Bundist, a member of the National Council of the Polish Government in Exile – committed suicide.

The uprising didn’t end with capitulation. When the insurgents withdrew, Stroop’s soldiers kept putting the ghetto on fire. On 16 May 1943, as a symbol of the end of Jewish life in Warsaw, Jurgen Stroop blew up the Great Synagogue at Tłomackie street. He gave his report about the suppression of the Ghetto Uprising a title: „The Jewish residential district in Warsaw ceased to exist!”. Traces of the fire of the synagogue can be still seen in the main hall of the neighbouring building – former Main Judaistic Library, currently – the Jewish Historical Institute.

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**Footnote:**

[1] Izrael Gutman, *Walka bez cienia nadziei. Powstanie w getcie warszawskim*, transl. by Marcin Stopa, Oficyna Rytm, Warsaw, 1998, p. 11.

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