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Agnieszka Haska
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences

ahaska@ifispan.edu.pl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0545-5250

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Agnieszka Haska

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0545-5250
ahaska@ifispan.edu.pl

"To Investigate and Reveal": The Central Jewish Historical Commission (1944–1947)

Abstract
In studies published to date, the Central Jewish Historical Commission (*Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna*, CŻKH) has been treated as a prelude to the target operation of the Jewish Historical Institute. Little attention has been devoted to its organizational structure and general operation, with emphasis laid on the collection of testimonies, securing archives, and publications. Meanwhile, the CŻKH objectives and tasks, including its main task, that is, documenting and talking about the fate of Polish Jews during World War II, were much broader than assumed. This article is a sketch of the CŻKH history – its activity, programmatic assumptions, and Holocaust research methodology.

Keywords
Central Jewish Historical Commission, Central Committee of Jews in Poland, Holocaust, testimonies, Poland 1944–1947

> Our single archive room cannot hold all those files piling up on the shelves which stretch from floor to ceiling. Moreover, new ones keep streaming in from the deserted tenements of the Łódź ghetto, and from cities, towns, and villages across Poland.[1]

Western journalists arrived in liberated Lublin in late August 1944, with one of the objectives of their visit being to describe what had happened in the nearby camp at Majdanek during the occupation.[2] Though nowadays Auschwitz-

[1] Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego [Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute] (hereafter: AŻIH), Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna przy CKŻP [Central Jewish Historical Commission of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland] (hereafter: CŻKH), 303/XX/38, Tekst audycji radiowej z 23 V 1945 r. [Text of a radio broadcast on May 23, 1945], p. 99.

[2] Among others, Alexander Werth, BBC correspondent to Moscow, W. Lawrence from *The New York Times*, and Richard Lauterbach, who wrote for the *Time* and *Life* weeklies (David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011], p. 152ff.).

Birkenau symbolizes the Holocaust, Majdanek was the first liberated camp of such size and thus in 1944 it exemplified the unimaginable for Western media. On August 28, 1944 *Life* ran a short piece from Lublin, illustrated with photographs of mass graves, crematorium ovens, skeletons, and a heap of the victims' footwear. However, it was not only pictures and remains but above all survivor testimonies that went on to testify to the Holocaust.

The need to document what had happened and to publish testimonies in order to provide Polish and foreign public opinion with an account of the horrors of the Holocaust was the reason behind the establishment of the Jewish Historical Commission (*Żydowska Komisja Historyczna*, ŻKH) on August 29, 1944.[3] According to the minutes of its first meeting, taken in Yiddish, it was attended by individuals connected with the Jewish Committee and the Union of Jewish Writers, Journalists, and Artists (*Związek Literatów, Dziennikarzy i Artystów Żydowskich*): Marek Bitter (future deputy chair of the CKŻP on behalf of the Polish Workers' Party), Menachem Marek Asz, writer Jehuda Elberg, Mieczysław Szpecht, and Ada Lichtman. The Jewish Historical Commission's objective was to "investigate and reveal the German crimes committed on the Jewish population in Poland, to which end [the Commission] collects all printed, handwritten, and other materials."[4] Its first chair, Bitter, was worried that the Commission's operation might not seem particularly important in the context of the ongoing war and the immediate problems of the Jewish community, but there was a consensus that comprehension of what had happened was essential to its future.[5] Another objective was to organize the work that had already begun. Even though the main objective of the Committee for Aid to Jews (*Komitet Pomocy Żydom*, KPŻ), established on August 10, 1944 in Lublin, was to provide elementary assistance to those who had survived, it also collected their testimonies. One of the earliest surviving testimonies in the ŻIH archive was recorded on August 20, 1944. Its author's name is Gertner and it regards the liquidation of the ghettos in Sandomierz and Staszów.[6] A day before the

[3] The history of ŻIH and the later CŻKH has been the topic of many texts, with the most important of those published recently being: a chapter in Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 84–20; Natalia Aleksiun, "The Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland 1944–7", *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry* 20 (2007); Stephen Stach, "Die Zentrale Jüdische Historische Kommission und das Jüdische Historische Institut in Polen / The Central Jewish Historical Commission and the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland," in *Verfolgen und Aufklären. Die erste Generation der Holocaustforschung / Crimes Uncovered. The First Generation of Holocaust Researchers*, eds Hans-Christian Jasch, Stephan Lehnstaedt (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2019), pp. 208–231.

[4] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/1, Rezolucja o powołaniu CŻKH [Resolution on the establishment of the CŻKH].

[5] Ibidem.

[6] AŻIH, Relacje Żydów Ocalałych z Zagłady [Testimonies of Jewish Holocaust survivors], 301/13, Relacja Mojżesza Grünbauma [Mojżesz Grünbaum's testimony].

establishment of the Jewish Historical Commission Eda Lieberman recorded Perec Szapiro's testimony regarding the fate of the Jews of Gniewoszów and the labor camp in Dęblin.[7] The last paragraph of the testimony aptly illustrates the circumstances in which those testimonies were recorded: Szapiro had escaped from Dęblin 5 days earlier along with 11 other Jews, "but only 2 boys, Szapiro, and Szyja Bleichman from Ryki, born in 1926, survived. The other escapees were killed by someone from the local population."[8] Testimonies were also recorded by various later co-workers of the Commission of their own accord. For instance, Mejlech Bakalczuk, a writer and pedagogue, submitted a testimony given and recorded on August 2, 1944 by a partisan in the Soviet Union, Jehuda Koszelewicz.[9]

Of course, the idea to record testimonies and document the fate of the Jewish population under the German occupation was not new. As Laura Jockusch demonstrates in her book *Collect and Record!*, it fell within the long tradition of such projects begun in 1903 in connection with the commemoration of the pogrom in Kishinev, and then continued in the form of a special kind of narrative about persecutions: suffice it to mention the interwar activities of YIVO and the occupation-period Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto (Ringelblum Archive). Another kind of narrative was connected with initiatives made by scholarly organizations established before the war by anthropologists and sociologists, such as the British Mass Observation, brought to life in 1937, which was aimed at securing sources in the form of memoirs and testimonies devoted to everyday life. The Holocaust, however, created a need for documentation and the transfer of information in an entirely new, important context. For the accounts of Holocaust survivors had not only the gravity of a testimony, as also the value of evidence – and this became particularly important during the later operation of the CŻKH.

It is not fully clear how the Commission's initial operation was organizationally related to the operation of the Historical-Cultural Unit of the Committee for Aid to Jews (KPŻ), which was established in early September 1944. Information about this aspect is absent from the minutes of the sessions of both the ŻKH and the KPŻ. During a meeting of the latter held on September 21, Marek Bitter, who was a liaison between the two organizations, motioned for purchase of a "typewriter with Jewish fonts" for 10,000 zlotys, but it remains unknown for which organization. What we do know is that the ŻKH budget was almost nonexistent. The earliest testimonies were also recorded by members of the Commission, including Marek Asz, who on September 4 recorded the recollections of Dwojra Szczucińska about the Hotel Polski affair,[10] and a day

[7] AŻIH, 301/8, Relacja Pereca Szapiry [Perec Szapiro's testimony].
[8] Ibidem, p. 5.
[9] AŻIH, 301/518, Relacja Jehudy Koszelewicza [Jehuda Koszelewicz's testimony].
[10] AŻIH, 301/2, Relacja Dwojry Szczucińkiej [Dwojra Szczucińska's testimony].

later wrote down the memories of Karol Tajgman, who participated in the uprising in Treblinka.[11] Other testimonies collected during that period include Hugo Alter's account of his stay in the ghetto in Krasnosielc, the establishment of the labor camp in Łęczna, and the transports to the camp in Trawniki (recorded on September 2)[12] – as well as the testimony of Salomon Podchlebnik, who had escaped from the camp in Sobibór[13] (September 15). There must have been more, but unfortunately they cannot be identified for lack of information about dates and names of the collectors of testimonies. Nevertheless, even this short overview proves that the questions focused on the fate of the Jews in general and not on particular camps.

October 10, 1944 saw a change when the position of chair was assumed by Cwi Epstein, who just several days earlier had been appointed the director of the Historical Unit of the Lublin KPŻ.[14] The number of ŻKH co-workers increased to a dozen, but that did not change its situation: aside from the recorders mentioned, the rest worked for free, in difficult conditions, and after hours, because they were associated with other organizations, mostly the KPŻ. The focus was exclusively on Lublin. There was almost no contact with the provinces. The Commission's co-workers were not fully prepared for the tasks they faced: as it was said later, the Commission's employees were not "professional people".[15] Its plans were nonetheless ambitious, as it considered sending its delegates to various towns and cities and finding permanent correspondents on the spot. Interestingly, during the initial period the Commission threatened to punish those who refused to give testimony by withholding from them material aid.

The situation changed at the turn of November and December 1944, when the historian Doctor Filip (Philip) Friedman came to Lublin from Lvov.[16] Born in 1901, he had studied in Lvov and Vienna. In 1925 he settled in Łódź, where he worked as a teacher in a Jewish high school. He did not abandon scholarly work though, as 1929 saw the publication of his doctoral dissertation entitled *Die galizischen Juden im Kampfe um ihre Gleichberechtigung (1848–1868)* (The Galician Jews in the struggle for equal rights [1848–1868]). Interested in local

[11] AŻIH, 301/5341, Relacja Karola Tajgmana [Karol Tajgman's testimony].

[12] AŻIH, 301/1, Relacja Hugo Altera [Hugo Alter's testimony].

[13] AŻIH, 301/10, Relacja Salomona Podchlebnika [Salomon Podchlebnik's testimony].

[14] AŻIH, Wojewódzki Komitet Żydowski w Lublinie [Voivodship Jewish Committee in Lublin], 355/4, Protokół posiedzenia WŻKH z 3 X 1944 r. [Minutes of the WŻKH meeting on October 3, 1944], pp. 4–7.

[15] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/19, Protokół posiedzenia WKŻ w Gdańsku z 28 VIII 1945 r. [Minutes of a meeting of the WKŻ in Gdańsk on August 28, 1945], p. 6.

[16] Even though the duplicate of his evacuation card, stored in the CŻKH archive, is dated December 24, 1944, this seems to be a mistake, just as in the case of his birth year (here 1902). Noteworthy is that, according to this card, he transported 150 kilograms of food products and 150 kg of items for home use (AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/135, Odpis karty ewakuacyjnej Filipa Friedmana [Duplicate of Filip Friedman's evacuation card], p. 43).

research, and promoted by Majer Bałaban, Friedman focused on the history of Łódź. In 1934 he published his *Ludność żydowska Łodzi do roku 1863 w świetle liczb* (The Jewish population of Łódź up to 1863 in the light of statistics), followed a year later by *Dzieje Żydów w Łodzi od początków osadnictwa Żydów do r. 1863. Stosunki ludnościowe, życie gospodarcze, stosunki społeczne* (A History of the Jews in Łódź from the beginning of Jewish settlement to 1863. Relations within the population, economic life, and social relations). Before the war broke out Friedman worked as an editor of a periodical issued by the YIVO Friends' Society in Łódź and as a lecturer at the Jewish Studies Institute in Warsaw. He was also writing a 3-volume study on the history of Jews in Poland, but the manuscript was lost during the war.[17] In September 1939 Friedman fled to Lvov; after the arrival of the German troops he lived in the ghetto and then in hiding on false papers. His wife and daughter did not survived the war. Established on November 12, 1944 the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (*Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce*, CKŻP) tasked him with re-organization of the Historical Commission, and more importantly, promised steady financing, initially in the amount of 1,500 zlotys.[18]

Friedman took up the task and on December 15, 1944 the Commission began to work as the Central Jewish Historical Commission of the Central Committee of Polish Jews (officially, the Central Committee of Jews in Poland) and the Union of Jewish Writers, Journalists, and Artists in Poland – even though the official founding meeting was not held until December 29, at the office of the Voivodship Jewish Committee (WKŻ) at Lubartowska Street 19 in Lublin. The Commission was composed of: Friedman, former ŻKH co-workers, and also new co-workers – for instance, Leon Bauminger, who became the Commission's first secretary, Józef Kermisz (Joseph Kermish), Mejlech Bakalczuk, Noe Grüss, and Aba Kowner. The Commission's structure was relatively simple: it was headed by the Executive (which elected the chair – or 'director' in the official nomenclature). Beginning with 1946, the advisory body which directed the scholarly work was the Academic Council, which consisted of five members. The CŻKH objectives could be summarized thusly: first of all, collect all documents about the Holocaust; secondly, edit and publish them. As early as December 1944 the CŻKH prepared a press release,[19] where it expounded its plans and outlined its operation. Its objective was to "investigate and reveal the German crimes committed on the Jewish population in Poland",[20] to which end it would

[17] Roni Stauber, "Filip Friedman i początki badań nad Zagładą [Filip Friedman and the origins of Holocaust research]," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 11 (2015): 237.

[18] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/96, Cash account for years 1944–1945, p. 4.

[19] Its abridged version was published in *Biuletyn* 7 of the Jewish Press Agency of December 16, 1944.

[20] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/1, Rezolucja o powołaniu CŻKH [Resolution on the establishment of the CŻKH], p. 1.

"collect all printed, handwritten, and other materials, photographs, illustrations, documents, and material evidence, and organize and edit the recording in writing of all oral testimonies and accounts of surviving victims of and witnesses to the Nazi terror." To carry out that objective the Commission

> organizes regional and local commissions, builds a network of correspondents, […] [organizes] instructive and research-scholarly trips to specific Jewish communities and centers in the country, to sites of mass murder, and to all other places where materials for [the prosecution of] Nazi crimes can be collected.[21]

It also co-operated with various institutions, particularly the Museum at Majdanek, which, it must be stressed, at that time was formally just an office tasked with organizing the museum.[22] Aside from the collection of materials, the Commission's second objective was to edit them in the form of "brochures, monographs, and more comprehensive publications". The publications and lectures were to contribute to "the popularization of research results" by making them available to "large groups in Polish society and to all Jewish and non-Jewish societies abroad".[23] The collection and publication of the materials on the Holocaust was also included among the CKŻP's statutory objectives.[24]

And here arises the first problem that was often to impact the Commission's later activities: did it have a scholarly, historical character – or was it aimed more at collecting and documenting evidence of the crime, and then disseminating that evidence? According to the program proposal, written by Friedman in mid-1945, "in the struggle against the Jews, Nazism fully revealed its nature, its true face as an insatiably bloodthirsty beast".[25] Consequently, "from the group of surviving Polish Jews there had to emerge a scholarly organization which would bring to light all German crimes before a court of the free nations of the world". Thus the Central Jewish Historical Commission was established predominantly "for the purpose of informing international public opinion, which was familiar only with the global figures of the Nazi murders, but had no idea that those figures were not everything". That international opinion "still has not fully realized the consequences of that terrible catastrophe". Consequently, the Commission intended to

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[21] Ibidem.

[22] Zofia Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba. Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zagłady 1944–1950* [Interrupted Mourning. Polish disputes over the memory of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps 1944–1950] (Warsaw: Trio, 2009), p. 239.

[23] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/1, Rezolucja o powołaniu CŻKH [Resolution on the establishment of the CŻKH], p. 1.

[24] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/I/1, Rezolucja o powołaniu CŻKH [Resolution on the establishment of the CŻKH], p. 1.

[25] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/38, Filip Friedman, "Cele i zadania Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej w Polsce [Objectives and tasks of the CŻKH in Poland]," no date, p. 23.

> collect all files and documents left by the German civilian, military, and police authorities; documents of Jewish organizations and institutions; recorded statements of the surviving victims and eyewitnesses to Nazi crimes; court files, photographs, memoirs, notes, chronicles, and all other (presumptive) evidence.[26]

Those materials were to serve primarily as evidence during the trials of Nazi criminals, then being prepared. Afterwards, they were to be published. As initially planned by Friedman, the CŻKH was to collect documents and make them available in the archive and in the museum it was to establish.

But the war had not yet ended. After the liberation of Łódź on January 19, 1945 a decision was made to move the CŻKH from Lublin to Łódź, following the example of other central offices. Though the CKŻP had moved to the Praga district of Warsaw, during the plenary session of the Central Committee held on February 23, 1945 Friedman called for "leaving the Central Historical Commission in Łódź", at the same time stating that its branch and the Jewish Historical Institute (*Żydowski Instytut Historyczny*, ŻIH) would be established in Warsaw.[27] That was the first document that mentioned ŻIH. During the same meeting it was decided that the Central Historical Commission had to be located "in the same place as the CKŻP, but for the time being [it would be based] in Łódź".[28] There are surviving documents issued at the turn of January and February 1945 permitting employees and co-workers of the Committee to go to Łódź to organize the office.[29] Such permits to go to Łódź "for the purpose of collecting historical materials for investigation of Nazi crimes" – particularly for "securing these materials for future research work" and organizing a "proper branch and a research apparatus" – were issued, for instance, to Aba Kowner[30] and Filip Friedman.[31] The Voivodship Historical Commission (WKH) in Białystok was already operative – at least on paper, as it seems. Other historical commissions were being established in Warsaw, Cracow, Radom, and Kielce, to where were delegated Mejlech Bakalczuk,[32] Leon Bauminger, Zygmunt Cukierman, and Stanisław Kon respectively. Lublin was also the location of the first convention (or actually a meeting) of former prisoners of Treblinka, organized on January 21, 1945 under the aegis of the CŻKH, to which testifies the certificate issued to Lejzor Finkelstein with a request to facilitate his return to his place of residence, that was, Międzyrzec Podlaski.[33]

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[26] Ibidem, p. 24.

[27] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/I/8, Protokół posiedzenia Prezydium CKŻP z 23 II 1945 r. [Minutes of a meeting of CKŻP Presidium's meeting on February 23, 1945], p. 19.

[28] Ibidem.

[29] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/52, p. 3ff. Those documents, issued in Polish and Russian, were to be presented during the journey to the military and civilian authorities.

[30] Ibidem, p. 9.

[31] Ibidem, p. 11.

[32] Ibidem, p. 15.

[33] Ibidem, p. 8.

The Central Jewish Historical Commission relocated to Łódź in mid-March 1945. Some of its co-workers did not move at once, to which testifies the attendance list of the CŻKH employees present at the meeting on March 16, in Łódź. Of the 24 employees present, four were still in Lublin (Kermisz, Grüss, Adolfina Eber, and Hersz Rand), one was on a business trip (Klugman), and two were in Warsaw (Genia Silkes and Rubin Safrien-Feldszuh).[34] On March 26, 1945 Friedman, already in Łódź, tabled a request to the CKŻP for an additional 15,000 zlotys for the "transport of the library, archive, and personnel",[35] and 17,000 for "CKH investments in Łódź (purchase of library cabinets, repair of display cases, small repairs, and transport of furniture and historical materials)".[36] Despite the temporary organizational and financial difficulties, the operation of the Central Commission and it provincial branches was gathering momentum.

Attendance list

After moving to Lublin[37] the Commission was seated at Narutowicz Street 25. The Chaim Mordka and Gersz Auerbach tenement house,[38] located vis-à-vis at Narutowicz Street 32, was the seat of three Jewish organizations: the Union of Jewish Writers and Journalists,[39] the *Dos Naje Lebn* editorial office, and the Jewish Press Agency, which had also been moved from Lublin. State Printing House no. 10 was also opened there (the only one in Lublin which printed in Yiddish) and the Jewish Press Agency bulletin was put up in the gate. The Central Commission took up eight rooms,[40] for which the rent was exceptionally

[34] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/13, Lista obecności z 16 V 1945 r. [Attendance list of May 16, 1945], p. 1.

[35] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/105, Pismo CŻKH do CKŻP z 26 III 1945 r. [CŻKH letter to the CKŻP of March 26, 1945], p. 3.

[36] Ibidem, p. 4.

[37] Even though it proved impossible to determine the surname of the tenement owner, it is certain that before 1939 most of its residents were Jewish. One of the most eminent tenants was Jakub Fogel, an industrialist and director of the Schlösser manufacture in Ozorków. In April 1938 Łódź newspapers informed about Fogel's apartment having been ransacked by burglars who had taken advantage of the absence of the owners and their maid. The industrialist estimated the losses at the total of 50,000 zlotys, which was a considerable sum of money. ("Ogołocono mieszkanie dr. Fogla [Dr. Fogel's apartment plundered]," *Ilustrowana Republika* 110, [April 23, 1938]: 7).

[38] Known as the Tenement with Bats, the building was erected in 1896 and designed by Gustaw Landau-Gutentenger. Before the war it housed, for instance, a storeroom and shop of the Jakub and Jehuda Teitelbaum textile factory and the seat of the *Szir* Singing Society.

[39] The Union returned to its prewar name in mid-1946, when actors established their own organization – the Union of Jewish Actors in Poland.

[40] AŻIH, CKŻP, 303/I/7, Protokół plenarnego posiedzenia członków CKŻP z 28 IV 1945 r. [Minutes of the CKŻP plenary session on April 28, 1945], p. 42. A part of the tenement at Narutowicz Street 25 was certainly inhabited by private individuals, to which testifies

low – 500 zlotys (for comparison – the monthly cost of cleaning the office in March 1945 was 100 zlotys higher).[41] In March 1945 the office was redecorated and the telephone was installed (the number was 157-10).[42] The tenement at Narutowicz Street also housed a canteen,[43] which was established in May 1945, with lunch and food coupons issued to employees of Jewish organizations and their families.[44] In April 1945 the employees were registered for social security. These documents – aside from the list of employees and payroll – are the basis for determining who exactly worked in the Central Commission.

As I have mentioned, the first Łódź attendance list of March 16, 1945 had 24 surnames, beginning with Filip Friedman. Number 2 on the list was journalist, revisionist, translator, writer, and publicist Rubin (Ruben) Safrien-Feldszuh.[45] During the occupation he lived in the Warsaw ghetto at Leszno Street 66, where at some point also lived his cousin, Rachela Auerbach, who is important for the CŻKH history. Before the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto Feldszuh crossed with his family to the 'Aryan side'. His wife and daughter died while hiding. In 1944 Feldszuh went to Lublin, where the Jewish Committee appointed him the chief rabbi.[46] He also engaged in the undertakings of the Central Commission as co-founder and member of the reborn Union of Jewish Writers, Journalists, and

a classified ad published in October 1945 in *Dziennik Łódzki*: "Machine operators, flat bed knitting machines, and sweater knitting machines needed. Narutowicz Street 25, apartment no. 3."

[41] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/85, Sprawozdanie kasowe za marzec 1945 r. [Financial report for March 1945], p. 7.

[42] Ibidem.

[43] In 1946 there was certainly a grocery store at Narutowicz Street 25 ("Rejestracja kuponu IV karty „W" na obuwie [Registration of a voucher 4 of the 'W' card for footwear]," *Dziennik Łódzki* 59, [February 28, 1946]: 6).

[44] AŻIH, CKŻP, 303/I/8, Protokół plenarnego posiedzenia Prezydium CKŻP z 12 V 1945 r. [Minutes of the CKŻP Presidium's plenary session on May 12, 1945], p. 56.

[45] Rubin Safrien-Feldszuh (Ruben/Ruwen/Reuwen Feldszuh/Feldszu, born in 1900 in Buchach), before the war known as 'Ben Szem'. Studied in Vienna, where in 1923 he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy. After coming to Warsaw he taught in a Hebrew junior high school. He became a Hashomer Hatzair activist and then a Betar commandant (he opened its first Congress, which was held in Warsaw in 1929). He co-operated with a number of periodicals, including *Nowy Dziennik*, *Nasz Przegląd*, *Chwila*, and *Moment*. He also published and edited periodicals, such as, *Nowa Era*, *Nowy Czas*, *My Sami*, or *Jidn – Staats Front*. He was also a co-initiator, deputy chair, and chair of the Warsaw branch of the Union of Hebrew Writers and Journalists in Poland, which was established in 1929. In the late 1930 he became engaged in the editing of *Żydowski Leksykon Społeczny* [The Jewish Social Lexicon], the first volume of which was published shortly before the outbreak of the war.

[46] Laurence Weinbaum, "'Shaking the Dust Off': The Story of the Warsaw Ghetto's Forgotten Chronicler, Ruben Feldschu (Ben Shem)," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 3/4 (2010), http://jcpa.org/article/shaking-the-dust-off-the-story-of-the-warsaw-ghettos-forgotten-chronicler-ruben-feldschu-ben-shem/ (accessed October 3, 2017).

Artists, but he soon emigrated to Israel, where he lived until his death in 1980.[47] Consequently, it should be assumed that he had participated in the Commission's activities since December 1944, but he soon ceased to be a member. Feldszuh best exemplifies the complex structure of the CŻKH during the initial months, as it was connected with the organizations that comprised it (the CKŻP and the Union of Jewish Writers, Journalists and Artists) not only titularly, but also in terms of personnel.

Number 3 on the list (and soon number 2 as the deputy director of the Commission) was Nachman Blumental. It remains uncertain whether he co-operated with the Commission as early as at the Jewish Historical Commission stage or later, after the December reorganization. Whatever the case, he soon organized the folklore section of the Łódź CŻKH and began to write instructions for the testimony collectors. As I have mentioned, according to the list of March 16, 1945, Józef Kermisz, Noe Grüss, and Adolfina (Ada) Eber were still in Lublin. Together with Genia Silkes, who was no. 6 on the list, they went on to become key figures in the CŻKH activities. Born in 1907 in Złotniki near Podhajce, Kermisz, a historian, later became the Commission's secretary.[48] As David Silberklang reconstructs in his text, Kermisz had been sheltered since 1943 in the village of Czabarówka by the Pole Franciszek Kamiński, a teacher from the school in Husiatyn whom he knew. After the arrival of the Red Army in those areas, in March 1944 Kermisz joined the Polish Army. Silberklang writes that he was assigned as a history lecturer to the officers' school in Żytomierz and then was sent to Lublin in the rank of major.[49] In the Commission's documents dating back to early 1945 his surname is usually preceded with the abbreviation CPT (captain), which means that either the CŻKH made a mistake or Kermisz decided to promote himself to that rank in the postwar biographies which are stored in the Yad Vashem Archive. One way or the other, the inclusion of the rank was quickly abandoned, after which he was listed on the payroll simply as "Dr Kermisz".

Born in 1902 in Kiełków near Przecław, Noe Szloma Grüss was a historian too. He had studied at the Jagiellonian University and later worked as a teacher in Lida, Grodno, and Równe. For some time he was the headmaster of a high school in Białystok. Associated with the Zionist movement, Grüss published in Yiddish before the war. He survived the war in the Soviet Union and in 1944 came to Lublin. One of his first assignments in the CŻKH was the preparation of questionnaires for the testimony collectors, in which he was aided by Eugenia (Genia) Silkes. Born in 1913, that prewar teacher had graduated from a Jewish teacher training collage in Vilnius. In the 1930s she worked in Warsaw schools

[47] More about Feldszuh's later fate see ibidem.

[48] Kermisz's biography is reconstructed by David Silberklang in "Józef Kermisz (1907–2005) – twórca badań nad Szoa [Joseph Kermish (1907–2005) – the founder of Shoah research]," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 11 (2014): 304.

[49] Ibidem, p. 305.

and married shortly before the outbreak of the war. During the occupation she was associated with the Central Association for Aid to Jewish Children and Orphans (*Centralne Stowarzyszenie Opieki nad Dziećmi i Sierotami Żydowskimi*, CENTOS). She ran a soup kitchen and classes for children at Nowolipki Street 35. Her family died during the liquidation campaign in the summer of 1942. Basia Temkin-Bermanowa remembers that Silkes jumped out of a train to Treblinka. She had 'good appearance' but she did not speak Polish. Nevertheless, she managed to find shelter in the Warsaw Zoo, where she was probably taken by Rachela Auerbach, who was hiding there too.[50] Another employee, Adolfina (Ada) Eber, did her Ph.D. at the John Casimir University in Lvov and worked as a teacher before the war. It remains unknown whether she first met Friedman before 1939 or during the German occupation, which she survived in Lvov. In her memoir she writes that when she met him shortly after the liberation he was already collecting materials from survivors. When he learned that Eber's husband had died in Janowska camp in Lvov he purportedly gave her Leon Weliczker's memoir to read, which was later published by the Commission.[51] Eber joined in Friedman's work. He then called her to work in the Commission in Lublin. They married no later than in the spring of 1946.

Another employee included on the list who played a major role in the formation of the Central Commission was Mejlech Bakalczuk (no. 9). Born in 1896 in Polesie, he studied in Kiev. Before the war he was known as an author of pedagogical articles and a teacher in Hebrew and Yiddish schools in Pińsk and elsewhere. During the war Bakalczuk lived in the ghetto in Dąbrowica in Polesie (nowadays Lviv Oblast), from where he fled to his hometown of Serniki (nowadays Rivne Oblast). According to his memoir, deposited as a typescript in Yad Vashem in 1956 and published two years later in Buenos Aires,[52] during the liquidation of the ghetto on September 27, 1942 he fled from Serniki with his sister's children and was hiding in a forest relying on help from local peasants.[53] Just as more than 200 escapees from Serniki and its vicinity, he moved to the forest near Swarycewice, where in December 1942 a camp was established, guarded by partisans commanded by Maksym Misiura, whose deputy was Efraim Bakalczuk, Mejlech's cousin.[54] Up to 350 people lived in that shelter,

[50] Basia Temkin-Bermanowa, *Dziennik z podziemia* [Diary from the Underground], eds Anka Grupińka, Paweł Szapiro (Warsaw: ŻIH and Twój Styl, 2000), pp. 288–89.

[51] Natalia Aleksiun, "Philip Friedman and the Emergence of Holocaust Scholarship," *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 9 (2012): 336.

[52] Melech Bakalczuk, *Zikarojnes fun a jidiszn partizan* [Recollections of a Jewish Partisan] (Buenos Aires: Central-farband fun Pojlisze Jidn in Argenṭne, 1958).

[53] Yad Vashem Archive (hereafter: YVA), O.33/8788, Wspomnienia Mejlecha Bakalczuka [Mejlech Bakalczuk's recollections].

[54] See Aleksandra Bańkowska, "Las jako miejsce przetrwania Zagłady [The forest as a place to survive the Holocaust]," typescript copy, p. 114. I am grateful to the author for making this work available to me.

which made it one of the largest forest camps in the area. In March 1943 contact with Soviet partisan forces was established and the people from the camp joined them, forming the Voroshilov detachment. Most of the camp dwellers survived the war. After the liberation Bakalczuk went to Kiev and then left for Poland. He brought with him testimonies of other members of Misiura's detachment and also recorded for the CŻKH purposes a testimony about the liquidation of the ghettos in Łachwa and Tuczyn.

While the March 1945 list had 24 surnames, the April 1945 payroll had as many as 30. Several surnames had not changed since the Lublin times – these are Dawid Kupferberg and Szabse Klugman, who had been recorders of the Historical Commissions since its beginning. But new people joined in too. First and foremost, one should list Klara Mirska, a prewar Yiddish and Polish teacher, wife of Michał Mirski, who had been an activist of the Communist Polish Party since 1927, and in 1945 became the chair of the Voivodship Jewish Committee in Łódź and the first editor-in-chief of *Dos Naje Lebn*, which was established in March 1945. Other important figures were: Helena Drobner, also a prewar teacher, who held the position of the CŻKH leadership's secretary, and also those whose surnames are well known to all readers of testimonies from collection 301 in the Jewish Historical Institute, that is, Pola Hirsz, Jakub and Maria Pytel, Maria Jagiełło, Diana Grunbaum, and Leon Szeftel.

In May 1945 the CŻKH began to collaborate with Rachela Auerbach. Her example is a good illustration of the network of mutual, both professional and private relations between people making up the CŻKH. It can also make us realize how fluid the composition of the Commission was. Immediately after the liberation Auerbach got involved with the operation of the established or reborn Jewish organizations, predominantly the Union of Jewish Writers, Journalists, and Artists. She was probably called to Łódź by Feldszuh. The May 1945 payroll listed her as an employee of the Commission. She then disappeared from the lists even though she received regular sums for the work she rendered and her surname was listed among members of the Scholarly Institute, which was being created. Her main workplace was *Dos Naje Lebn*, where she was an editor of the literary-historical section.

The Commission also hired people who claimed to know of surviving archival materials. One of them was Nachman Zonabend, who, according to documents, was the Commission's employee from March 15 to the end of April 1945. A postman in the Łódź ghetto, in August 1944 Zonabend was included in a group of Jewish laborers who were to clear the ghetto area. He managed to hide numerous documents, including Mordechaj Chaim Rumkowski's announcements and correspondence, along with photographs, drawings, and paintings by various other artists (Maurycy Trębacz, Izrael Lejzerowicz, Amos Szwarc, and Józef Kowner). He also knew the places where others hid their works; for instance, he participated in the hiding of a part of Mendel Grosman's photo collection. After the liberation of Łódź, Zonabend relatively easily extracted the materials

from the hideouts. Some of them he returned to their surviving owners, for instance, the collection of 50 works by Józef Kowner, who survived Auschwitz and returned to Łódź. He donated some of the salvaged documents and works he donated to the Central Commission after its move to Łódź, while the rest he kept for himself. Zonabend transported those items from Poland to Sweden in 1947. Some of them ended up at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York and at Yad Vashem. Coming back to his employment in the Commission, it certainly resulted from his donation of the documents and works from the Łódź ghetto. These were documents of the Council of Elders, including materials from the Archive Department (for instance, the encyclopedia of the ghetto and the chronicle of the Łódź ghetto and also Trębacz's paintings). Although he was officially employed as a photographer, Zonabend likely helped order and edit those materials.

Among the other important co-workers who joined the Łódź Commission in 1945, one well need mention Gerszon Taffet and Szmerke Kaczergiński. The former, before the war a history teacher in Żółkiew, was hired in July 1945 and became the director of the photographic section. The latter, a poet, playwright, and prosaist before the war associated with the Yung Vilne group, following the Germans' arrival into Lithuania was (together with Awrom Suckewer) in the group forced to select the most precious items from the YIVO collection which the occupier intended to send to the Reich. Part of that collection was hidden by smuggling it out of the ghetto or by burial. After the uprising in the Vilnius ghetto Kaczergiński joined the partisan forces and after the liberation participated in the attempts to revive Jewish life in the city. With the fiasco of those attempts, he came to Łódź in December 1945.

The list of the Commission employees expanded in 1946. Artur Eisenbach appeared on the payroll in March, Beniamin Mosiężnik in June, and Tatiana Berenstein a month later, while Izajasz (Isaiah) Trunk was hired in mid-September. At the same time the composition kept changing as more and more employees left Poland. That was also the fate of Filip Friedman, who left in May 1946, with the duties of the CŻKH chair taken over by Blumental. For many the stay in Łódź and work in the Commission proved just an episode in their biography, albeit an important one.

"Those materials were peculiar"

The first entries in the CŻKH inventory book are dated March 10, 1945: Gelestern from Łódź deposited two songs from the Łódź ghetto, while Hersz and Bluma Wasser donated another two songs, that time from the Warsaw ghetto.[55] As we know, the collection of materials had already begun, but it was not until the move

[55] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/245, Księga inwentarzowa 1944–1946 [Inventory book 1944–1946], p. 62.

to Łódź that the CŻKH began to take inventory of what exactly was deposited. The diversity of the materials can be seen on the very first page – from a wallet made of a fragment of the Torah (donated by Wolf Fischer from Zgierz), a plan of the Kielce ghetto, letters, German announcements, and fragments of a memoir found at Majdanek (donated by Bakalczuk), to a Yiddish poem entitled "Głód" [hunger] (donated by a Czyżewski from Łódź). Besides a short note and the surname of the person or institution donating the documents, initially the inventory also specified the price paid for the items. The entry of April 3, on the first page informs us that for 2,000 zlotys the Commission bought from Hendler an "urn with ashes of the victims cremated at Majdanek, hair, a jaw with the teeth pulled out."[56]

The CŻKH collection of the materials was not limited to testimonies, documents, or works of art. In that respect the Commission was a total project. It placed within its sphere of interest everything that documented the tragedy of the Polish Jews and testified to the Holocaust – and at the same time, to use Noe Grüss' words, all that could be a symbolic monument to the millions of murdered victims.[57] First and foremost, then, what was sought was evidence to the exceptional fate of the Jews. At the beginning of the program proposal entitled "Cele i zadania Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej w Polsce" (Objectives and tasks of the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland) Filip Friedman wrote:

> The Jewish martyrology constitutes a special chapter in the history of the German bestialities during the recent war, with its tragic outcome surpassing all other atrocities. Consequently, investigating it is a particularly important task for the historiography of the recent war. For this clearly and vividly shows the abyss of the debasement and barbarity that the Third Reich sank into. In its struggle against the Jews, Nazism revealed its true essence, its true face as an insatiably bloodthirsty beast.[58]

That exceptionality of the Holocaust consisted not only in the "many millions of victims", but also in

> that horrible atmosphere of crime, that atmosphere brimming with the bloodthirsty sadism and bestiality, that calculated cruelty planned without emotions, that atmosphere in which the extermination took place. In short, what is overwhelming here is not so much the physical catastrophe of colossal dimensions, as the moral catastrophe, the downfall of mankind, so horrible and low, unprecedented in world history.[59]

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[56] Ibidem.

[57] Noe Grüss, *Rok pracy Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej* [A year of work of the Central Jewish Historical Commission] (Łódź: CŻKH, 1946), p. 10.

[58] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/38, Filip Friedman, "Cele i zadania Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej w Polsce [Objectives and tasks of the CŻKH in Poland]," no date, p. 23.

[59] Ibidem, p. 24.

Friedman went on to observe that the world was "not fully aware of the consequences of that horrible catastrophe."[60] Consequently, the Commission's main objective was to "collect all the evidence and all other data available at present in order to fully illustrate this unprecedented tragedy of mankind."[61] Thus, and this should be stressed, the material collected by the CŻKH had, first and foremost, the rank of evidence.

Most employees of the Commission were painfully aware that the exceptionality of the Holocaust made it difficult for people to fathom its mass character and scale. Those who managed to spend almost the entire period of the occupation in the Soviet Union experienced that first hand. A good example here is Klara Mirska, who described her journey to Lublin in 1944 as follows:

> Already in the train carriage I felt a surprise which had not yet transformed into terror, which I still had not yet consciously grasped fully, but which was gradually beginning to dawn on me. The nice man who helped us get on the train was sitting next to us. I suddenly asked him:
> "Tell me please why I cannot see a single Jew in this car. Why don't I see them at the stations?"
> "There are no Jews, Miss. They're gone. Don't you know, Miss?"
> He began telling me about what happened. What he said was beyond the capacity of my imagination, my sense of reality. A Poland without Jews![62]

At the same time some of the Commission's employees had not only witnessed the Holocaust, but had also lost their entire family during the occupation. The Commission's special role therefore also consisted in juxtaposing those two perspectives. At the same time it faced a broader problem – how to investigate the Holocaust? "We – and we alone in the whole world – were still inexperienced at examining issues such as the theory and practice of German fascism towards the Jews. We educated ourselves in the course of our work," Noe Grüss remarked very honestly in *Rok pracy*.[63] The Commission was aware that its "employees faced totally unprecedented tasks; their objective was to investigate the most recent period of events, which they saw with their own eyes; it was difficult for them to be objective, as historical research requires."[64] That discrepancy between the scholar's objectivity and the subjectivity of one's own experiences echoed loudly in the Commission's program proposals. Grüss was motivated by the fact that the Commission employees were not only scholars, but also individuals stigmatized by the Holocaust: "We intended to commemorate our killed parents,

[60] Ibidem.
[61] Ibidem.
[62] Klara Mirska, *W cieniu wiecznego strachu* [In the Shadow of Perpetual Fear] (Paryż: published by the author, 1980), p. 441.
[63] Grüss, *Rok pracy*…, pp. 9–10.
[64] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/26, Sprawozdanie CŻKH za maj 1945 r. [CŻKH report for May 1945], p. 44.

brothers, and the children of our heroes who perished. We wished to unmask Nazism, racism, and antisemitism, and appeal for a fight and just punishment for the crimes committed."[65] During the second scholarly session held in September 1945 Friedman emphasized:

> in the face of what happened the historian's duty is particularly difficult. While writing history one should be guided by reason and not emotion […]. [But w]hile writing the history of the occupation years one cannot be guided by strictly scholarly objectives. Now the main role is to be played by factors of an emotional nature, feelings, one's own experiences, and personal loss. What is going to be written now should be an indictment meant for a tribunal and also one that should be a historic indictment of passivity, capable of stirring the conscience of nations and mobilizing them to fight against reaction.[66]

The exceptionality of not only the object of the research, but also of the researchers' situation made determination of the methodological framework all the more important. In addition, that naturally led to a broadening of the group of the Commission's co-workers. Initially, the provincial commissions and correspondents were inspected by Noe Grüss, who instructed them on how to proceed. However, that soon proved insufficient. Klara Mirska describes what the recorders' training looked like at the very beginning:

> I remember my first month of work in the Commission. Its director was Doctor Friedman, a historian. I had almost no contact with him. But I had close contact with his successor, Blumental. He was a man of broad knowledge, very modest and shy. He proposed that I familiarize myself with interviews conducted immediately after the liberation by an employee of the Commission, Bakalczuk, a former teacher in an elementary school in Pińsk. Completely objectively, extremely realistically, and thus with extreme brutality, he showed in them a truly unretouched picture of the experiences of the first Jews who crossed the Commission's threshold immediately after the liberation […]. The first interviews I read in April 1945, when I was only beginning my work in the Historical Commission, could have destroyed all my existing conceptions of friendship, morality, and love. I witnessed situations where, faced with a choice between life and death, mothers chose life, sacrificing their children. Based on a number of facts I learned I could have lost my faith in man, become a cynic. But that did not happen.[67]

Thus the Commission began preparing instructions for the recorders, of course, ones based on the research methods developed by YIVO before the war

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[65] Grüss, *Rok pracy*…, p. 10.

[66] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/12, Protokół drugiej narady naukowej CŻKH 19–20 IX 1945 r. [Minutes of the second academic session of the CŻKH, September 19–20, 1945], pp. 1–2.

[67] Mirska, *W cieniu wiecznego strachu*…, pp. 447–48.

and adapted to the postwar context. The summer of 1945 saw the publication of three brochures: *Instrukcje dla zbierania materiałów historycznych z okresu okupacji niemieckiej* (Instructions for collecting historical materials concerning the German occupation), *Instrukcje dla zbierania materiałów etnograficznych z okresu okupacji niemieckiej* (Instructions for collecting ethnographic materials from the period of the German occupation), and *Instrukcje dla badania przeżyć dzieci żydowskich w okresie okupacji niemieckiej* (Instructions for examining the experiences of Jewish children during the German occupation). Here one should mention that initially the main sphere of the CŻKH interest was the resistance movement. One of the first questionnaires prepared by Bakalczuk for the collectors of testimonies regarded resistance and partisan combat. It contained 39 topics ranging from the organization's establishment, through its possible "repression by the Judenrat", plans for clandestine workshops, and life in the detachments; to the course of combat.[68] It seems that that choice was not so much methodological as ideological. Initially, at press conferences, during its employees' public appearances, or in its publications, CŻKH was trying to show the experience of Jews during the occupation as the experience of people who actively engaged in the struggle against the occupier and did not remain passive. Consequently, emphasis was laid on the "heroic struggle and death of our heroes", and, as it seems, attempts were made to include the narrative about the Jewish resistance in the Polish narrative about the struggle against the occupier. Although in the Commission there were voices against combining those narratives, particularly in the context of the Poles' auxiliary role in the Holocaust,[69] it must be stressed that those voices were few and far between.

Let us return to the instructions published. The first one, *Instrukcje dla zbierania materiałów historycznych z okresu okupacji niemieckiej*, edited by Kermisz and Friedman, is a perfect illustration of the methodology and the objectives of the Commission's operation, and also its interdisciplinarity. The witness and his experience are in the center of interest. According to Kermisz's *Uwagi metodologiczne* (Remarks on methodology), this results from the fragmentary nature of the documents (evidence). In this situation, testimony becomes evidence – "the lack of original documents, taken away or destroyed by the enemy, should not be an obstacle to revealing the whole truth."[70] One can thereafter read that "aside from the original documents and files, the testimonies of eye witnesses shall constitute the primary source material for a reconstruction of the indictment against the entire German nation as well as the individual Germans whose full names are known and who participated in the crime, and finally against all those who

[68] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/577. The Questionnaire was drafted by Bakalczuk.

[69] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/12, Protokół narady naukowej CŻKH [Minutes of a CŻKH academic session], September 30, 1945, p. 21.

[70] *Instrukcje dla zbierania materiałów historycznych z okresu okupacji niemieckiej* (Łódź: CKŻP Komisja Historyczna, 1945), p. 6.

brought disgrace on themselves for their co-operation with the Germans."[71] The secondary use of the testimonies was as "sources for carrying out research on Jewish history."[72] This clearly shows that the words 'evidence', 'testimony', and 'witness', so often used in the Commission's documents, were mostly of legal significance, and only later were those documents treated as historical sources. It was not without a reason that the collectors were likened to court reporters,[73] and the reading out of the testimony and its signing by the witness was a part of the testimony-giving process.[74]

The testimonies were to be recorded not only with solemnity, diligence, and devotion, but predominantly in an objective way, though there was the dilemma caused by the fact that the recorder might have been a witness oneself. Again, the testimony was to be an asset and not an obstacle – familiarity of the 'reality investigated' facilitated not only a deeper understanding of the witness, but also pointed him/her in such a direction "so as to recreate the actual experiences of the Jewish population on the given territory in a detailed and exhaustive way."[75] First and foremost, however, the recorder was to approach the witness without prejudice and individually. The questions had an auxiliary character: "every witness should be approached from the perspective of his perception of the phenomena he knows and remembers best, which he can discuss in detail. Let us emphasize yet again that the most valuable is always what the witness saw and experienced himself."[76] At the same time the collectors were urged to separate what the witness saw with his own eyes from what he heard about. In the latter case the collector was to inquire about the source of information. Moreover, nothing was to be unimportant to the collector – every detail counted. And even though the collectors were warned against adding information to the testimonies (aside from comments written separately) or altering the style and language used by the given person, the Commission permitted steering the conversation to help the witness "refresh his/her memory". Last but not least, the testimonies were to include a short profile of the individual testifying, with an evaluation of his/her credibility. The collectors were given a great deal of freedom and they were encouraged to show initiative in searching for witnesses.

Importantly, the witness's personal experiences were put in the context of the community – not the Polish-Jewish one, but the Jewish one. The initial personal details were followed by questions about demographics – how many Jews lived in the given locality before the war and at the beginning of the occupation. Poles were treated as the 'local population', with the local authorities singled out in

[71] Ibidem.
[72] Ibidem, p. 7.
[73] Ibidem, p. 8.
[74] Ibidem, p. 9.
[75] Ibidem, p. 7.
[76] Ibidem, p. 8.

the context of the questions about that population's attitude to the Jews during the occupation. The context of the community also appeared in other questions – both those about the Jewish administration, the social or religious life in the ghetto, and also the customs. Here the recorders inquired about the breaking of moral and social norms – from sham marriages and forced divorces, through moral depravity or prostitution, to bribery and betrayal. The aim was also to learn the details of the instances when solidarity was broken, an expression of which was the question: "Did a partying frenzy grip certain better-to-do groups? Was it paired with abject poverty of the masses?"[77]

The questionnaire in *Instrukcje dla zbierania materiałów historycznych z okresu okupacji niemieckiej* is divided into 16 topics – from demographics and the Jewish population's attitude, which I have mentioned; through the German repressions, the establishment of the ghettos and their specificity (economic, social, cultural, political, and religious life), deportations (colloquially called *Aktions* in line with the occupier's nomenclature), life in camps and prisons, manifestations of 'disobedience' and resistance, partisan struggle; to life in bunkers and on the 'Aryan side' and also 'German acts of particular cruelty'. The total number of questions exceeded 150. Special attention was paid to surnames, with the witnesses asked to list people they knew from the ghetto (that pertained to "eminent Jewish personas," "lunatics and eccentrics," and "compromised individuals"). The topic of the atmosphere in the ghetto, camps, and prisons was emphasized, with the recorders inquiring about manifestations of despair, gossip, mass psychoses, and suicides on the one hand, and hopes and "psychological consequences of the persecutions" one the other. Understandably, in the context of the Commission's work there also appeared questions about manuscripts and book collections, that is, the fate of the Jewish archives, museums, and libraries, and the documents possessed as well as about people who kept diaries, memoirs, or documented their recollections and fate.

The CŻKH interdisciplinarity was emphasized even further in *Instrukcje dla zbierania materiałów etnograficznych z okresu okupacji niemieckiej* and *Instrukcje dla badania przeżyć dzieci żydowskich w okresie okupacji niemieckiej*. In the former the stated objective was not only to collect songs or materials described as 'folk', but also religious materials ("prayers composed in the ghetto, in forests"), mythological ones ("stories of individuals' heroism, sacrifice, or martyrdom"), and magical ones. In the case of those last two elements the collectors asked detailed questions about, for instance, apotropaic acts ("How did people try to prevent evil or bring about good?," "Prayers and magical acts which were to protect the bunker from being located by the enemy"). The questionnaire also included questions about social life, particularly children's games and social games played by adults, and life in bunkers (here the recorders inquired about, for instance, specific activities and food preparation). A lot of significance

[77] Ibidem, p. 25.

was attributed to linguistic phenomena (the collectors inquired about "jokes, curses, satires, parodies, nicknames, and linguistic puzzles" that were used to denote certain people, places, or events from the occupation period) and the mechanisms of gossip ("the legends, beliefs, stories about miracles, dreams, and extraordinary phenomena which circulated among the Jews"). According to the instruction to the questionnaire, the objective was, on the one hand, to record what people talked about in ghettos and how they consoled one another ("uplifting anecdotes"), and, on the other, to record how they reported events to one another.

Written by Noe Grüss and Genia Silkes, the instructions for examining the experiences of Jewish children during the German occupation were to be used not only by the Commission's recorders, but also by teachers in Jewish schools. The 136 questions, divided into 10 topics, were aimed predominantly at reconstructing events from the child's perspective, but they also included a psychological element as the recorders inquired about experiences and dreams, and also laid stress on recording the child's mood and behavior. "One should listen closely to 'offhand remarks' made by the testifying individual, such as, 'but I didn't care one way or another', reflections, confessions about feelings and emotions, evaluations of events and people, opinions, etc.".[78] The children were also encouraged to write autobiographic essays, which fit within the YIVO tradition. On the one hand, the collected material was to be used as historical source-material, and, on the other, it was to help educators and teachers in their work with the children. First and foremost, however, it was supposed to have psychological value and not be used as evidence, which was clearly stated in the brochure: "We know about the course of […] the events, the facts of crime, and the ways of killing from adults' testimonies, which discuss these in much more detail. We realize in advance that interrogations of children might have less value in terms of evidence, but at the same time they have incalculable psychological value. And adults cannot give us that."[79]

It should be mentioned here that while in the recorded children's testimonies the influence of the instruction brochure drafted by Grüss and Silkes was clearly visible in the recorded children's testimonies, the remaining two sets of instructions seem to have served more as inspiration than a questionnaire to be followed during the interview. When reading this collection of documents one has the impression that the children were allowed to tell their experiences freely; the testimonies collected by the Commission often regarded one specific event during the war instead of the entire occupation period. If stress was laid on something, it was surnames – not only of fellow camp prisoners, of the dead, and survivors, but also of the Germans.

[78] *Instrukcje dla badania przeżyć dzieci żydowskich w okresie okupacji niemieckiej* (Łódź: CKŻP Komisja Historyczna, 1945), p. 5.

[79] Ibidem.

Aside the testimonies, the number of which was quickly growing, an important part of the CŻKH collection was the ghetto archives buried during the war – the said documentation of departments of the Council of Elders in the Łódź ghetto, the underground archive of the Białystok ghetto (the Mersik–Tenenbaum Archive), and the documentation collected in the Warsaw ghetto by the Oneg Shabbat group. The history of the search for the Ringelblum Archive by the CŻKH has been reconstructed by Aleksandra Bańkowska and the author of this text,[80] but let me remind that that endeavor had been planned since the spring of 1945. In August that year Hersz Wasser, the director of the Warsaw WŻKH, applied to the Capital Reconstruction Bureau for permission to conduct excavations at Nowolipki Street 68 and Świętojerska Street 34. Those plans were thwarted by a lack of funds. The digs did not commence until September 1946 after the receipt of 200,000 zlotys from the Jewish Labor Committee, and they ended in the discovery of the first part of the archive on Nowolipki Street. As for the documents of the Łódź ghetto, let me repeat that they were hidden away by Nachman Zonabend, who was in the group of Jews who were clearing the ghetto area. According to his testimony deposited in Yad Vashem in 1986,[81] his mission to salvage what was left of the Łódź ghetto and its residents began when he stashed away a collection of Mendel Grosman's photographs. "I thought that that was something colossal. Regardless of whether I lived or died there had to be a document left for the future generation or survivors."[82] One Sunday in October 1944 he sneaked into the Archive Department on Kościelny Square.

> [E]verything was lying on the right on the second floor; the door was locked tight with a key and not a padlock. I had to force the door open and that took a while, but I succeeded. When I walked in I saw a colossal amount of documents in cardboard folders […]. I began to peek into some of them, but I was too frantic and at the same time I had little time to reflect on what to take and what not to take. But how should I carry those documents? As on those premises was the place where the Germans used to purchase[83] things abandoned by the deported Jews, I descended and found several suitcases, and there were plenty, and I put in them the things which I thought the most important and there were large items, too, lying in a chest.[84]

[80] Aleksandra Bańkowska, Agnieszka Haska, "'…w podziemiach wymienionych domów zakopane są…" Poszukiwania Archiwum Ringelbluma ['…in the basements of the houses mentioned are buried…' The Search for the Ringelblum Archive]," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 12 (2016): 319–33.

[81] YVA, O.3/5896, Relacja Nachmana Zonabenda [Nachman Zonabend's testimony].

[82] Ibidem, p. 16.

[83] It should probably be 'stored'.

[84] YVA, O.3/5896, Relacja Nachmana Zonabenda [Nachman Zonabend's testimony], p. 6.

Zonabend hid some of the documents in the well on Kościelny Square and the larger ones, as he recalled, he "laid at the back of the building and simply covered them with stones, sand, and duvets, for there was no shortage of duvets."[85] About a dozen days after the liberation, in January, Zonabend removed the documents from the well and brought them to his apartment. In February 1945 he donated some of the documents (including *Kronika getta łódzkiego*), paintings, and photographs to the Central Commission.[86] On October 26, 1947, during his preparations to leave Poland, Zonabend gave another portion of the documents to the Commission. It seems that he donated the items he could have trouble transporting out of the country: "I did not know what I could [take with me] […] For instance, I was not allowed to take all the paintings, and Doctor Kermisz was present at the donation of the documents. Some I did take with me."[87] Together with the Gettoverwaltung files obtained in March 1945 the documents from the Łódź ghetto constituted the Commission's largest archival collection at that time. Ordering those materials began in May 1945. By the way, it was observed that that "could take a lot of time" because the Commission was "in possession of all the papers of the Judenrat[88] and all of its posts and also tremendous amounts of manuscripts produced by the German authorities of the ghetto."[89] Interestingly, some of the materials, for instance, the ghetto employment cards, were returned to their owners.[90] According to the report for the first half of 1946, the Commission wrote and ordered short descriptions of the content of approx. 400 files, with the collection amounting to almost 7,000 items.[91]

The history of the Underground Archive of the Białystok Ghetto best illustrates the manner in which the CŻKH obtained documents. It also attests to the telltale chaos in the Commission's documentation. According to Aleksandra

[85] Ibidem, p. 7.

[86] Samuel Kassow and Laura Jockusch after him discuss the search for a part of Rumkowski's archive conducted in 1946 and led by Kermisz. The Archive was purportedly hidden away in a well. In light of Zonabend's testimony and the fact that the Łódź ghetto chronicle is included in the 1945 inventory it seems that what they write was not the case (Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation*…, p. 101).

[87] YVA, O.3/5896, Relacja Nachmana Zonabenda [Nachman Zonabend's testimony], p. 10.

[88] Jacek Walicki points out that this incorrect term used here proves poor knowledge of the Łódź ghetto subject matter (idem, *Polityka historyczna a nauka. Dzieje badań materiałów archiwalnych getta łódzkiego i jego Kroniki do roku 1968* [Historical politics versus science. The History of research on archival materials of the Lodz Ghetto and its Chronicle until 1968]," in *Kronika getta łódzkiego/Litzmannstadt Getto 1941–1944*, ed. Julian Baranowski, et al. [Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2009], p. 250).

[89] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/26, Sprawozdanie CŻKH za maj 1945 r. [CŻKH report for May 1945], p. 13.

[90] Ibidem, p. 25.

[91] Ibidem, p. 33.

Bańkowska and Weronika Romanik's[92] findings, the Archive's history began in late 1942 with the arrival in Białystok of Mordechaj Tenenbaum-Tamarof, an envoy of the Jewish Fighting Organization (*Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, ŻOB) in Białystok. His co-worker in the ghetto was Cwi Mersik, a social activist, who, of his own accord, collected testimonies from the refugees who arrived there. After Mersik's death on January 28, 1943 Tenenbaum was aided by Gedalia Petluk. Various materials were collected for inclusion in the Archive – from testimonies, memoirs, and personal documents (including Tenenbaum's diary, which he had kept since January 1943), through songs and literary works, to the documentation of the Jewish Council (ordinances, minutes of meetings, and reports) and unique documents of the individuals murdered in Treblinka, which were discovered in the clothing delivered to Białystok for sorting. It must be said that this collection is relatively chaotic because the individuals who were in charge of it acted under immense time pressure. The February campaign during which more than 10,000 people were deported to Treblinka did not discontinue those efforts, which continued until April 1943. At the same time the activists were looking for ways to hide the archive outside the ghetto. Of crucial importance here were the contacts of Tenenbaum's co-worker Izrael Blumental with Bolesław Filipowski, a colonel of the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK). The documents were transferred in tin boxes – two in March, and a third one at the turn of April and May 1943. Filipowski buried them in the stable on his farm, while Tenenbaum's messenger, Bronka Klibańska (Winicka), made a drawing which was to help find the materials after the war. Tenenbaum committed suicide during the uprising in the Białystok ghetto in mid-August 1943.

Bańkowska and Romanik managed to establish that after the Red Army's arrival in Białystok in late August 1944, Bronka Klibańska was trying to locate the documents, but to no avail as they had been moved by Filipowski. She informed Szymon Datner, at that time the chair of the Voivodship Jewish Committee in Białystok, about the archive's existence. The archive (two boxes) was discovered in the summer of 1945 by Lejb Blumental, Izrael Blumental's brother, who knew about its concealment. No later than in March 1946 Lejb contacted the CŻKH and proposed to sell the materials. Unfortunately, the exact price remains unknown, though it could not have been particularly high as the CŻKH was suffering from a chronic lack of funds. The purchase was certainly made, though, as the CŻKH report for the first half of 1946 contains a handwritten annotation reading: "the Białystok Judenrat's files have been purchased."[93] The documents from the Archive were entered as an acquisition in the CŻKH inventory book under the

[92] Aleksandra Bańkowska, Weronika Romanik, "Podziemne Archiwum Getta Białostockiego. Archiwum Mersika–Tenenbauma [The Underground Archive of the Bialystok Ghetto. Mersik–Tenenbaum Archive]," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 9 (2013): 257–273.

[93] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/26, Sprawozdanie CŻKH za maj 1945 r. [CŻKH report for May 1945], p. 33.

date of April 9, 1946.[94] In line with the CŻKH policy on making duplicates by the appropriate provincial commissions, two days later the documents were sent to Białystok to be copied and sent back along with two duplicates.[95] The work dragged on; as late as in October letters were sent from Łódź to Białystok, urging the latter to hurry in that regard.[96] Interestingly, that was not the whole archive. A letter sent to the Białystok WŻKH had an attachment – a detailed list of documents complied by Józef Kermisz. However, certain entries in the CŻKH inventory book inform that Menachem Turek sent over copies of documents from the Białystok Ghetto Archive, including Mordechaj Tenenbaum's diary, which do not appear on Kermisz's list.[97] Those documents were sent between May and November 1946, with their total number amounting to 26. In addition, three more documents from Białystok, which were certainly a part of the archive, were published in a collection edited by Betti Ajzensztajn, entitled *Ruch podziemny w ghettach i obozach* (The Underground movement in ghettos and camps). It remains unknown how the CŻKH obtained the rest of the archive.

The history of the obtainment of the Underground Archive of the Białystok Ghetto was not unique, as documents, photographs, paintings, and other artefacts were very often purchased. The CŻKH budget book informs us that in May 1945 10,591.70 zlotys were spent on acquisitions, with as much as 13,305 zlotys spent in June on photographs alone. On April 30, 1945 the Commission purchased "instruments of torture" for 500 zlotys, but it remains unknown what exactly that enigmatic entry meant. Some of the materials were lent to the Central Commission, for instance, the album with photographs from the ghetto (91 photographs, 84 negatives) taken during the Warsaw Uprising by Michał Stabrowski 'Lubicz', an employee of the Photographic Desk of the Information and Propaganda Bureau of the AK High Command.[98] By April 30, 1945 the Commission had collected over 5,000 files concerning the operation of German offices, the Gestapo, Judenrats, and the Jewish Social Self-Help (*Żydowska Samoobrona Społeczna*, ŻSS); plans of ghettos and camps, documents of underground struggle, 1,000 photographs, approx. 500 items in the folk section, and also letters, poems, synagogue art, and over 1,500 books. The CŻKH also collected "material evidence" and "museum exhibits", also called

[94] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/245, Księga inwentarzowa 1944–1946 [Inventory book 1944–1946], p. 84.

[95] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/325, Pismo CŻKH do WKH w Białymstoku z 11 IV 1946 r. [Letter from the CŻKH to the Białystok WKH of April 11, 1946], p. 6.

[96] Ibidem, p. 15.

[97] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/245, Księga inwentarzowa 1944–1946 [Inventory book 1944–1946], pp. 89–90.

[98] Stabrowski lent the album (along with the copyright to the photographs) to the Warsaw WŻKH on October 2, 1945 for six months. After that period the photographs were returned to him (AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/573, Oświadczenie [Declaration], p. 4).

"horror exhibits"[99] – human remains. Friedman's report of May 1945 lists an urn with bones, a torn out jaw, and teeth extracted after death. The Commission's documentation also mentions ashes from Treblinka. The Commission expanded quickly – aside from the archival, photographic, folk, painting and sculpture sections, it also came to include a medical board which examined the health of victims of the German medical experiments and also recorded their testimonies.

The key role in the collection of materials was played by provincial and local historical commissions. The provincial ones operated in Białystok, Gdańsk, Katowice, Cracow, Lublin, Warsaw, and Wrocław, with the local ones located in Bielsko, Częstochowa, Kielce, Kutno, Piotrków Trybunalski, Przemyśl, Radom, Tarnów, Włocławek, and, from early 1947, also in Szczecin. According to archival documents, the commissions in Katowice, Cracow, and Warsaw operated the most effectively, sending various materials to Łódź every month. The local commissions most often operated at the Jewish committees, often sharing their personnel and office. As one can read in reports penned by Noe Grüss, who visited the local Historical Commissions with Bakalczuk, the conditions were sometimes spartan: for instance, in the Historical Commission in Bielsko the office "had no window panes, the doors to the adjacent rooms did not close properly, and nor did the document box."[100] The personnel's composition kept changing. It must be emphasized here that the CŻKH not only visited its local branches, but also organized training sessions on the collection of materials. There were also meetings of WŻKH directors. Most often, however, the reports of the provincial and local commissions included sentences like this one from Rita Sobol-Masłowska's letter from Katowice: "I am asking, begging for money!"[101]

"The most valuable evidence is..."

The materials were to be ordered and edited by the Jewish Scientific Institute, the establishment of which was postulated in paragraph 6 of the CŻKH statute ("The Commission associates specialists in the field of the said research and the neighboring fields, thus laying foundations for the future establishment of the Jewish Scientific Institute"). Interestingly, according to the reports, the Jewish Historical Institute was established before the end of April 1945, with Filip Friedman as its director, and Rachela Auerbach, Nachman Blumental, Noe Grüss, and Józef Kermisz as its scholarly secretaries. However, it is not mentioned in documents produced after August 1945, nor did it produce any documentation

[99] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/26, Sprawozdanie CŻKH za maj 1945 r. [CŻKH report for May 1945], p. 46.

[100] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/329, Sprawozdanie z inspekcji Komisji Historycznej w Bielsku 6 VII 1945 r. [Report on the Historical Commission's inspection in Bielsko, July 6, 1945], p. 1.

[101] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/349, Pismo Rity Sobol-Masłowskiej do Filipa Friedmana z 1 VI 1945 r. [Rita Sobol-Masłowska's letter to Filip Friedman of June 1, 1945], p. 8.

surviving in the ŻIH archive. Hence, it seems that it was established exclusively on paper.

As we know, although stress was laid on documenting the Holocaust, that was only a part of the CŻKH activity. It was assumed the materials collected would be treated as evidence first, and only later serve as material for scholarly work. Nonetheless, particular emphasis was laid on making the items collected as widely available as possible, which was achieved through CŻKH publications. The Commission's impressive publishing activity – several dozen books and brochures – is well known and frequently discussed.[102] It should be mentioned here that aside from those distributed in Poland, the lion's share of the publications was sent abroad, mainly to Great Britain, the United States, and South America. The CŻKH also paid attention to publicizing its work by organizing seminars, lectures, historians' conventions, and press conferences. It also looked for questionnaire respondents through the agency of the press and it prepared radio programs. For instance, on May 23, 1945 Polish Radio broadcast a program on the Commission's activity, the transcript of which has survived in the ŻIH archive. The "domestic press and radio service" also involved appeals for sending in materials and informing the press about the documents collected or a search for individuals.

First and foremost, however, the CŻKH relatively quickly began to co-operate with organizations in Poland and abroad. The documents collected were to constitute evidence in the literal meaning of the word. The CŻKH co-operated closely with the Prosecutor's Supervision Bureau of the Ministry of Justice, the Polish Delegation in the International Commission for the Investigation of War Crimes, and the Main Commission for Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (*Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce*, GKBZN), particularly its Łódź branch. Friedman, Kermisz, Blumental, and Zonabend, along with writer Zofia Nałkowska, were members of a commission which inspected the sites of former camps.[103] Not incidentally, the Commission had tried from the very beginning to interest Polish writers in its operation, with Pola Gojawiczyńska, Adam Ważyk, Stanisław Dygat, Mieczysław Jastrun, and Ewa Szelburg-Zarembina among the writers invited to the meeting of the Historical Commission held

[102] Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak, "'Obecnie przed historykiem wyrasta cały szereg problemów…' Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna – geneza i dokonania ['The historian is now confronted with a whole series of problems...' The Central Jewish Historical Commission – origins and achievements]," in Szymon Datner, *Walka i zagłada białostockiego ghetta* [The struggle and extermination of the Bialystok ghetto] (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2014); eadem, "'Tytuł książki jest prosty i skromny…' ['The title of the book is simple and modest…']," in Janina Hescheles, *Oczyma dwunastoletniej dziewczyny* [Through the eyes of a twelve-year-old girl] (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2015); Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation*…

[103] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/576, Skład Komisji dla badania zbrodni hitlerowskich w Chełmie [Composition of the commission for investigation of Nazi crimes in Chełm], p. 1.

in Łódź on February 6, 1945 (that is, before the official move from Lublin).[104] Moreover, Julian Tuwim was a regular recipient of the Commission's publications. Coming back to the CŻKH co-operation with the GKBZN, it can be presented using the example of Chełmno nad Nerem (Kulmhof). The testimonies began to be collected in 1945 by survivor Jakub Waldman, after the war an employee of the county commissioner's office in Turek. Waldman contacted the Historical Commission in Włocławek and soon became its employee. On May 26, 1945 a special commission, composed of members the CŻKH and the GKBZN, including Friedman, Waldman, prosecutor Stefan Kurowski, judge Władysław Bednarz from the Regional Court in Łódź, and representatives of the local authorities and the Red Army went to Chełmno, Poddębice, Dąbie, Uniejów, and Koło to inspect the crime scenes. A report was drafted.[105] Two days later the CŻKH published in the press an appeal to witnesses to come forward. These measures were described in CKŻP documents as the 'Chełmno campaign'.[106] The collection of the testimonies, written down mostly by Waldman, went on simultaneously with the official investigation conducted by judge Bednarz from June 6, 1945. And even though the CŻKH performed an auxiliary function by indicating witnesses and preparing materials, a few of the testimonies collected by the Commission bear the heading "Interrogation protocol".[107] During the later period the CKŻP also conducted a search query that encompassed other sources, thus helping to prepare materials for the Nuremberg Trials.

The CKŻP also collaborated with the Supreme National Tribunal. Filip Friedman, the Tribunal's expert, participated in the Nuremberg Trials, for which the CŻKH prepared some of the materials to be used as evidence by Polish public prosecutors. It even printed a brochure entitled *Deutsche Verbrechen gegen die jüdische Bevölkerung in Polen 1939–1945* (German crimes against the Jewish population in Poland 1939–1945). The Commission and WŻKH employees prepared expert opinions for the trials of the Nazi war criminals before the Tribunal and other courts, and they also acted as witnesses. Preparation of evidence against the Nazi war criminals was also important to the CKŻP. For instance, during the 1945 preparations for Ludwig Fischer's trial, Adolf Berman, Ludwik Gutmacher, and Jonas Turkow were selected "to collect and prepare appropriate materials in co-operation with the Warsaw Historical Commission."[108] For the purpose of that trial (Fischer was tried along with

[104] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/2, Zaproszenie na posiedzenie CŻKH [Invitation to a CŻKH meeting], February 6, 1945, p. 3.

[105] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/X//33, pp. 3–10.

[106] AŻIH, CKŻP, 303/I/7, Plan pracy CKŻP na maj 1945 r. [CKŻ's agenda for May 1945], p. 33.

[107] For instance, AŻIH, 301/5350, Protokół przesłuchania Andrzeja Miszczaka [Minutes of Andrzej Miszczak's interrogation].

[108] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/I/7, Protokół posiedzenia Prezydium CKŻP z 13 IV 1945 r. [Minutes of a meeting of CKŻP Presidium's meeting on April 13, 1945], p. 26.

Ludwig Leist, Josef Meisinger, and Maks Daum) the CŻKH prepared several expert opinions, including, Kermisz's "Likwidacja żydostwa polskiego [The liquidation of Polish Jewry]," Wasser's "Stan aprowizacyjny, warunki zdrowotne i śmiertelność w getcie w czasie okupacji [Food provision, health, and mortality in the ghetto during the occupation]," Tatiana Berenstein's "Utworzenie getta w Warszawie i w dystrykcie warszawskim. Przesiedlenia w pierwszym okresie (do czerwca 1942) [The establishment of the ghetto in Warsaw and in the Warsaw District. Resettlements during the initial period (to June 1942)]."[109] The materials prepared for Amon Göth's trial and the report on the court proceedings were published by the CŻKH in 1947 under the title *Proces ludobójcy Amona Leopolda Goetha* (Trial of genocide perpetrator Amon Leopold Goeth). The Commission also compiled lists of Jewish collaborators for its own purposes, as well as to be used by the Supreme National Tribunal. The Commission also carried on voluminous correspondence with courts regarding the pursuit of Nazi war criminals, based on the records which it compiled. According to Alina Skibińska, without the participation of the Historical Commission a number of trials would have probably not taken place.[110]

The CŻKH relatively quickly established contacts with Jewish organizations outside Poland; aside from Western institutions, it also collaborated with the Anti-fascist Committee in Moscow. Those contacts quickly broke off though – in 1946 the CŻKH representatives did not visit the United States due to the CKŻP leadership's veto. The planned international congress of Jewish historians did not take place either. Nevertheless, in 1947 Kermisz (at that time, ŻIH's director) managed to go to Paris to attend a convention of Holocaust historians that was also attended by Friedman, but in his capacity as the director of the Department of Education and Culture of the Joint's Munich branch.

"Developing Pictures. Streetcars. An Inkwell"

As the scope of the Commission's operation broadened, it encountered mounting problems – from trivial ones such as obtaining showcases and chests for storing materials, to ideological and methodological ones. As the situation immediately after the war was unstable, every trip made by a Commission member required appropriate permission and organization of transport. In the ŻIH archive there is, for instance, a permit issued on January 23, 1945 to Aba Kowner (at that time

[109] AŻIH, Procesy przestępców niemieckich [Trials of German criminals], 344/18, 344/16, 344/22.

[110] Alina Skibińska, "Żydzi – świadkowie w procesach karnych [Jews – witnesses in criminal trials]," paper given during a conference on witnesses to the Holocaust, organized by the Polish Center for Holocaust Research of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Institute of National Remembrance, and ŻIH during April 22–23, 2013 in Warsaw. I am grateful to the author for making this text available to me.

employed as a CŻKH instructor) to go from Lublin to Łódź. It is also noteworthy that in 1945 Łódź–Warsaw–Łódź airplane tickets were a constant position in the budget, while later the Commission employees tended to use intercity buses. There were various problems with contacting the existing provincial commissions and co-workers in the field, not to mention the rotation of personnel. But the main problem was financing, and throughout the period of the CŻKH operation at that. From the very beginning, the CKŻP, which also faced such problems, had been transferring less money than promised. Let us take the first surviving budget of the CŻKH, which was an appendix to the minutes of the plenary session of the CKŻP held on January 26, 1945 in Lublin. During that session it was decided that 100,000 zlotys would be allocated to the Commission, but the next month it would receive only half that.[111]

The non-punctuality of the CKŻP subsidies and the problems with covering the Commission's various unanticipated expenses had serious consequences. This became a source of conflict first and foremost between the CKŻP and the CŻKH, but the dispute regarded not only money, as also who controlled whom. For instance, in April 1945 the Central Committee accused the Commission of operating "completely independently and without any plan whatsoever" and that its employees' salaries were "too high and its apparatus too extensive." A month later it was even postulated that the CŻKH seat be moved to Warsaw and, in order to "relieve the Central Commission",[112] that the supervision over its financial affairs be exercised by the provincial Jewish committees. The CKŻP also demanded submission in scholarly matters and exerted political pressure. It was observed that the content of the letters sent abroad was not consulted with the Committee and that the Commission's seal did not mention the CKŻP and that its director's plans were too ambitious. Friedman clearly saw the Commission as an institution autonomous and independent from the CKŻP, to which testifies, for instance, his letter of December 3, 1945 where he postulated the appointment of CŻKH delegates to the CKŻP. His postulate was turned down "because the Central Historical Commission [was] an integral part of the Central Committee of Polish Jews."[113] Reading the files one may also notice a permanent personal conflict between the WŻKH in Cracow and its chair, Michał Borwicz, and the central headquarters. Consequently, Borwicz began to turn to the CKŻP for designated subsidies exclusively for his Commission, which depleted the overall budget of the CŻKH and sparked further conflicts. At some point there were even suspicions that the Cracow WŻKH wished to become a separate body.

[111] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/I/8, Protokół posiedzenia Prezydium CKŻP z 26 I 1945 r. [Minutes of the CKŻP Presidium's meeting on January 26, 1945], p. 5.

[112] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/104, Pismo CKŻP do CŻKH z 25 IV 1945 r. [The CKŻP's letter to the CŻKH of April 25, 1945], pp. 3–4.

[113] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/I/11, Protokół posiedzenia Prezydium CKŻP z 11 I 1946 r. [Minutes of the CKŻP Presidium's meeting on January 11, 1946], p. 12.

The financial situation did not improve in 1946. In his letter to the CKŻP dated March 18, 1946 Friedman struck an alarming tone: "we have not received a subsidy for the month of February, as a result of which we have not paid the salaries to our employees. Our canteen has been closed for 2 days for lack of any funds whatsoever. Our publishing activity has ceased. […] The clerks, poorly remunerated anyway, cannot work without remuneration."[114] Even though Friedman tried to obtain the funds by turning directly to the Joint he was quickly reprimanded by the CKŻP leadership. That became the reason for his resignation in March 1946, which however was not accepted. The Commission relatively quickly spiraled into debt, borrowing money from private individuals (including its employees). That, paired with organizational problems, became the reason for the October 1945 establishment of the Associations of Friends to the CŻKH, the objective of which was supporting the Commission in its statute actions and collecting funds for its operation. The Association was also to serve as a bridge between the Commission and the general public and it was to popularize its works. It was divided into commissions and sections (pedagogical, legal, medical, and propaganda). In 1946 it was also supported by various organizations abroad. According to the minutes of a meeting of the Executive on May 1, 1946, money for the Commission's operation was donated by, for instance, Adolf Silberschein (an MP in the Second Republic of Poland and the chair of the RELICO organization in Geneva and the Jewish Committee of Czenstochovers in America) and Jacob Pat from the Jewish Labor Committee.[115] Despite those subsidies, which did improve the situation slightly, the power struggle between the CKŻP and the CŻKH intensified. This was probably one of the reasons why Friedman decided to leave Poland. He was succeeded by Blumental.

Tłomackie Street 3/5

Beginning with early 1947 the CŻKH operation slowed in connection with its planned move to Warsaw and its transformation into the Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH). Even though the move did take place in the summer of 1947 and ŻIH officially began to operate on October 1, 1947 under the CKŻP Presidium's September 27, 1947 resolution, all employees and co-workers of the Commission were dismissed at the end of December 1946, with the intention of rehiring them as ŻIH employees at the beginning of the new year. However, that did not happen due to red tape and the lengthy exchange of letters between the CKŻP and CŻKH. Letters from that period testify to the growing irritation of all parties involved. The Commission nevertheless continued its work. According to the

[114] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/107, Pismo CŻKH do CKŻP z 18 III 1946 r. [The CŻKH letter to the CKŻP of March 18, 1946], p. 15.

[115] AŻIH, CŻKH, 303/XX/11, Protokół posiedzenia Egzekutywy CŻKH z 1 V 1946 r. [Minutes of a meeting of the CŻKH Executive on May 1, 1946], p. 15.

report closing the Commission's operation, over three years it collected 3,000 testimonies (plus a directory and index), 100 memoirs, and a few hundred songs. It catalogued the Ringelblum Archive and the archive of the Białystok ghetto; edited 8,000 files with German documents, posters, and maps; complied directories of ghettos and camps; collected 4,000 photographs and also paintings, drawings, sheet music, "models, panoramas, art works, synagogue art objects, coins, banknotes, and post stamps."[116] 38 of its publications were released and more were in preparation, including Calel Perechodnik's memoir, but, as it was stated with regret, they could not be published for lack of funds. It is noteworthy that when ŻIH was established the Commission had a 3-million-zloty debt.[117] Nevertheless, the balance of the Commission's operation is impressive. It was pioneering in every respect, and the attempt to order and describe the still living past was incredibly difficult in the postwar chaos, which had both a material and strongly emotional nature.

Translated by *Anna Brzostowska* and *Jerzy Giebułtowski*

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[116] AŻIH, 303/XX/26, Sprawozdanie z działalności CŻKH za maj 1945 [Report on the CŻKH operation for May 1945], p. 44et seq..

[117] Ibidem. See also 303/XX/109, letters to the CKŻP of March 29, 1947, p. 55, and of August 28, 1947, pp. 100–101.

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