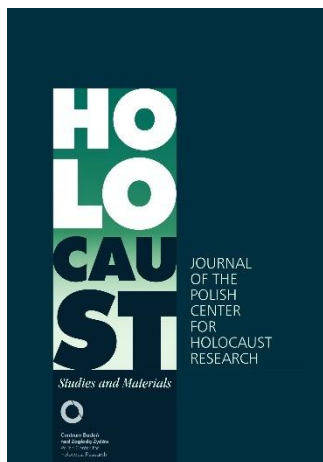




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Rabbi Josef Leyb Gelernter from Skępe and His Traces in the Ringelblum Archive

Rabin Josef Lejb Gelernter ze Skępego i jego ślady w Archiwum Ringelbluma

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Abstract

This text consists of two parts. The first presents Rabbi Josef Leyb Gelernter's biography. Gelernter was a rabbi in Skępe from 1931, after which he was in the Warsaw ghetto, where he became engaged in the organization of social welfare for Orthodox refugees and DPs. The second part contains three primary sources: a testimony about the expulsion of Jews from Skępe in 1939 and the special role Gelernter played in his community; Gelernter's report on the issue of kashrut among refugees in the Warsaw ghetto; and an appeal attributed to him which regards the neglect of burial customs in the Jewish district.

Keywords

Holocaust, Warsaw ghetto, religious life, rabbi, kashrut, social welfare

Josef Leyb Gelernter (born December 15, 1908 in Końskowola, died in 1942 [?]) served in Skępe (Lipno country) as a rabbi from 1931. He was also the chairman of the Community's rabbinical court. With the help of members of his congregation he purchased a house in Skępe, located at Dobrzyńska Street 4. In 1939 he had a wife and six small children.¹

After the outbreak of the war, he and other Jews from Skępe were deported to Dobrzyń nad Wisłą.² Shortly thereafter, Gelernter returned with some of his congregation to Skępe, but soon he and all the local Jews were deported to Warsaw. In the Ringelblum Archive (ARG) there is a surviving testimony about

¹ *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy* [Ringelblum Archive. Conspiratorial archive of the Warsaw ghetto], vol. 8: *Tereny wcielone do Rzeszy: Okręg Rzeszy Gdańsk-Prusy Zachodnie, rejencja ciechanowska, Górny Śląsk* [Reich district of Gdansk-West Prussia, Ciechanów region, Upper Silesia], ed. Magdalena Siek (Warsaw: ŻIH and WUW, 2012), document 17, p. 79.

² *Ibidem*, p. 66.

the course of the first months of the war and the expulsion of the Jews from Skępe. Its anonymous author emphasized the great respect that rabbi Gelernter enjoyed among the town's inhabitants. From the text emerges an unquestioned leader of Skępe's Jews, a brave man devoted to his congregation and determined to protect and support it in those harsh times.³ The author of the testimony (fragments of which I publish below) quoted Gelernter's sermons given during the first months of the war. The rabbi appealed for maintaining faith and hope for a better future, even in the face of persecution. During the expulsion from Skępe the rabbi appealed: "Do not lose Jewish faith or trust in God! Do not lose faith in a better tomorrow!"⁴ (see document 1). His stance during the deportation from Skępe was so extraordinary that Ringelblum included the entry reading "Deportation – rabbi from Skępe" on the list of topics for the monograph "Dwa i pół roku wojny" [Two and a half years of war] planned by Oneg Shabbat.⁵ It seems almost certain that the anonymous testimony about the expulsion of Jews from Skępe was used by Szymon Huberband in his study concerning the fate of the Jewish population in various localities, which unfortunately has survived only in fragments.⁶

The text of the testimony quoted is laudatory towards Gelernter, but the opinion of the outside observer – the creator of the Underground Archive of the Warsaw ghetto who distanced himself to religion and Orthodox Judaism – matches its tone. Thus, it should be assumed that the relation between Gelernter and the Skępe Jews indeed was extraordinary.

The document which quotes the sermons given by Gelernter during the first months of the war stand out from the materials collected in the ARG. With the exception of Szymon Huberband's and Kalonimus Szapiro's legacy, there are few materials in the ARG which regard the religious life of Jews during the occupation. This makes the document presented here, which illustrates the relations between the religious leader and his community, all the more unique.

It is still not known what happened with Gelernter after his arrival in Warsaw in December 1939. He resurfaced at the turn of 1941 and 1942 on the pages of the documents of the Jewish Social Self-Help (*Żydowska Samopomoc Społeczna*, ŻSS) which have survived in the ARG. We learn from them that in the Warsaw

³ Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 271.

⁴ *Archiwum Ringelbluma*, vol. 8, document 17, p. 63.

⁵ *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 29: *Pisma Emanuela Ringelbluma z getta* [Emanuel Ringelblum's writings from the ghetto], ed. Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikov (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2018), document 196b, p. 493.

⁶ In the surviving fragments of the part devoted to Skępe, Huberband mentions a rabbi. Although he does not mention the rabbi's name, the details given point clearly to Gelernter (*Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 32: *Pisma rabina Szymona Huberbanda* [Writings of Rabbi Shimon Huberband], ed. Anna Ciałowicz [Warsaw: ŻIH, 2017], document 18, p. 205).

ghetto Gelernter was a director of the religious section of the Central Commission for Refugees (*Centralna Komisja Uchodźców*, CKU),⁷ which was a charitable organization associating delegates of the twelve largest *Landsmanschafts*, which represented refugees and DPs. The delegates were to represent all refugees before the administrative organs, charitable organizations, etc. Within the framework of the CKU Gelernter dealt with practical issues regarding observance of religious principles among refugees and DPs, such as the issue of kashrut of the food distributed within the framework of the food aid⁸ (see document 2). In this document he is still referred to as the “rabbi from Skępe,” which suggests that in the Warsaw ghetto Gelernter maintained his bond with the members of his congregation. While working in the CKU he tried to make it easier for religious Jews to obtain kosher food and, more broadly, enable them to observe the customs regulating the everyday life of religious Jews. He concluded with joy: “it is safe to say that kashrut has begun to play an important role in the hearts of some of the refugees.”⁹

There are further traces of Gelernter in the ARG: his surname is on the list of rabbis staying in the Warsaw ghetto.¹⁰ Rabbi Gelernter submitted to the ARG a leaflet which regarded funerals in the Warsaw ghetto (one cannot exclude that he was its author), which discussed the issue of organizing burials for the poorest dead (see document 3). The leaflet also called on the ghetto authorities to deal with the issue of decent burials for the poor (nor is this the only text in the ARG on this topic, as it can be paired with texts penned by, for instance, Abraham Mordechaj Rogowy).¹¹ In the Archive there is also a letter which M. Gelernter (probably a relative of rabbi Gelernter) received from the Steineck camp near Poznań. The letter was submitted to the ARG probably by rabbi Gelernter.¹²

⁷ *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 27: *Żydowska Samopomoc Społeczna w Warszawie (1939–1943)* [Jewish Social Self-help in Warsaw (1939–1943)], eds Aleksandra Bańkowska and Maria Ferenc Piotrowska (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2017), document 298, p. 1001.

⁸ *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 33: *Getto warszawskie* [Warsaw Ghetto], part 1, eds Katarzyna Person and Tadeusz Epsztein (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2016), document 50, pp. 243–244.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 244.

¹⁰ *Archiwum Ringelbluma*, vol. 33, part 1, document 52, p. 253. More about the list see Havi Dreifuss, “‘The Work of My Hands is Drowning in the Sea, and You Would Offer Me Song?!’: Orthodox Behavior and Leadership in Warsaw during the Holocaust,” in *Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis. Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Professor Antony Polonsky*, eds Glenn Dynner and Francois Guesnet (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2015), pp. 467–496.

¹¹ *Archiwum Ringelbluma*, vol. 27, documents 334–336. See also “Memoriał Patronatu Opieki nad Zwłokami Ubogich Żydów ‘Halwajat Hamet’ [Memorial of the patronage for the care of the remains of poor Jews ‘Halwajat Hamet’],” in *ibidem*, document 344.

¹² *Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* [Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute] (hereafter: AŻIH), ARG I 1137, published in *The Ringelblum Archive. Underground*

Emanuel Ringelblum considered Gelernter a man capable of co-operation with non-religious individuals – he mentioned him beside rabbi Szymon Huberband as an example of religious tolerance.¹³ The circumstances of rabbi Gelernter's death and the fate of his family remain unknown.

Sources

Document 1. Testimony about the Jewish population in the town of Skępe¹⁴

[...] A few days before the war

The shtetl of S[kępe] is on tenterhooks. [...] There are rumours of war, of battles. There is fighting somewhere – but where exactly? [...] Here, they've dropped bombs. There, they've broken through the front. People tell each other the news – a sensation from one town, a revelation from another. One man talks about the radio, another about a speech. This one is talking about a letter, and that one is just talking. I saw it myself, says one; I read it myself, says another; I heard it myself, says a third. [...]

Disorganization, perturbation and confusion reign in all circles, up to the highest level. The Jewish population of S[kępe], especially the broad masses, had always been accustomed in all matters to consult the town rabbi, to whom they felt bound as to a father, since he had always taken care of them *keroeh yireh edro*¹⁵. In all areas of Jewish life – moral, spiritual and economic – he had spared no effort for the sake of the town's Jewish community. [...] Everyone considered him not only a faithful leader, [3] but also a faithful father to his town, both in suffering and in joy. In that tragic moment, the Jews of S[kępe] turned instinctively to their rabbi and asked in desperation: "Rabbi, what should we do? Where should we go? In what direction should we look? Where to?" and so on. "*Sha, sha!*" the rabbi reassured them.

These are the words of encouragement and consolation spoken by the rabbi of S[kępe], but without despair: "Truly (in a serious tone of voice) a very hard time is in store for us, there are very dark clouds on the horizon. We can feel that our generation is facing a severe trial, a trial such as our ancestors have not endured for generations. The fate rushing towards us seems very bleak. But, despite all the gloomy prospects, we feel instinctively that Divine Providence has

Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, vol. 9, *Letters on the Shoah*, eds Maria Ferenc and Eleonora Bergman (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2023), document 74, pp. 133-134.

¹³ *Archiwum Ringelbluma*, vol. 29, document 196a, p. 487.

¹⁴ AŻIH, ARG I 1004, published in *Archiwum Ringelbluma*, vol. 8, document 17, pp. 61-88. The document is dated "after December 1939." The author is anonymous, the document that has survived in the ARG is a manuscript written by Bluma Wasser, an Oneg Shabbat copyist.

¹⁵ (Hebrew) as a shepherd pastures his flock (cf. Isaiah 40:11).

imposed special duties on us, difficult but historic duties, duties with historic significance for the future of our people, duties which we must fulfill, despite the moral suffering, physical pain, material hardship, spiritual torment, and economic deprivation which they involve. [...] Those duties are: Not to fall into the abyss of despair! Into the pit of desperation! Not to abandon our Jewish faith! Our trust in the Holy One, blessed be He! Our hope for a better tomorrow! The harsh situation confronting us threatens our bodies with *havivim yesurim*¹⁶, as the holy *tanna*¹⁷ Rabbi Akiva called them.¹⁸ [...] That very same Rabbi Akiva who, alas, felt the most tragic and dreadful torments on his own flesh and bones, that very same holy *tanna* who experienced martyrdom, said that sometimes afflictions are to be cherished. And do you know, my honorable friends, when that is? When they are not suffered individually for some transgression or error committed, but when the afflictions occur only because we belong to a race that brought the light of the Torah into a darkened world, when they are wrought upon us only because we belong to the historic nation which, with its few rays, brought the light of the holy Torah and the moral [5] worldview of the great prophets into the still-benighted world of ancient times when mankind was still half-savage and there was still only a very small difference between man and beast, at a time when peoples were still at a very low cultural level and the words civilization and morality had no place in their vocabulary.

But already then, the Jewish world, with its few treasures and the moral customs of the Jewish Bible, enlightened and influenced the dark, uneducated masses of the whole planet. Already then, the Jewish people gave the world monotheism and, along with it, the principles of justice and righteousness on which the whole world order of the human race was subsequently built: the concepts of *rahmaniut*¹⁹ and truth [...].

Instead of the gratitude which the peoples owe the Jews for spreading those lofty, [6] pure ideals among the human race, they repay us, and have always and everywhere repaid us, with hatred, enmity, antagonism and cruelty to the Jewish people. It derives from envy of a spiritually and culturally superior human being. It is the eternal hatred of the eternal people [...]. in D.,²⁰ when all our communal institutions, philanthropic and charitable organisations, all our holy places, were trampled underfoot, our Torah scrolls desecrated, our synagogues burnt, our schools and *Talmud Torahs* wrecked, our *cheders* and yeshivas laid waste, Jewish property destroyed. In that dark era, when the most brutal means were

¹⁶ (Hebrew) cherished afflictions; the term attributed to Rabbi Akiva in the midrash Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Bahodesh 10.

¹⁷ (Aramaic) repeater, instructor; title given to the sages quoted in the Mishna.

¹⁸ Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef (~50–135 C.E.), belonged to the third generation of tannaim, took part in the Shimon Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans, died as a martyr.

¹⁹ (Hebrew) empathy.

²⁰ The Hebrew letter “ד” here is presumably an abbreviation of the Yiddish word *daytshland*, i.e. Germany.

employed to persecute and repress the Jewish nation, the elite of the Jewish people were tortured mercilessly, in the most dreadful and cruellest fashion, until, alas, they found salvation from their suffering only in the death that put an end to the agony inflicted by the cruel, barbaric Inquisition.

[...] But we, my honorable friends, must raise a historic and factual question, to wit: did our enemies actually achieve what they were aiming at? Did our enemy of the Middle Ages actually succeed in implementing Haman's slogan *lehashmid laharog ule'abeid et kol hayehudim*,²¹ to destroy – God forbid! – the Jewish people? To that we can give a clear and categorical answer: No! Absolutely not! History shows us the exact opposite. History shows us that, although our enemies' aim was to bring the Jewish people down into the pit of destruction, into the abyss of annihilation, the effect of that inhuman, cruel barbarity was precisely the opposite of what they were hoping for. [...] The more they tortured and embittered Jewish life, the greater grew the Jewish people's inner nobility and cohesion; the more they persecuted and oppressed the Jewish nation, the more Jewish courage and Jewish spirit were strengthened, the more religious ecstasy was inflamed and Jewish endurance reinforced. Precisely thanks to that inner *hitchazkut*,²² resilience, religious constancy and trust, Jewish national pride was strengthened at the same time, with the hope that they would in the end emerge purified from the great horror of the Inquisition.

And at the present time we are faced with that same historic mission. Honored brethren! In this new situation," said the rabbi, continuing his words of encouragement, "which we should not underestimate and in which we should have no illusions, because we are facing tragedy, we must see the miserable truth. The era of emancipation and human rights is past, democracy and liberalism have disappeared, morality and ethics have ceased to exist, and instead of law and civilization, instead of *tzedek veyosher*,²³ we are facing an age of brutality, darkness, trampling on human, and [9] especially Jewish, feelings, violation of human existence, destruction, devastation in the cruellest manner of everyone and everything that remains humane and moral. Nevertheless! Despite everything, we must not let ourselves be spiritually broken. I repeat: we must not fall into despair, scepticism and pessimism, which are only one step from the abyss of downfall, from the pit of destruction and disintegration. No!" the rabbi exclaimed with pathos, "No, I say! We must not despair. We must not fall short of the steadfastness and optimism, the faith and trust, of our forebears in the dark Middle Ages. No! We must not be deserters from our history, which is rich enough in such bloody moments as the present. [...] Jewish martyrology contains enough experience and enough tempestuous periods to prove that no force in the world will be able to wipe the Jewish people, the Jewish nation, from

²¹ (Hebrew) to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews (Esther 3:13).

²² (Hebrew) strengthening.

²³ (Hebrew) righteousness and justice.

the face of the earth. As the basis for such optimism and endurance, let me quote a verse of the Prophet, a verse which contains such *hitchazkut* and wisdom that it should be inscribed in your memories and in your hearts [...]:

Here is what it says: *ve'af gam zot bihyotam be'eretz oyveihem*,²⁴ even then, when the Jewish people find themselves in a hostile land, among enemies who seek to destroy – God forbid! – that holy people, nevertheless *lo me'astim velo ge'altim lekhalotam*,²⁵ I shall not make them loathsome nor degrade them, nor let them, God forbid, be destroyed, *lehafer beriti otam*,²⁶ and annul and break the covenant, the bond which I made with them, *ki ani adonai eloheihem*,²⁷ for I alone am their God, their creator, their protector. That verse should be, for all of us, the basis of our trust and our faith, the cornerstone of hope for a better tomorrow when the sun will shine again in the darkened Jewish sky, when it will rise again on the gloomy, cloud-ridden Jewish horizon.

Dear brethren,” the rabbi concluded his words of encouragement, “we must be firm in our hope that, with the help of the Holy One, blessed be He, we shall soon live to see the Jewish ship of exile, sailing for thousands of years through a sea of troubles, suffering and pain, speedily come to harbour and bring us *geula shlema*.²⁸ Despite the thousands of raging waves that impede our journey, we shall soon be worthy of the full awakening, salvation and liberation of *am yisrael saba*,²⁹ the old, historical people of Israel, and *veshavu benei yisrael ligvulam*³⁰ shall be fulfilled, b”b,³¹ amen.”

The rabbi’s heartfelt words acted on the broken hearts and distraught souls of the Jewish population of the shtetl of S[kępe] like balm on an aching body. They brought a little light into their dark pessimism, a little hope and consolation into the mood of despair then reigning among the Jewish masses in S[kępe]. The assembled crowd dispersed in an optimistic mood, with a little of *tal shel hayim*,³² as if a stone had been lifted from their hearts.

²⁴ (Hebrew) And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies (Leviticus 26:44).

²⁵ (Hebrew) I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, (Leviticus 26:44, continued).

²⁶ (Hebrew) and to break my covenant with them (Leviticus 26:44, continued).

²⁷ (Hebrew) for I am the Lord, their God (Leviticus 26.44, continued).

²⁸ (Hebrew) complete redemption.

²⁹ (Hebrew) the ancestral people of Israel.

³⁰ (Hebrew) The Children of Israel shall come again to their own border (cf. Jeremiah 31:17).

³¹ (Hebrew) abbreviation of *bimhera beyameinu* (speedily in our day).

³² (Hebrew) reviving dew; according to the *midrash* (e.g. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, 32), God will pour it upon the earth at the end of days.

[...] The sounding of the *shofar* in the synagogue of D[obrzyń] ([5]700) [...]

The rabbi of S[kępe] mounted the *bimah*. The congregation fell silent, seized by a compelling seriousness. “My Jewish brethren,” the rabbi of S[kępe] began, “an exceptional shiver runs down our spines when today we pronounce the words *vechol ba’ei olam ya’avrun lefanecha kivnei maron*³³ in the *musaf* service, although we say them every year. *Vechol ba’ei olam ya’avrun lefanecha* – the whole world passes before You – *kivnei maron* – like a flock of sheep. Why, precisely, like a flock of sheep?

Let us first of all acquaint ourselves for a moment with the cattle tithing procedure. The holy Torah commanded us to give up a tenth of our cattle. How was the cattle tithing carried out? *Hazal*³⁴ explain that it was done in the following way: all the young sheep were assembled in a barn – *bifnim*, that is, inside – *ve’imoteihen bahutz*, and the mothers of those young sheep were gathered outside. From the inside, the little sheep could hear their mothers, who were standing outside, so they all pushed towards the door, trying to get out to their mothers. Thanks to the pushing, the herdsmen were able to get them into line, one behind the other. Then they let them out of the door one by one, counting them as they went – 1, 2, 3, and so on – until they got to 10, when they would perform *sokrin besikra*, that is, strike the animal with a rod (red dye), making a red mark as a sign and proof that the animal was a tithe and was to be sacrificed. The same procedure of *sokrin besikra* was performed on each tenth sheep [...]. Meanwhile, the mothers waited impatiently for their children to come out, and it obviously occurred to none of them that their child had been designated by fate to be a sacrifice. Imagine, my dear friends, the joy of the mothers when they saw from a distance that their children, the little sheep, were coming out and that, any moment now, they would be able to hug and kiss their nearest and dearest. But even more, dear friends, should we imagine the deep pain and bitter disappointment of those mothers who saw a red mark on their offspring, the sign that they were to be sacrificed [...]. Their rejoicing quickly turned to mourning. The earlier joy that they had felt on seeing their children from a distance disappeared at the moment when they saw the red sign on them, marking them for sacrifice. [...]

My dear brothers,” the rabbi continued, his voice choked with emotion, “We have all gathered in the synagogue at this time, on this *yom hadin*:³⁵ parents, fathers, mothers and children, [24] big and small, old and young. But terrible

³³ (Hebrew) All created beings pass before Thee, like a flock of sheep. From *Unetaneh tokef* (Let us proclaim the strength), a liturgical poem which is part of the *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* services. See Doc. 134.

³⁴ (Hebrew) Acronym for *hakhmeinu zikhram livrakha* (our sages of blessed memory), denoting all the sages quoted in the *Mishna*, *Tosefta* and *Talmud*.

³⁵ (Hebrew) day of judgement.

thoughts and melancholy premonitions assail our minds in view of the dreadful situation in which we find ourselves in this tragic period. Every brain is plagued by terror, or rather by a question, a question which we are afraid to utter even to ourselves, but which grants us no respite: Who knows who has been marked with a red sign on this day of reckoning? Who of us will, God forbid, be the sacrifice, or rather, the sacrifices? Yes indeed, *kivenei maron*, the rabbi repeated several times, *kivenei maron*. Who knows which mothers, parents or even children will find their joy disappointed, just like the mothers of the sheep on seeing the red mark?"

All the men, women and children in the synagogue broke into spasmodic weeping, and the rabbi too was choked with tears and unable to conclude. It was hard to recover one's composure. The rabbi could barely be heard reciting *lamnatzeah livnei korah mizmor*, the first verse of the chapter read before sounding the *shofar*.

[...] Yom Kippur³⁶ in Skepe (year 5700)

In view of the order forbidding people to be outside in the street after 7 o'clock, and because it was feared that the *Kol Nidrei* prayers could last until late in the evening, it was decided that the prayer service on the eve of *Yom Kippur* should begin at 3 o'clock. And so it was. Punctually at half past two in the afternoon the whole congregation was already assembled in the synagogue. The rabbi is walking around Aron Hakodesh.³⁷ A solemn silence reigned. "My dear Jewish brethren," the rabbi began, "today's *Yom Kippur*, and especially 'o - o - oh', the traditional *Kol Nidrei niggun*, calls to mind the *Yom Kippur* of our forebears in Spain and Portugal long ago, when they hid in cellars and attics to recite their prayers and supplications. [...]"

It was probably at that very time that the *Kol Nidrei* prayer and its traditional *niggun* 'o - o - oh' arose.³⁸ They looked around on all sides lest, God forbid, someone should hear the sound of those heartfelt prayers. And today, when we look around on all sides as soon as we begin to pray a little louder, to ensure that no one, God forbid, can hear or see, we are reminded of those *Kol Nidrei* prayers and the days of *Yom Kippur* spent by our forebears and the Marranos in medieval times.

Every year, in turning the pages of our prayer books for the *Yamim Noraim*, we have passed over unnoticed a prayer in the *musaf* service for *Yom Kippur*

³⁶ Yom Kippur – Day of Atonement. A day of repentance celebrated on the 10th day of the month of Tishrei ending the celebration of the Jewish New Year. In 1939 the eve of Yom Kippur fell on September 22–23.

³⁷ *Aaron Ha-Kodesh* (Hebrew for holy ark) – the place where Torah scrolls are stored in a synagogue; it sets the direction in which the Jews should pray (in the direction of Jerusalem).

³⁸ It was commonly supposed that the *Kol Nidrei* prayer, which releases Jews from their vows, arose during a period of extreme persecution, when Jews were forced to convert on pain of death, and that the prayer nullified their forced conversion.

simply because it has been irrelevant for thousands of years. The words of that prayer are: *Ve'al anshei hasharon haya omer yehi ratson shelo ya'asu bateihem kivreihem*,³⁹ meaning that the houses of the people who lived in the Sharon should not be turned into graves. Those people were in special need of such a prayer because of the Sharon's unfavorable geographical location. It lay in a valley surrounded only by mountains of rock and sand, [27] constantly threatened by a wind that could bury the houses and their inhabitants. For that reason the High Priest used to say a separate prayer for those people – *ve'al anshei hasharon haya omer yehi ratson shelo ya'asu bateihem kivreihem* – that the houses, with the people in them, should not, God forbid, be turned into graves. But from the time when we left *Eretz Israel* after the destruction of the Temple and there was no longer any Temple service, that prayer too became irrelevant as a matter of course, and in the *galut* we no longer paid any attention to its words.

Now, however, on today's *Yom Kippur*, when military operations, bombs and cannons are demolishing houses and their inhabitants, and at the same time the Jewish population, including their little children, are threatened with expulsion from house and home in the clothes they stand up in, there exists the danger that Jewish houses, God forbid, will be turned into graves. Therefore at the present moment, when we are reciting the prayers for *Yom Kippur*, the High Priest's prayer *yehi ratson shelo ya'asu bateihem kivreihem* – that our houses should not, God forbid, be turned into graves – is especially appropriate. And so, my dear brethren, how many tears must we shed during that prayer, which has again become relevant!"

Grief and lamentation broke out and the tears flowed forth. Thereupon the rabbi took the Torah scrolls out of the ark and, with exceptional exaltation and intensity, with *sha'agat aryeh*,⁴⁰ he began to recite the verse *Or zarua latzadik uleyishrei lev simchah*.⁴¹ The congregation repeated *Or zarua...*, and then came 'o - o - oh', the *niggun* of *Kol Nidrei*.

[...] The rabbi sweeps and cleans the market square in Skępe

One day an order came from the district head of the stormtrooper division in L[ipno] that the rabbi, together with 20 Jews, was to sweep out and clean the marketplace. A delegation went to the command headquarters with the request that 10 men be supplied to sweep instead of the rabbi, who should be left out of it. But to no avail: "It's an order," was the answer at command headquarters.

³⁹ (Hebrew) And concerning the inhabitants of the Sharon he would say: May it be Thy will that their homes not become their graves (Jerusalem *Talmud*, *Yoma* 27a).

⁴⁰ (Hebrew) The roar of a lion; title of a work by Rabbi Aryeh Leib Gunzberg (published 1755) frequently quoted in rabbinical debate.

⁴¹ (Hebrew) Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart (Psalm 97:11).

"The *Rabbiner*⁴² must go and sweep out the marketplace." And that was that. The rabbi, in his rabbinical garb, picked up a broom and, along with several other Jews, went out to sweep. It was early morning. After they had been sweeping for a while, a *Volksdeutsche* from the neighbouring village of L[ipno] approached them.

"The *Rabbiner*," he said, "is responsible for ensuring that the whole marketplace is swept and cleaned properly." "I can take responsibility for myself, that I will sweep diligently," the rabbi replied, "but not for the whole marketplace." The scene made a strong impression on the population. Various people passed by, both Jews and Christians, and all without exception were moved to tears at the tragic sight of the rabbi being forced to stand and clear away rubbish – a spiritual leader who had done so much both for the Jewish community and for the general good of the town, in which he was loved by all classes and races, irrespective of convictions and beliefs. On all lips was the question posed in the case of the *asara harugei malchut: Zu torah vezu sechora*?⁴³

The decree of expulsion from Skępe

In mid-December 1939, the Jews of S[kępe] were ordered to leave the town by December 21. After that date, there was not to be a single Jew in the town. This happened on the morning of the Sabbath of *Hanukkah*. There was panic and confusion. The news of the order to leave town by that deadline came like a thunderbolt. Where can we go in such a bitter frost, with little children, the old and sick? [...]

"Rabbi, what will happen? Where shall we go? Will we be able to endure it all?" "First of all, calm down. Of course there is a difference," the rabbi replied [33] tranquilly, "between the *lech lecha*⁴⁴ of our grandfather Abraham, may he rest in peace, when he was instructed to take up the wanderer's staff and leave, and today's *lech lecha*, because our grandfather Abraham, may he rest in peace, was told immediately *el ha'aretz asher arecha*.⁴⁵ He was immediately informed of the place, the land, where he should go, and, what is more, he received a blessing, *va'avarechecha*,⁴⁶ a promise that he would be blessed.

Our *lech lecha* is different. We are ordered to take up the wanderer's staff and leave, but not told of a place to go, and certainly not given a blessing on the way. And we are ordered to leave in the bitter cold and go wherever our eyes lead us. So it is certainly not good. Nevertheless, if you listen to what I tell you now, we may hope to be not broken, but strengthened, by this tragic historic crisis in our lives. Listen to me, my dear brethren," the rabbi began. "The first thing I ask

⁴² (German) rabbi.

⁴³ (Hebrew) Ten murdered by the kingdom: Is this the Torah, and this its reward?

⁴⁴ (Hebrew) Get thee out [of thy country] (Genesis 12:1).

⁴⁵ (Hebrew) unto a land that I will shew thee (ibidem).

⁴⁶ (Hebrew) and I will bless thee (Genesis 12:2).

of you is that those who are better off and still able to take a certain amount of money with them shall not leave without first donating a sum to the poor who have nothing for their travel expenses, so that, God forbid, it shall not come to pass that the poor are obliged to go on foot in such freezing weather, at the risk, God forbid, of their lives. Let there be no casualties among us, [34] especially in poor families with small children. We must take care of them too! They are our brothers! [...] Secondly, for my part," the rabbi continued, "I can only repeat the words which the Holy One, Blessed be He, spoke to Our Teacher Moses, may he rest in peace: *'ehyeh asher ehyeh'*.⁴⁷ Just as I have been with you until now, cared and laboured only for you, to raise our community both spiritually and materially, so will I, for you and together with you, care and labor in exile too, so that all of us together, rich and poor without distinction, can continue to exist. I therefore declare categorically that I shall not part from you but, as Ruth said to Naomi: *ki asher telech elech, ki asher talin alin*.⁴⁸ Where you go, I too will go. Where you lodge, I too will lodge. We shall go together in the same direction and on the same road, and we shall stay together everywhere, until such time as we are deemed worthy of coming *el hamenucha ve'el hanachala*⁴⁹ – to the place where we shall be able to lay the wandering staff aside and say 'At last! This is where we stop. Here we shall not only stay a while but shall at last begin to [35] build our future, our life in the land of our fathers, *eret hakedusha*,⁵⁰ after two thousand years of wandering.' "

Torah scrolls imprisoned

In the last days before departure, the shtetl was faced with the question: "What is to be done with the Torah scrolls?" The rabbi gave his opinion that a grave in the cemetery should be lined with cement or tin plate, with a sign to show its location, to prevent the scrolls from being damaged. And when, with God's help, they returned, they would be able to dig them up in perfect condition. However, that turned out to be technically impossible, because the cemetery watchman was not a Jew and might reveal what had been done. In short, the Jews placed the scrolls in private Christian homes, entrusting them to friends who promised to keep them until the Jews returned.

Two Torah scrolls remained to be dealt with. The synagogue sexton I. K. took one of them somewhere at night, but on the way he was caught by some *Volksdeutsche* who beat him badly and took the Torah scroll. It is not known where it ended up or what became of it. There was one small Torah scroll left, so they brought it to the rabbi. The rabbi grabbed hold of the last remaining small

⁴⁷ (Hebrew) I am that I am (Exodus 3:14).

⁴⁸ (Hebrew) Slightly misquoted from Ruth 1:16, which reads *ki el-asher telchi elech, uva'asher talini alin* (for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge).

⁴⁹ (Hebrew) to the rest and to the inheritance (Deuteronomy 12:9).

⁵⁰ (Hebrew) the Holy Land.

Torah scroll. "No! I won't let this one be taken away in case it should, God forbid, be damaged," the rabbi shouted, lifting up the little scroll. "No! I won't leave this one behind. I'll take it with me! I have danced with this little Torah scroll on *Simchat Torah* [39] for 10 years. *Sisu vesimchu beSimchat Torah!*⁵¹ Wherever I go, wherever I find myself, I will take it with me, like my own child!" "What are you saying, Rabbi?" those present retorted. "If you are searched on the journey and it is found on you, it can cost you your life." "No!" the rabbi exclaimed, "I won't listen to any of you. Even a king of Israel used to take a Torah scroll with him in time of war. And today too there is a war going on. [...]" "Come what may," the rabbi concluded, "we are taking it with us." And so he did. [...]

Silence, darkness and cold reigned. They barely dragged themselves along with the children. From time to time an exalted melody escaped the rabbi's lips: "*Perok yat anach mipum aryavata. Ve'apek yat amach migo galuta, amach di bechart mikol umaya.*"⁵² As he sang, tears ran from the rabbi's eyes and were lost in the darkness or frozen by the frost. They were not the tears of an individual but the historic tears of exile shed by the downtrodden, desperate, martyred Jewish people. They were tears which ran, and still run, during thousands of years of long, dismal wandering. No, not tears! It was blood! [...]

"Pardon me for asking, but why are you singing at such a sad time? What occasion is there for rejoicing?"

"Listen to me," the rabbi [50] replied. "There are three levels of reaction to troubles and suffering. The first is to scream that it hurts. That's the lowest level. The second level is to keep silent. That's a slightly higher level. But the third level, when troubles befall a person, or rather a people, is to sing, to sing the troubles away. That was the way of the Baal Shem Tov⁵³ and his disciples on their road into exile." And another sweet, heartfelt melody rose into the empty darkness [...]."

[based on Sara Arm's translation from Yiddish]

⁵¹ (Hebrew) Rejoice and be merry on *Simchat Torah*!

⁵² (Aramaic) "Deliver Thy flock from the mouths of the lions. Lead Thy people out of exile, Thy people whom Thou chosest out of all peoples." From a song written by the 16th-century liturgical poet Israel ben Moses Najara, rabbi of Gaza, which became part of the Sabbath repertoire throughout the Diaspora.

⁵³ Literally, master of good name, reference to Israel ben Eliezer (ca. 1700–760), the founder of *Hasidism*.

Document 2. “The issue of kashrut among refugees in Warsaw”⁵⁴**The first annual report for the Central Commission for Refugees for the year 1941, according to the shortened calculation of time⁵⁵**

Drafted by rabbi from Skepe [Josef Leyb Gelernter], a *gaon*,⁵⁶ our teacher and master, may he stay in good health.

1. After the first months of the year 1941, when it was established that the number of refugees in kosher soup kitchens in Warsaw was markedly smaller than the actual number of religious Jews among the refugees, we ordered a stamp with the word ‘kosher’. We handed it to the director of the *Landsmanshaft* section with the instruction that the clerk who supervises how the refugees fill in their lunch declarations should ask every petitioner whether he wished to get kosher food and mark that fact with the stamp on the declaration slip. That procedure partly solved the said problem and the percentage of refugees using kosher soup kitchens indeed increased.
2. In the months of *shevat/adar* of the year 1941,⁵⁷ during the second wave of resettlement, new groups of refugees arrived in the ghetto from smaller and larger towns near Warsaw.⁵⁸ The percentage of religious Jews among them was much larger than during the first resettlement in 1940. The number of people wishing to be issued kosher lunches increased. Thus, a day before the 1941 Purim festival⁵⁹ I called a special council of all directors of kosher soup kitchens [...]. That was when the following decisions were made which were successfully carried out:
 - A. Turn to the leadership of the Jewish Welfare Society concerning inclusion of a special rubric with the question about kosher lunches on the lunch declarations for the refugees [...].
 - B. For the time being, until the realization of the above postulate by the Jewish Welfare Society, religious refugees seeking free lunches should be required to report directly to kosher soup kitchens, [which can be achieved by informing them through] posters [...].
 - C. It must be ensured that in soup kitchens of the Jewish Social Welfare Association the refugees who already have IDs issued by non-kosher

⁵⁴ AŽIH, ARG I 591, published in *Archiwum Ringelbluma*, vol. 33, part 1, document 50, pp. 243–244. The document is dated “after 1941.” It has survived in the ARG in the form of a Yiddish typescript.

⁵⁵ That is the Gregorian calendar.

⁵⁶ *Gaon* (Hebrew for ‘excellency’) – title awarded to particularly eminent scholars of the Scripture.

⁵⁷ January–March in the Gregorian calendar.

⁵⁸ See more in Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, trans. Emma Harris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 48–49.

⁵⁹ In 1941 Purim fell on March 13.

soup kitchens have fewer problems with exchanging them for kosher soup kitchen IDs. This decision was implemented successfully.

- D. In order to make it even simpler for the refugees to transfer to a kosher soup kitchen a decision was made to urge – by way of an announcement – those who wish to exchange their IDs to report to the Central Commission for Refugees, to the rabbi of Skępe, who is going to settle this through the agency of the section for soup kitchens' affairs. This has already been achieved.

The expenses for the realization of the above solutions were partly covered by the Jewish Welfare Society and partly by Mr. Frydman.⁶⁰ Consequently, so far we have exchanged as many as 573 refugees' IDs to various soup kitchens, but this campaign has not yet come to an end because every day religious refugees come to us with IDs they wish to exchange [...].

- E. The information campaign addressed at the refugees was conducted at the same time to inform them about the great importance of kashrut in Jewish life, how much non-kosher food defiles the human soul, body, and heart, at the same time having an adverse effect on people's morality and actions.

Understandably, it is difficult to assess whether the information campaign has worked. But it is safe to say that kashrut has begun to play an important role in the hearts of some of the refugees.

[based on Sara Arm's translation from Yiddish]

Document 3. Kolkoyre [Proclamation]⁶¹

[...] A reader's opinion.

At the time of the epidemic, the time which permits [...], at the hour when there is not a single family in Israel that is not suffering hunger and has not lost a member in the war or has no member dying at home as a victim of the war, at

⁶⁰ Probably a reference to Aleksander Zysze Frydman (1897–1943) – rabbi, social-political activist, and secretary of the religious party of Agudat Yisrael. In the ghetto Frydman was one of the leaders of the Orthodox Jews. He was in the initial composition of the Jewish Community in Warsaw and an Agudat representative in the Joint's social council. After the uprising in the ghetto he was deported to a camp in the Lublin region, where he died (*Archiwum Ringelbluma*, vol. 27, document 202 and other documents; Engelking, Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, pp. 820–821).

⁶¹ AŻIH, ARG I 1352, published in *Archiwum Ringelbluma*, vol. 33, part 1, document 51, pp. 245–246. The document is dated "after June 1941." It survived in the ARG as a typescript in Hebrew. Its author remains unknown. Attached to it was a postwar memo written by ARG Secretary Hersz Wasser: "Submitted by rabbi Józef Gelernter from Saska Kępa" (Wasser no doubt confused Skępe with the Warsaw district of Saska Kępa).

this hour comes Passover for the entire nation of Israel living in Warsaw. It is a time of visiting the cemetery on Gęsia Street.

[...] There is not a single man [...] there [...] and does not notice the scandal, vileness, lawlessness, evil [...] to every living man.

Hunger, epidemics, horror, despair, deep sorrow [...] ⁶² kill more than a hundred people every day. It is understandable that people who had worked in the cemetery service until the war cannot serve and perform the *taharah* ⁶³ and bury such a large number of bodies at once. [...]

This Community [in Warsaw] does nothing to lower the death toll caused by the starvation and want suffered by Warsaw inhabitants. It is making excuses that there is no money for increased and more frequent expenses, or at least for a one-off expenditure of a small sum to buy [...] carts, stretchers, and tools. There are things to spend money on, and as far as the gravediggers are concerned, I assure you that 20 or even 30 decent Jews can be found to undertake this task without expecting remuneration from the Community. As even the poorest of the poor deserve burial, those who bury the dead shall find their fight in their work. [...]

What is more, go and see what is happening at the cemetery on Gęsia Street. Go and see if you have not seen this already.

The cemetery is managed by a man who dares call himself with a name connected with Israel's tradition, but in truth there is no peace in his conduct or faith in his heart, and his hands are void of the deeds of Israel. Even before the war his rule of the dead had inspired anger and wrath. But the time has come to eradicate this behavior. [...] Thus, I call on you, God-fearing people in whom lives the Lord of Israel, you – teachers, do you not know that at the Warsaw cemetery naked dead men and women, disgraced and defiled, lie in the open for four or five days, and sometimes even as many as seven, before a grave is found for them?

Do you know that cats, dogs, and mice feed on the dead bodies and there have been many instances of the animals chewing off entire body parts?

Do you know that shirts, bedsheets, talliths, and other items of clothing are stolen from those dead and that they are buried naked?

Do you know that all golden teeth are pulled out of their mouths?

Do you know that men and women are buried together in a mass grave on the cemetery (even though there is no need for that)?

This is not the place to elaborate on the obligation to respect the dead [...]. The religion revealed to us by our teachers and that what is concealed from us in the *kabbalah* says that a dead man is to be buried as soon as possible after his death. Do savage tribes not pay respects to their dead in line with their customs? There is no justification for our shame and disgrace. And strangers shout about the disgrace which persists in us because dead bodies are treated like manure.

⁶² [...] – illegible text, two words.

⁶³ *Taharah* (Hebrew for purification) – preparation of a dead body for burial.

I suggest assembling 1,400 men in Warsaw who would be willing to devote one day a month to cover the corpses for the day and supervise and ensure order during burial. [...] If you, dear teachers, do not hear a reader's voice and not do your responsibility, this shall bring disgrace on your names among those who come after you [...].

[based on Daria Boniecka-Stępień's translation from Hebrew]

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