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## The Getto of Białystok (June 1941 to August 1943)

If I may, I'd like to say a few words about my personal connection to Białystok.

My late father was born in Poland, in the town of Grajewo. In 1941, after Poland was invaded by the Nazis, my father and his whole family were sent to the ghetto in Grodno. His mother died in the ghetto; his sister and her whole family died in Bugusze and another brother died in Radzymin. Towards the end of 1942, when the extermination of the district of Białystok began in earnest, his father — my grandfather — summones his two remaining sons, my father and his brother, and instructed them to escape from Grodno to save their lives. He suggested that one brother should escape to Wilno and the other to Białystok, so that at least someone of the family would survive.

My father managed to reach Wilno, helped by Tadeusz Soroka, a Pole who is still alive today, and is living in Tarnowskie Góry. From Wilno he made his way to join the partisans in the woods of Narocz, participated with them in the fighting, survived and arrived in Israel at the end of 1945.

His brother, together with his wife and son, went to Białystok at the beginning of 1943. The child was given to a Polish family in Białystok. The couple was killed along with all the Jewish population of the Ghetto, but the child, my cousin, probably survived. Today he should be about 47 years old, and may still be living here, in Białystok, unaware of his origins, or true identity.

I myself, born in the already independent State of Israel in the end of 1948, came to research the Holocaust through the influence and inspiration of my late father, who died but 9 months ago. I wish to thank Professor Wyczański, who remembered me, and thanks to whom I am able to be here today. Permit me to dedicate the lecture to the memory of my late father, who, before he died had still visited Poland with me, and even came with me to Białystok.

I shall now go on to the lecture, dealing with life in the Ghetto of Białystok and the Ghetto leadership.

On Friday, June 27th 1941, at 6 o'clock in the morning, Białystok was attacked and captured by the German army. Unlike the regions of the General Government — Western Poland, which had been under German occupation since 1939 — in the areas under Soviet rule the Germans employed a policy of mass murder and extermination of Jews, begun immediately after the invasion. Białystok was no exception.

Right after the capture of the city, a mass pogrom of the Jews took place. This pogrom, and its prolonged incident, lasted for about two weeks.

On the day of the invasion the Germans surrounded one of the Jewish quarters, located around the old synagogue in town. Jewish men were kidnapped from their homes and dragged to the synagogue. Some one thousand Jews were held in the synagogue when the Germans set it on fire. The fire spread to the neighboring dwellings of the Jewish quarter, and these, built mostly of wood, immediately took fire and started to burn. The Germans kept capturing Jews and throwing them into the burning synagogue until late afternoon. On the whole, some two thousands of the Białystok Jews were burned alive, shot and tortured on that Friday, later named by the Jews „Red Friday” (Der Reuter Freitag), „Bloody Friday” (Der Blutiger Freitag) or „Black Friday”.

A week later, on the 3rd of July, the Germans ordered a group of Jewish lawyers, intellectuals, political activists and communists to report to German headquarters in Warszawska Street. The excuse for that was that they should acquaint themselves with the occupation rules applying to the occupied territories. About three hundred Jews reported to the headquarters. They were taken to a field called Pietrasze, about 2 km. out of Białystok, where they were all shot.

On the 11th of July more than four thousand Jewish men and boys were kidnapped, taken to Pietrasze and slaughtered.

Jews began organizing in a new, cruel and threatening reality. At the height of the riots, on June 29th, that is, two days only after the capture of Białystok, the military commander of Białystok summoned the Rabi of the town, Dr. Gedaliahu Rosenmann, and the leader of the community, the engineer Ephraim Barash, and ordered them to form a Judenrat — a Jewish Council. Concurrently, in accordance with an order issued by the headquarters of the German Army acting in the area, the Ghetto of Białystok was formed, in a relatively new quarter, that till then had hardly contained any Jews.

The formation of the Judenrat in its full capacity — twenty four members — was completed by the end of July. By then the Ghetto of Białystok was sealed, became a sort of autonomic district, disconnected from the Polish town surrounding it. It contained some fifty thousand

Jews, residents of Białystok and nearby areas, crammed into a narrow area.

The acting chairman of the Judenrat was Ephraim Barash, and one should note that the Judenrat retained its original form to the last day of Ghetto, in August 1943, that is for two whole years. The Judenrat and most of its departments settled in a three-storied building in 32 Kupiecka Street. Only four departments — including the Jewish police — were located in other buildings. The most prominent thing in the Białystok Ghetto, that singles it out from among the other Ghettos, is the fact that it became an industrial work-camp serving the occupation forces. It thus happened that while other Ghettos, some of them quite close to Białystok, were totally exterminated, they kept serving as a supply base for various vital products, controlled by the economic branch of the occupation forces.

The hierarchy of the Nazi occupational government was in complete chaos, and all along the existence of the Białystok Ghetto the controversy between various occupation branches regarding the „Jewish question” could be well felt. Furthermore, the Germans fought relentlessly among themselves over control of the Ghetto, and each wanted to appropriate the stolen Jewish property, and Jewish work force and the industrial production of the Ghetto. The Germans pointed clearly to the Judenrat that „inactive elements in the economy” would not be tolerated in the Ghetto. The meaning of the threat was unmistakable, and thus the Judenrat took upon itself to arrange workshops that would employ all Jews capable of work.

From August 1941 till mid-1942, ten factories and a great number of workshops all producing and processing dozens of products, were operated in the Ghetto. Some of the factories operated, school workshops, teaching apprentices skilled labour. The work in its entirety was carried out by Jews, supervised by Germans. Most of the Białystok Jews worked in the Ghetto factories, and only a few were employed in German factories outside the Ghetto. The occupation government used to pass the orders for products, destined for various German institutions, to the Judenrat. The chief client was the Wehrmacht, then employed in the difficult campaign at the Russian front. Thus, for instance, in May 1942 the occupation administration filed a commission for 30.000 pairs of new for boots, and for sewing leather parts for 100.000 existing boots. In August 1942, the textile factories in the Ghetto produced some 100.000 military berets, and some 40.000 pairs of gloves. In October of that same year, the factories were ordered to produce some 30.000 wagons, probably in preparation for winter on the Russian front.

The Ghetto of Białystok became a huge work-camp, supervised by the Judenrat, that became the occupation administration's executing branch. Men and machines worked in shifts, ceaselessly, night and day. Those not employed in the factories operated makeshift factories in their living quarters and worked to supply the quota set by the Judenrat. The production of this quota was the condition for reception of the meager food quota, and the Judenrat was the only legal source of food.

The German occupation rules enforced work on every man and woman, from the age of 15 to 60. Later on these rules were changed to include youths below 15 and the elderly aged over 60.

The employment rate in the Ghetto rose steadily. In July 1942, some 8,600 of the 37,000 inhabitants of the Ghetto were working. In April 1943, about 14,650 Jews, some of them minors, of the 30,000 inhabitants were employed, forming thus some 50 percent of the population. This phenomenon should be attributed to the tireless efforts of Barash, who was convinced that raised industrial production is the key to survival, and managed to convince most of the Ghetto's inhabitants in his conviction.

Life in the Ghetto was insecure and discouraging, governed by shortage and fear. Refugees arrived at the Ghetto and told of mass extermination of Jews in the nearby and far towns. And in spite of all that, in the Ghetto of Białystok — more than in any other large Ghetto in Poland — at least on the surface, the inhabitants managed to form „balanced” life.

When we try to analyze the causes for that, we run into a composite, complex and varying system of factors. In the reality of Nazi occupation, few things, if at all, remained stable for any length of time. But one factor in the Ghetto of Białystok remained permanent, stable and dominant from the day the Ghetto was built — the Judenrat and in particular its chairman, Ephraim Barash.

From the day the Ghetto was formed it contained a firm leadership, that defended its objectives to the best of its abilities, acted loyally, diligently and tirelessly, fought any sign of corruption, and enjoyed the trust of most of the Ghetto population. This leadership held on to the theory that survival would be possible if the Jews became an industrious, vital workforce, serving the occupation forces. The first year of the Ghetto's existence seemed to prove this assumption correct.

And indeed, the theory contained a logic hard to disprove: Jewish work, inside and outside the Ghetto, at an extremely meager cost, seemed like a temptation the Germans would not be able to resist. Barash knew that the produce of the factory was transferred directly to the

German soldiers in the Russian front. Why, then would the Germans wish to exterminate such an efficient population?

And, indeed, from surviving minutes of meetings of the Judenrat we learn that the idea summed up in the slogan „the Ghetto must become an element useful to the government” became a motto expressed consistently and intensively in all such meetings. Ephraim Barash was the most ardent supporter of this idea. He employed all his personal prestige, which he owned to his personal reputation for honest education and position, for the idea. It should be noted that he was well aware of the dangers threatening the Ghetto, and understood that the occupation administration contained elements that strove for the wholesale extermination of the Jews. But he believed that the Germans that directly supervised the Ghetto, and thus well aware of the enormous usefulness of the Ghetto of Białystok to the Nazi rule, these Germans would defend the Ghetto. The year of 1942, which was relatively quiet, convinced him that his faith in the ability of the Ghetto to survive the war had a sound basis. Thus he underwent a process of deep self-suggestion, which finally led him to the conviction that even if the rest of the Polish Jewry is exterminated, the Ghetto of Białystok will survive.

This conviction naturally forced those adhering to it to become the lackeys and servants of the Germans. Ephraim Barash became just that — but not due to submissiveness and obsequiousness, and certainly not in a process of the identification of the conquered with the conqueror, he did that out of an undersanding of the reality as he saw it.

Unfortunately, Barash did not write a personal diary, but from the documents and evidence available to us we may conclude that Barash — who was well informed on Jewish history through the ages — regarded himself as the successor to Jewish leaders in the Diaspora through the ages. Those leaders were entrusted with the care of their people, while still retaining their Jewishness — in the face of hatred, scheming, pogroms and restrictions. They had done their job — as is historically attested by the survival of the Jewish people through 1900 years in the Diaspora.

Apparently Barash believed that he was destined by fate to save his people in a period of unprecedented troubles.

His achievements are not to be scoffed at. His enormous efforts to preserve a semblance of ordinary existence in spite of fear and hardships — all these caused the feeling to arise through the Ghetto, objectively as well as subjectively, that it is possible to survive the war.

And, indeed, while the Germans started systematically exterminating the Jews of the region as of November 1942, no such action, was

undertaken in the Ghetto of Białystok for some 17 months from its founding, until February 1943, except for the evacuation of some 4.500 Jews, mostly old and ill, from Białystok to Prózany, a town some 100 km south of Białystok, which took place in September 1941.

Only in February 1943, after most of the Jewish population in the region of Białystok had already been sent to death, mostly in Treblinka, was an *Akzion* held in the Ghetto. Within one week, from the 5th to the 12th of February, about 10.000 Jews were taken from the Ghetto to Treblinka.

Barash tried desperately to prevent the *Akzion*, but was quite helpless. When he had to face it, he claimed that with all due sorrow and pain, a part must be sacrificed that the majority may survive. From then on he adopted the concept that the few must be sacrificed to save the many.

It is here one should note that in those days two resistance groups, consisting of young members of the youth movements were already acting in the Ghetto. Most of them were directed by the leadership of their movements, located in Warsaw. In time these two groups would become a united underground movement, but during the *Akzion* of February 1943 they had not yet reached at a formula for cooperation. The resistance deserves a separate lecture, and here I cannot discuss it in detail. I shall only note the fact that one group, called Block A — led by Edek Boraks, of the Shomer Hazair movement, and Daniel Moshkowitz, of the Communist movement, did resist during the February 1943 *Akzion*, but were severely short of firearms. The resistance was mostly sporadic, and not centrally controlled, and this hardly hindered the German force performing the *Akzion*, aided by a considerable number of Jewish informers.

As I have mentioned before, Barash believed that the 10.000 victims would save the remainder. He also believed that such a catastrophe would not recur, and even though he knew the Polish Jewry is slowly being exterminated, he quickly restored the Ghetto, which returned to normal labour, and renewed his efforts to convince the authorities that an active, working Ghetto is useful to them.

However, the final decision on the fate of the Ghetto of Białystok — like other Ghettos in Poland and Jewish populations in Europe — was undertaken in Berlin, not in Białystok. And however much local authorities were convinced of the usefulness of the Ghetto, the decision makers in Berlin were mostly concerned with the execution of the „Final Solution of the Jewish Problem.” The system of principles by which they acted is attested to by the fact that Heinrich Himmler was quite prepared — in the midst of the great offensive in the Russian front — to

demand from the Reich's Transport and Communications Ministry to redirect trains, intended for transportation of troops and supplies to the front, to the transport of Jews to the death camps, because he regarded the extermination of Jews as prior cause.

At the beginning of August 1943 the final decision was taken in Berlin to evacuate the Białystok Ghetto. In order to prevent a repetition of the events that had taken place a few months previously in Warsaw, a senior, talented, S.S. officer, Gruppenfuhrer (Brigadier) Odilo Globocznik was appointed to organize the evacuation. The Germans managed to keep the preparations for the extermination of the Ghetto in secret, and it seems even many of the local commanders were not aware of their intentions.

On Sunday, 15th of August 1943, at 6 o'clock in the evening, Barash was summoned to the Gestapo headquarters, outside the Ghetto. There he was told that the evacuation of the Ghetto would begin at three o'clock in the morning, and that the whole Jewish population would be transferred to so-called „work” in Lublin. He was told make sure that the evacuation goes smoothly and no one tries to escape or resist.

This time Barash left the Gestapo headquarters desperate and helpless. He understood that no device or strategy would remove the danger.

One may suppose that the chairman of the Judenrat reflected that he erred and perhaps endangered the majority of his brethren. On the other hand, he may still have retained a glimmer of hope that it is not a physical extermination of the Jews, and that the Germans do intend to transfer them to Lublin. Barash could have, of course, notified the inhabitants of the Ghetto in time of the intended evacuation, but he realized such news would spread chaos and panic, and cause the underground — with which he was constantly in touch — to start active resistance. That he did not want: he regarded acts of resistance as senseless suicide, and was willing to do anything — including sacrifice of some his people — to save the majority of the Jewish population.

Exhausted, desperate, helplessly foudering in the stream of events, Ephraim Barash returned to the Ghetto and carried out his orders.

Between the 16th and 20th of August, more than 25.000 of the Jewish inhabitants of the Ghetto of Białystok were sent in hundreds of cattle-wagons, to Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz. In those days the Jewish underground — finally united — rebelled and fought with its meager weapons, to the death of the last member. The commander of the underground, Mordechai Tannenbaum-Tamarof, a native of Warsaw and a member of the Dror movement, and his second-in-command, the communist Daniel Moshkowitz, directed the resistance almost to the last moment. When they realized the end is near, they saw no point in esca-

pe. Both committed suicide in the ruined Ghetto. Out of nearly 50,000 Jews that had lived in Białystok prior to the German occupation, no more than 400, less than one percent, remained.

In conclusion:

The story of the Ghetto of Białystok is in more than one sense the story of the chairman of the Białystok Judenrat, Ephraim Barash, a noble Jewish leader, determined to survive at any cost, who concluded that the Ghetto must be turned into a camp of slave labour, a conclusion based on the assumption that a rational government does not exterminate its slaves. It should be remembered that Barash had acted after the massive wave of murders held during the first two weeks of the occupation. Today, retrospectively, we know these assumptions were wrong, but that is hindsight. We must remember that from his contacts with his direct superiors, Barash could certainly have formed the impression that his reasoning is not only logical, but based on sound reality.

And thus he dedicated all his talents and efforts to the organization of sane life in the Ghetto, as far as possible. He organized welfare and education, got rid of informers, the Gestapo agents within the Ghetto, and prevented an internal collapse of the Jewish public, a phenomenon that occurred in several Ghettos.

Barash did everything to form a wide consensus within the Ghetto, and succeeded. This is attested by his special relations with the heads of the underground. He exchanged information with them, consulted them, supported them financially and all that in spite of his conviction that they are in the wrong. His power and influence were such, that during the first Akzion he even managed to prevent at least one part of the underground movement from taking up arms.

Barash's faith in the Ghetto's ability to survive was based on one hand on the Ghetto's usefulness to the Germans, and on the other on using conflicting interests within the occupation authorities to the Ghetto's advantage. Ultimately he was proved wrong, because he miscalculated the eager, satanical zealotry which the authorities in Berlin applied to the annihilation of Jews, regardless of any other consideration.

In public speeches, and during Judenrat meetings, Barash said more than once that he would be tried by history — and that he will face that trial with assurance and a clean conscience. An objective evaluation, if such a thing is at all possible, of his activity during the Ghetto's existence, will lead us to the conclusion that he would have been found

innocent in the eyes of history. Without a doubt, Barash truthfully believed that his way may save at least a part of the Ghetto's inhabitants.

The only question regarding Barash is why, as soon as he received the news about the annihilation of the Ghetto, he adhered to his former method, rather than tell the Jews in the Ghetto the bitter, horrible truth and suggest to fight instead of walking like lambs to the slaughter.

An ancient Jewish proverb says: „Judge not till ye be judged.” It is difficult to visualize what went on in Barash's mind during the last hours of the Ghetto. Perhaps he convinced himself that the Germans do not mean extermination, but evacuation only. Or maybe, he thought that resistance would be an act of suicide, which he rejected on principle. Or perhaps he was simply exhausted, tired out and in despair. Anyway, he remained a leader to the last moment, and went to his death along with the rest of Białystok Jews. The Ghetto of Białystok, in which life went on relatively quietly, would not have survived those two terrible years in relatively bearable conditions if it had not been for the leadership of the Ghetto, guided and directed by Ephraim Barash. And he would not have succeeded in his mission if it were not for the majority of Jews in the Ghetto believing in his vision, because they too wanted to survive. They refused to admit the fact that the Germans intend to annihilate them, regardless of their service to the German war-effort, and of the fact that they had never harmed the German nation itself in any way.

Sara Bender

## **Białostockie getto (czerwiec 1941 – sierpień 1943)**

Po zajęciu przez Niemców Białegostoku (27 czerwca 1941), doszło tu do masowych pogromów żydowskich i zamieszek, które trwały ok. 2 tygodni. Już w dniu inwazji (tzw. krwawy piątek) Niemcy dokonali masowej masakry ludności żydowskiej w synagodze, którą spalono, a wraz z nią ok. 2 tysiące żydoów.

27 czerwca 1941 r. niemieckie dowództwo wojskowe zarządziło powołanie Judenratu (Efraim Barasz, dr Gedaliahu Rosenmann) oraz utworzenie getta. Pod koniec lipca 1941 Judenrat został skompletowany (24 osoby), a w getcie znalazło się ok. 50 tys. Żydów. Już wkrótce stało się ono wielkim obozem pracy, produkującym głównie na potrzeby niemieckiego frontu. Podstawą istnienia getta była właśnie owa produkcja i pełne zatrudnienie (obowiązkiem pracy byli objęci wszyscy w wieku od 15 do 60 lat).

Rozbudowa zakładów przemysłowych i wzrost produkcji były efektem wysiłków Barasza, który w ten sposób widział szansę na przetrwanie społeczności żydowskiej. Był on przekonany, że Niemcy, którzy bezpośrednio zarządzają gettem, będą przeciwni jego likwidacji dopóki będzie ono dla nich użyteczne. Rok funkcjonowania getta wydawał się potwierdzać te kalkulacje, a Barasz wysiłki swoje koncentrował na próbie zachowania getta.

W lutym 1943 rozpoczęła się masowa eksterminacja Żydów w Białymstoku. W dn. 5–12 lutego Niemcy wywieźli do Treblinki ok. 10 tys. mieszkańców getta. Pozostali zgodnie z zaleceniami Barasza — powrócili do pracy.

Na początku sierpnia 1943 w Berlinie zapadła decyzja o całkowitej likwidacji białostockiego getta. 15 sierpnia 1943 o godz. 18.00 Barasz został wezwany do kwatery Gestapo, gdzie go poinformowano o natychmiastowej ewakuacji mieszkańców getta do Lublina. W dniach 16–20 sierpnia 1943 ok. 25 tys. ludzi przewieziono do obozów koncentracyjnych w Treblince, Majdanku i Oświęcimiu.