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Knights of the Iron Cross in the Łódź Ghetto

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Yesterday evening the first group of 100 Knights of the Iron Cross was called to come to Bałucki Square at 8 a.m. The meeting point was the department building on Rybna [Street], from where the militia escorted them through the city to Bałucki Square. The elderly men marching in military formation aroused general interest on the ghetto streets. In Bałucki Square the secret police functionaries carefully checked their documents and asked their holders various questions. Each man produced proof of his military decorations. The authorities ordered our authorities to assign them some work.²

Biuletyn Kroniki Codziennej, 16 May 1942.

The Łódź ghetto witnessed that scene in May 1942. It is no wonder that it aroused “general interest,” for even for today’s readers it seems both improbable and paradoxical – heroic soldiers of the 1914–1918 war – Jewish German patriots – march along the ghetto streets (for the last time in military formation) to meet other German patriots. If one examines a ghetto map one can try to guess their route. Were they allowed by an exception to march along Limanowskiego Street, which was beyond its borders? Or were they obliged to take the longer route and climb the infamous wooden bridge over Zgierska Street near the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary? One can imagine that they felt important and exceptional. After all, they had been awarded one of the highest military decorations issued in the German Empire for their contribution during the Great War, which still was not called the “first.” They had probably fought on various front lines and under various commanders. Had they known during the previous war about Gen. Karl Litzmann? Had they heard about the famous “Lion of Brzeziny” – the victorious commander in the Battle of Łódź, in honour of whom the Nazis renamed the city? Those former soldiers were forced to leave their home towns and settle in “Litzmannstadt-Getto,” where they felt alienat-

¹ The term “knight” refers to men decorated with the Iron Cross, not to those decorated with the Knights Order of the Iron Cross (translator’s footnote).

² *Kronika getta łódzkiego 1941–1944/Litzmannstadt Getto 1941–1944*, ed. Julian Baranowski et al., vol. 2: 1942 (Łódź: Archiwum Państwowe and Wydawnictwo UŁ, 2009), 193.

ed and miserable. That march in close formation was perhaps the last moment when they still hoped that their homeland would come to its heroes' rescue. Unfortunately, the only privilege they received was the postponement of their death sentences' by a few or about a dozen months.

The Iron Cross (*Eisernes Kreuze*, EK) was a decoration established by King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia during the Napoleonic Wars. Its name and material alluded to an epithet of that epoch ("the Iron Time") while the shape reflected the cross borne by the Teutonic Order. The decoration was instituted in 1870 after the military victories during the Franco-Prussian War. It was reinstituted on 5 August 1914 by Emperor Wilhelm II. The Cross had three grades: Iron Cross 1st and 2nd Class and the Grand Cross of the Iron Cross. Wilhelm II awarded the Grand Cross only five times, among others to himself, Generalfeldmarschall Paul von Hindenburg and Gen. Erich Ludendorff. It is impossible, however, to give the exact number of the Iron Crosses awarded during 1914–1918, as the Prussian archives were destroyed by the allied air force during World War II. The estimates (1.5–5 million and 80–250,000 of the 2nd Class and 1st Class respectively)³ suggest that the decoration was eagerly and frequently awarded to front-line soldiers in the German army and in the armies of its allies. As per decree of Wilhelm II, the 1st Class could be awarded only to 2nd Class holders.⁴ The fact that it was awarded to 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment dispatch runner Private Adolf Hitler must have made the decoration even more prestigious. Hitler was awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class and 1st Class on 2 December 1914 and 4 August 1918 respectively. It is not without significance that it was a Nuremberg Jew – regimental ADC Hugo Gutman – who recommended him for the decoration.⁵

After the outbreak of World War I the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith (*Centralverein Deutscher Staatsbürger Jüdischen Glaubens*, CV) issued a pamphlet to encourage German Jews to fight, which read: it is obvious that every German Jew is ready to die for Germany, to fulfill his duty.⁶ The figures show that the Jews passed that "exam" in patriotism and loyalty with flying colors: 100,000 out of the total of 550,000 German soldiers were Jewish, including 10,000 volunteers. 78 percent of the Jewish soldiers fought on the front line, 12,000 died and 30,000 received decorations. The situation in the Austro-Hungarian Empire was analogous – there were 300,000 Jews in the army while the total number of Jewish soldiers and officers who perished in combat amounted to 25,000.⁷

³ Gordon Williamson, *The Iron Cross: A History 1813–1957* (New York: Blandford Press, 1984), 49–52.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 46.

⁵ Thomas Weber, *Hitler's First War: Adolf Hitler, the Men of the List Regiment, and the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 82, 262–263.

⁶ Quoted in: Bryan Mark Rigg, *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers: The Untold Story of Nazi Racial Laws and Men of Jewish Descent in the German Military (Modern War Studies)* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 91.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 92–93.

The possibility to prove their patriotism through service in the army was to help the German Jews achieve the status of citizens with full rights. It is enough to quote Lieutenant Josef Zürndorfer: as a German I went to defend my endangered homeland. But a Jew I also fought for full and equal rights and for my fellow believers.⁸ The Jews could also expose the fallacy that they supposedly avoided military service. In fact, a study commissioned by the German government and the army to prove that the Jews avoided military service revealed their over-representation in the army [in relation to the whole population].⁹

The post-war situation of German officers and soldiers of Jewish descent changed with Hitler's rise to power and the subsequent gradual dismissal of Jews from the civil service. Combined with the economic boycott, the policy hit thousands of Jewish families, including veterans. President Paul von Hindenburg pleaded their cause in a letter to Hitler in which he stated that if they were willing to spill their blood and to die for Germany, the Homeland should treat them with respect.¹⁰ Indeed, the 7 April 1933 Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service (*Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*, shortened to *Berufsbeamtengesetz*), known as the "Aryan paragraph," ordered dismissal of civil servants of non-Aryan descent with the exception of veterans and those who lost a father or son in combat.¹¹ Loyalty toward Jewish veterans was manifested again during the so-called simplification of administration when the Nazis decided to get rid of all Jewish civil servants, whom they forced into retirement on 31 December 1935. The civil servants were entitled to old-age pensions only if they had been front-line soldiers during the 1914–1918 war.¹² The subsequent years of Hitler's rule worsened the situation of Jews, who gradually lost their jobs, property, money and all rights. After the outbreak of the war the next step was to "cleanse" the Reich towns and cities of Jews and deport them to the ghettos in the General Government or to the territories incorporated into the Reich. During a few weeks in October and November 1941 the ghetto in Łódź became the destination of the biggest mass deportation from the Reich and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The already congested "Jewish residential district" received a transport of nearly 20,000 DPs from Vienna, Prague, Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Dusseldorf plus 512 deportees from Luxembourg.¹³ The later transports went to Riga, Minsk, Kaunas, Warsaw or near Lublin. In May 1942 German Jews began to be sent to the Theresienstadt ghetto. In the

⁸ Quoted in: *ibidem*, 92.

⁹ David Welch, *Germany. Propaganda and Total War, 1914–1918. Sins of Omission* (New Brunswick, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 200.

¹⁰ Quoted in: Rigg, *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers*, 97.

¹¹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (3rd edition, New York–London: Yale University Press, 2003), vol. 1, 85.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Danuta Dąbrowska, "Wsiedleni Żydzi zachodnieuropejscy w getcie Łódzkim," *Biuletyn ŻIH* 65/66 (1968): 105–139.

context of this text it should be stressed that that ghetto had one of the largest populations of former World War I soldiers. It was to be a model settlement for the elderly and Reich heroes. The idea to establish a *jüdischen Altersghetto* in Theresienstadt for Jews over the age of 65, severely wounded veterans and Iron Cross 1st Class holders was put forward during the Wannsee Conference on 20 January 1942. According to the minutes, the aim of that radical and unique solution was to avoid any interventions regarding such persons.¹⁴

Few Łódź ghetto inhabitants from that city or its vicinity were World War I veterans who had fought on the side of the Central Powers. It is only known that Jewish police chief Leon Rozenblat had been a mortar battery commander in the Austro-Hungarian army.¹⁵ Numerous war veterans and their relatives arrived in the ghetto only with a transport of 20,000 Jews from the so-called *Altes-reich*, Czechoslovakia and Austria. Their number must have puzzled the ghetto inhabitants as one of the chroniclers wrote the following:

Even though many of the newcomers were not allowed to take any documents, a lot of them brought proofs of their bravery during the World War and one really has to wonder why there are so many decorated among the Jews.¹⁶

The social structure of the transports must have been the reason for the relatively substantial number of veterans in the ghetto – most deportees' youth fell within the period of the Great War.¹⁷ Most lived peaceful middle class lives in their home towns – they were mostly entrepreneurs, merchants and representatives of freelance professions and they arrived with their home-staying wives.¹⁸ The deportation to the ghetto on the eastern frontier of the Reich radically changed both their material and psychological situation – those loyal German citizens were pushed onto the margin of society. It must have been particularly painful for former soldiers, many of whom were disabled war veterans. They had the same status in the ghetto as the other so-called deportees. They lived in horrible conditions in collective dwellings (called “collectives” [*kolektywy*] in the ghetto nomenclature) and suffered from diseases, which were spreading mostly due to lack of hygiene and hunger. Few newcomers managed to find any, usually physical, work. In exceptional cases the Jews from Western Europe worked as Judenrat clerks, for example, in the specially established Department for Deportees' Affairs (*Wydział dla Wsiedlonych*) on Rybna Street No. 8. The Jewish administration of the ghetto generally paid no attention to the deportees' professions,

¹⁴ Pages 8–9 of the Wannsee Conference's minutes, <http://www.ghwk.de/deut/proto.htm>, retrieved 10 March 2011.

¹⁵ *Kronika*, vol. 5: *Suplementy*, 337.

¹⁶ *Kronika*, vol. 1: 1941, 125–126.

¹⁷ Dąbrowska, “Wsiedleni,” 109. The percentage of people over 50 years old among those deported to the ghetto amounted to 53.5.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 115.

but it should be stressed that about 100 former officers of the German and Austro-Hungarian armies were engaged by the Jewish police in the rank of private.¹⁹

The category of those awarded with the Iron Cross or with the Wound Badge (*Verwundeten-Abzeichen*, VA) for injuries sustained during the 1914–1918 war was created only during the May 1942 deportations of Western European Jews. The information about the deportation appeared on 29 April, when announcement No. 380 was posted on the ghetto walls: “as per the authorities’ order the Jews deported to the Łódź ghetto from Altesreich, Luxemburg, Vienna and Prague are to be deported beginning Monday 4 May 1942.” It also specified that it “does not apply to: 1. Iron Cross holders, 2. Wound Badge holders, 3. Employed persons. The persons mentioned in points 1 and 2 must produce proof of their decorations in the Department for the Deportees’ Affairs.” The next day an announcement with the same number but with different content was posted.²⁰ Then it did not mention the exemption categories but it stated that the deportation would affect “the Jews deported to the ghetto.” As a matter of fact the groups defined earlier were still exempted from deportation but such decisions were made individually after submission of required documents. It is unclear why the announcement was changed but the ghetto inhabitants believed that the official announcement regarding decoration holders’ exemption was inconvenient for the German authorities.²¹ Also it is not known who exactly ordered the veterans’ exemption from deportation. Considering the Judenrat’s lack of autonomy to make decisions regarding deportations, the later meeting of the decoration holders with the Gestapo and the surviving correspondence, the Secret State Police might have been behind it. For the milieu of the Łódź Jews and the Jewish ghetto administration certainly cared little for manifestations of German heroism and patriotism.

Just as during the earlier deportations, the May 1942 deportations involved the entire administrative machine. Transports were organized by the Depart-

¹⁹ Ibidem, 121.

²⁰ Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi [State Archive in Łódź] (later: APŁ), Przełożony Starszeństwa Żydów [Chairman of the Elders] (later: PSŻ), 164, Okólniki i obwieszczenia PSŻ dla getta łódzkiego 1940–1943 [Judenrat Head’s Circulars and Announcements for the Łódź Ghetto 1940–1943], pp. 199–200. In the list of the ghetto announcements and memos that announcement is accompanied by the following words: Fassung 1 and Fassung 2 (German: version). This was the only instance of a change introduced to an announcement. Cf. *Kronika*, vol. 2, 121, Oskar Singer, *Przemierzając szybkim krokiem getto... Reportaże i eseje z getta łódzkiego* (Łódź: Oficyna Bibliofilów and Archiwum Państwowe, 2002), 19 (announcement’s photocopy). Icchak (Henryk) Rubin gives a wrong announcement number (381) and is mistaken when he claims that the announcement was signed by the head of the German ghetto administration (*Ghettoverwaltung*) Hans Biebow. These are just two examples of mistakes in that controversial monograph of the Łódź ghetto, see Icchak Rubin, *Żydzi w Łodzi pod niemiecką okupacją 1939–1945* (London: Kontra, 1988), 382.

²¹ Dąbrowska, “Wsiedleni,” 128.

ment for Deportees' Affairs, which had been responsible for dealing with the newcomers from the West. The authorities sent letters to each Jew ordering him or her to come to the meeting point on a given day and reminding the recipient of the possibility to take 12.5 kg of baggage. Such summons (called "wedding cards" [*karty ślubne*] in the ghetto jargon) pertained to all family members. Most addressees immediately began to write appeals, which were examined by the specially established Deportation Commission (*Aussiedlungskommission*). Of course, many of those who appealed were war veterans, who attached copies of decoration proofs to their appeals sent to the especially established department cell headed by Dr. Aleksander Pollak from Prague. The State Archive in Łódź has a few hundred of such documents.²² Most of them are copies of document copies or of original diplomas, which were then certified by Dr. Pollak. Some original documents have survived too. The Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute (*Żydowski Instytut Historyczny*, ŻIH) also has a dozen originals of various documents regarding military service.²³ Some of them are unique, for example the soldier's ID of Gesta Ruth's father – Herman Haake from Berlin, who fought in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871).²⁴

Even a rough analysis of a few hundred appeals shows that all EK II, EK I or VA holders and their families were exempted from the transports (such appeals were stamped as REQUEST GRANTED). In rare cases of failure to submit decoration proofs the clerks wrote: "to reconsider" or "surplus" (*nadkontyngent*). The commission usually accepted appeals of relatives of veterans. They were usually filed by women who had already become widows in the ghetto such as Helena Wallach from Cologne, whose husband died on 28 December 1941. Helena documented her husband Marcus' decoration and was exempted from the transport.²⁵ Similarly, Marianna Keller, whose husband Nathan died on the very day when she submitted the appeal, that is on May 1942.²⁶ The clerks sometimes also granted the appeals of widows whose EK II awarded husbands had perished during World War I. This was the case, for example, with Dorothea Marczak and

²² APŁ, PSŻ, 1292, Podania Żydów zagranicznych, odznaczonych wojskowymi orderami, o zwolnienie z wysiedlenia [Applications for Deportation Exemption of Foreign Jews with Military Decorations], 1942.

²³ Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego [Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute] (later: AŻIH), 205, Materiały osobiste Żydów z Europy Zachodniej [Personal Materials of Western European Jews].

²⁴ Ibidem, 205/357/2.

²⁵ APŁ, PSŻ, 1292, Podania Żydów zagranicznych, odznaczonych wojskowymi orderami, o zwolnienie z wysiedlenia [Applications for Deportation Exemption of Foreign Jews Awarded with Military Decorations], 1942, pp. 616–617. Helena Wallach was deported to the death center in Chełmno nad Nerem on 7 September 1942.

²⁶ Ibidem, 1291, Podania Żydów zagranicznych o zwolnienie z wysiedlenia lub o odroczenie terminu, załatwione pozytywnie [Foreign Jews' Applications for Deportation Exemption or Postponement, requests granted], 1942, pp. 1009, 1014.

Hilda Żydower from Berlin and the widow of Martin Ballin decorated with the Iron Cross 2nd and 1st Class for his long service.²⁷ Perhaps the chief factor in such situations was the war pension, which the *Kriegenwitwen* (war widows) were entitled to. In turn, Herbert Krischner from Berlin filed an appeal as a son of a decorated soldier. He was not only exempted from deportation but also included on the list of decorated veterans even though his participation in the war was unlikely as he was born in 1907.²⁸ In his appeal against deportation Ernst Löwenberg from Dusseldorf not only proved his decorations but also gave another reason for his exemption from deportation: he was to marry Berta Levy from Essen, who came to the ghetto with her sister Elise²⁹ and the ceremony was scheduled for 17 May. The clerks granted his request and exempted him and the two Levy sisters from deportation. During the next deportation in September 1942, however, they were deported as a family.

It is difficult to assess the degree of awareness of the fate of the deported, who as we know were murdered on the same or on the next day in the death centre in Chełmno nad Nerem. The few ghetto survivors confirmed that people tried to shut out the thought of death of the deported even though many were convinced that that was what had happened to them. Perhaps the Jews from Western Europe had the hardest time to believe in the death sentence, which was why so many of them volunteered for deportation because they actually thought that "it [couldn't] be worse than in the ghetto."³⁰ According to *Kronika*, a group of Berliners put in the Old People's Home unanimously decided to leave the ghetto even though 50 of them could apply for exemption on account of their decorations for military merit.³¹

All veterans who contacted the Department for Deportees' Affairs were registered on the lists of EK and VA holders. The memorable meeting with the Gestapo, to which the veterans marched "in formation," took place right after the end of the deportations, that is on 16 May 1942. That day a hundred people were officially registered and ID'ed "to see if perhaps somebody avoided deportation unlawfully on account of that privilege."³²

Of course, even though the deportations had ended, it was not the end of the formalities connected with the decoration holders' registration. Throughout a few weeks the documents were examined, copies were submitted and witnesses were summoned. More and more new lists were compiled using different criteria. Such an excessive level of bureaucracy was characteristic of the ghetto.

²⁷ Ibidem, pp. 220, 1083.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 5.

²⁹ APŁ, PSŻ, 1293, Podania zagranicznych Żydów o zwolnienie z wysiedlenia, dobrowolne zgłoszenia na wysiedlenie [Foreign Jews' Applications for Deportation Exemption, Voluntary Applications for Deportation], 1942, p. 88.

³⁰ Singer, "Przemierzając szybkim krokiem getto..." *Reportaże*, 22.

³¹ *Kronika*, vol. 2, 126.

³² Ibidem, 193.

There was something in it both for the department clerks and the veterans. The former could show how “busy” they were even if they only made new copies of documents. In turn, the latter wanted to obtain the status of decoration holders, which ensured certain privileges in the ghetto: decoration holders were not only exempted from deportation but could also hope to find employment and consequently receive food rations. On 27 May Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, Judenrat head, sent another list to the Litzmannstadt Gestapo with a list of already as many as 207 surnames and four additional lists with surnames of people who did not have certificates. The total number of surnames amounted to 311. Rumkowski made it clear that new lists would be submitted if more people documented their decorations.³³ Indeed, on 14 June 1942 Judenrat head Rumkowski’s secretariat received a list of as many as 334 surnames and an additional list of 25 people without certificates. Lists with surnames ordered both alphabetically and according to birth place were prepared. The former provides some information about the representation of decoration holders in individual groups. The number of war heroes from Dusseldorf, Frankfurt and Cologne was more or less similar (69 out of 1007 deportees, 69 out of 1186 deportees and 122 out of 200 deportees respectively). The figures were lower for Hamburg (36 out of 1063 deportees) and Luxemburg (10 out of 512), with the lowest one for Berlin (only 16 out of more than 4,000 newcomers, but one should remember the already mentioned 50 Berliners who volunteered for deportation). The number of EK and VA holders was of course the lowest (4 and 9 respectively) among the newcomers from Vienna and Prague, who were the most numerous (5,000 from each of the two cities). According to the documents, however, there were many more war veterans among them, but they had other less prestigious decorations.³⁴ The list includes 12 surnames of people who died from 6 May to 8 June. The Iron Cross 2nd Class holders obviously constituted an absolute majority. 70 people had additionally been awarded the Wound Badge, while 52 had only the Wound Badge. The surviving documents suggest that there were five knights of the Iron Cross 1st Class in the ghetto: Hugo Stern and Walter Hirsch

³³ APŁ, PSŻ, 17, Gestapo (Żydzi w obozach pracy, paczki dla Żydów, łapanki, listy imienne Żydów posiadających EK, statystyka urodzin i zgonów) [Gestapo (Jews in Labor Camps, Parcels for Jews, Round-Ups, Lists of Surnames of Jews with EK, Birth and Death Statistics)], 1940–1942, p. 136.

³⁴ Among the surviving documents there are for example the rejected appeals of Karl Nowak from Prague awarded in 1917 with the Karl Troop Cross (*Karl-Truppenkreuz*) and Sigmund Berger from Vienna with the Military Merit Cross (*Militarverdienstkreuz*) and the Medal for Bravery (*Tapferkeitsmedaille*), see APŁ, PSŻ, 1291, Podania Żydów zagranicznych o zwolnienie z wysiedlenia lub o odroczenie terminu, załatwione pozytywnie [Foreign Jews’ Applications for Deportation Exemption or Postponement, Requests Granted], 1942, p. 596; ibidem, 1293, Podania zagranicznych Żydów o zwolnienie z wysiedlenia, dobrowolne zgłoszenia na wysiedlenie [Foreign Jews’ Applications for Deportation Exemption, Voluntary Applications for Deportation], 1942, p. 99.

from Berlin, Julius Lewy and Josef Lewy from Cologne and Edgar Fels from Hamburg. There was also Martin Ballin's widow, who has been already mentioned and whose origin and later fate remains unknown.

One should also examine the list of 25 people without the certificates. Apart from basic information such as name and surname, date of birth, former and present address, the list specifies the location of the required documents. Moritz Lehrberger claimed that the certificate was in a file in his home in Frankfurt and provided the address. Erich Kornblum from Berlin provided his sister's address while Alfred Jakobsohn from Berlin, who had been wounded three times during the war, wanted to obtain the documents from the Welfare Department (*Versorgungsamt*) in Berlin-Schoenenberg or in the local orthopaedic station for disabled war veterans. Berliners constituted the biggest group of those without the documents. There were 14 of them and as many as half of them had their soldier's IDs and other documents taken away from them at the gathering point before their departure to Łódź.³⁵

Rumkowski's last official action regarding EK and VA holders was to send a letter to the Central Information Office for War Victims and Graves (*Zentralnachweistamt für Kriegerverluste und Kriegergräber*) in Berlin by the agency of *Geheime Staatspolizei*, in which he asked for the issue of the necessary certificates regarding EK and VA decorations so that they could be presented to the local German authorities (*hiesige deutsche Behörde*). This confirms the thesis that the affairs of the war veterans in the ghetto were not only an internal problem.

To the letter attached was the list of 25 people with their date of birth, place of residence before the deportation, the date and place of the decoration and the name of their military unit.³⁶ The most surprising thing about the letter is that it was written on 1 October 1942. During that period life in the ghetto was slowly returning to normal after the unbelievable shock of the brutal deportation of children, the elderly and sick to Chełmno nad Nerem, that is after the so-called *Sperre* (*szpera*). Unlike during the earlier deportations between January and May 1942, that time the Germans did not use any administrative measures such as deportation lists, deportation commissions and appellate commissions to keep up the appearances and hide the deportations' objective.

The Gestapo, which selected the people driven into the courtyards, had the deciding vote as to who would to be deported. Its functionaries paid no attention to either war merit or documents. Healthy appearance, which proved one's

³⁵ Many Berlin Jews had their baggage searched and their money, most valuable objects and documents taken at the assembly area in the synagogue on Levetzowstrasse, see *Kronika*, vol. 1, p. 325; APŁ, PSŻ, 19, Wsiedlanie Żydów zagranicznych do getta łódzkiego 1941–VI 1942 [Deportation of Foreign Jews to the Łódź Ghetto 1941–June 1942], pp. 84–93.

³⁶ APŁ, PSŻ, 17, Gestapo (Żydzi w obozach pracy, paczki dla Żydów, łapanki, listy imienne Żydów posiadających EK, statystyka urodzin i zgonów) [Gestapo (Jews in Labor Camps, Parcels for Jews, Round-Ups, Lists of Surnames of Jews with EK, Birth and Death Statistics)], 1940–1942, pp. 13–16.

fitness for work, was the criterion for exemption. There were some EK and VA holders among the deported, for example, the group of 21 out of 40 decorated Jews from Düsseldorf, who were in the ghetto at that time.³⁷

It is impossible to determine the number decorated with the EK and former soldiers decorated for wounds received in combat. Considering the high mortality rate among the Western European Jews, it is likely that many of them died in the “collectives” or in the old people’s homes during the first winter months after their arrival in the ghetto. The number of those who gave in to their fate and were deported in May 1942 or during the September *Sperre* also remains unknown. Some had taken their Iron Crosses on their last journey as some decorations were found in the ditches where the less valuable possessions of those gassed in Chełmno nad Nerem were buried. At this stage of research it is only possible to estimate their number. The search query in the files, which contain mostly the appeals against deportation orders and the comparison of the lists compiled by the Jewish ghetto administration suggest that at least 450 Jews in the ghetto had been decorated for their service to Germany during the previous war, including a few war widows and the 50 Berliners who volunteered for deportation. According to the statistical data prepared in the ghetto, the number of men born during 1877–1897³⁸ (that is potential conscripts during World War I) deported from the Old Reich’s towns and cities amounted to 1,873. This means that one in four men was a decoration holder. Many of them came to the ghetto with a few family members. Hence, one may assume that consequently about 1,500 people had a chance to remain in the ghetto, usually for a few months and sometimes even until August 1944.

One may examine the fate of those decorated after the deportation operation. Of course, those who found employment before the May “evacuation” were in the best situation regardless of their war merit. Among them were two employees of the Department for Deportees’ Affairs – Dr. Alfred Alsberg from Cologne and Karl Bergmann from Frankfurt. They were also intermediaries or directors of their “transports,” that is they organized the difficult life in the “collectives” during the first weeks in the ghetto and usually acted as messengers between the newcomers and the Jewish ghetto administration. Rabbi Siegfried Klein from Düsseldorf enjoyed great trust of his fellow countrymen. After his promotion to the rank of officer in 1916 he became one of 30 army rabbis (*Feldrabbiner*). That function appeared in the German army during World War I.³⁹ In 1919 he became

³⁷ The total number of deportees from Düsseldorf awarded with EK and VA amounted to 65, see *Düsseldorf/Getto Litmannstadt 1941*, ed. Angela Genger and Hildegard Jakobs (Essen: Klartext, 2010), 179–181.

³⁸ APŁ, PSŻ, 863, Statystyka: ludność, 1940–1942 [Statistics: Population, 1940–1942], p. 82.

³⁹ Rigg, *Hitler’s Jewish Soldiers*, 92. The best-known field rabbi was Leo Baeck, who was the Judenrat head in the Theresienstadt ghetto from December 1944 until the liberation on 8 May

a rabbi in Dusseldorf, which many years later was commemorated with a street that was named after him. He was deported to the ghetto in Łódź with his wife Lilli (he had sent his two children to England in 1938). He lived in the collective at Rybna Street No. 21 trying to organize the life of that community just as he had done in the Jewish community in Dusseldorf.⁴⁰ In February 1942 he even asked Rumkowski for permission to organize Sabbath suppers and liturgy for the collective members, which he wanted to head as a long-time rabbi of a Jewish community in Dusseldorf.⁴¹ He must have received that permission since on 9 May 1942 during the frantic period of deportations *Kronika* printed the following: "During the Saturday prayers in the Dusseldorf transport's collective Dr. Rabbi Klein delivered a sermon on the fate of our deported brothers."⁴²

Former 2nd Lt Dr. Walter Hirsch (attorney and notary public from Berlin and Iron Cross 2nd and 1st Class holder) began to work in the Order Service (Jewish police) right after he came to the ghetto. Hirsch arrived without any documents to prove his decorations. In the already mentioned letter of 1 October 1942 Rumkowski requested his certificates sent over. Two out of six of his children and his wife Kaete died of TB in the ghetto. The remaining members of the Hirsch family survived until the ghetto closure in August 1944 and probably died in Auschwitz-Birkenau.⁴³

Some physicians also managed to find work, for example Hugon Natanson,⁴⁴ who arrived from Prague but was originally from Hamburg. At first, he became head of an electromedical laboratory and then worked in an out-patients' clinic established in November 1942 and as a departmental physician.⁴⁵ He carried out research on the health of ghetto inhabitants in conditions of malnutrition, vitamin deficiency and starvation. The general results of that research were printed in *Kronika* on 19 March 1943.⁴⁶ In July 1944 Natanson was deported with his

1945 – *The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, ed. Guy Miron and Shlomit Shulhani (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009), vol. 2, 825.

⁴⁰ *Düsseldorf/Getto Litzmannstadt*, 123–126.

⁴¹ APŁ, PSŻ, 19, Wsiedlanie Żydów zagranicznych do getta łódzkiego 1941–VI 1942 [Deportation of Foreign Jews to the Łódź Ghetto 1941–June 1942], p. 151.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 159.

⁴³ *Żydzi berlińscy w Litzmannstadt Getto 1941–1944. Księga pamięci*, ed. Ingo Loose, trans. Maria Goldstein (Berlin: Stiftung Topographie des Terrors and Łódź: Archiwum Państwowe, 2009), 120–122.

⁴⁴ An entry in an encyclopedia written in the ghetto says that Natanson began to work as a rheumatologist in Odessa in 1937 from where he was deported as a German spy. See: APŁ, PSŻ, 1103, *Encyklopedia Getta* [Encyclopedia of the Ghetto] (around 1944), 178.

⁴⁵ After the closure of the hospitals in September 1942 two out-patients' clinics were created and 40 medical areas were established. Moreover, there was a doctor's office in each work detail with over 1,000 employees, see *Kronika*, vol. 2, 582.

⁴⁶ *Kronika*, vol. 3: 1943, 112–113. The initial version of the same text, signed by physical therapist Dr. Hugo Natanson is in the Łódź archive, cf. APŁ, PSŻ, 1093, *Opracowania dotyczące getta w Łodzi* [Reports on the Łódź Ghetto], 1939–1944, p. 55.

wife and daughter to the camp in Chełmno nad Nerem as the official physician of the seventh transport. Another war veteran and deportee Dr. Fritz Heine from Berlin was deported a few days earlier with the fifth transport.⁴⁷

Doctor Victor Aronstein from Berlin also began to work in the out-patients' clinic. His assistant of many years from Berlin, Lotta Korn, whom he married right after his arrival in the ghetto, was his co-worker. Aronstein was deported from the ghetto to Auschwitz in August 1944. Two accounts of his death have survived: according to one of them he died of TB two weeks before the liberation, while according to the other, he was forced to work at the crematorium ovens and was killed by the SS before the arrival of the Red Army.⁴⁸

Doctor Otto Wolfes from Cologne also had an opportunity to work in his profession. He was even appointed a specialist to the orthopedic station created in March 1944, which produced various orthopedic articles.⁴⁹

"Bank director" by profession, Robert Bullaty from Prague began to work as a bookkeeper in the Sorting Department on 4 September 1942. He died in July 1944 but his daughter Sonia Bullaty survived the ghetto and became a famous photographer after the war. Engineer Maks Buchholz from Berlin became the Construction Department head in July 1943. At least two war veterans – Mirtil Berman and Louis Mendel from Luxemburg – could utilize their military experience during their work in the anti-aircraft protection service.⁵⁰

In one of his articles Oskar Singer described the case of Edgar Fels, who kept trying to find work.

An attorney from Hamburg, Dr. F., has been trying to find a job since his arrival. A man in his fifties, former officer awarded the Iron Cross 1st and 2nd Class. [...] He is trying to find a job that matches his abilities, that is, he is trying to become a legal advisor of the displaced persons. [...] One day he finally gets the job or at least knows it will be his. Now he needs to wait. Will the future generations know what "a few days" without soup mean in the ghetto? When the thing finally works out the man is totally exhausted. He takes the office as a wreck of a person. Deportations begin. Doctor F. is assigned to work at the German Jews' deportation. He works in the Central Prison. Every day he drags himself there on his last legs. He is required to work at night too. One day he comes late to the office. His boss, former attorney, deprives him of soup as punishment. It is tanta-

⁴⁷ *Kronika*, vol. 4: 1944, pp. 403, 410. According to a testimony of Walter Piller, Chełmno nad Nerem camp commandant Hans Botmann's deputy, there had to be a physician or nurse in each transport that came to Łódź. Such persons were shot instead of being sent to undress before the gassing with the others. See: Yad Vashem Archive, 0-53/12, Relacja Waltera Pillera [Walter Piller's Testimony].

⁴⁸ *Żydzi berlińscy w Litzmannstadt Getto*, 97–98.

⁴⁹ *Kronika*, vol. 4, 172.

⁵⁰ APŁ, PSŻ, 1011, Karty meldunkowe 1939–1944 [Registration Forms 1939–1944], Letter B – p. 880, Letter M – p. 544.

mount to a death sentence – the heaviest sentence for being late. A man deprived of soup ceases to exist. Doctor F. lies lonely on the plank bed in his “apartment” with his limbs swollen and waits for death.⁵¹

Edgar Fels died on 22 May. According to his surviving petition for deportation exemption, Fels worked as a legal advisor of the “newly deported” (*Neueingesiedelte*) without remuneration, which he stressed.⁵² Of course, it does not contradict Singer’s statement that he worked at the deportation as help was surely needed during that period. Many of the surviving appeals were typewritten following the same pattern so they could have been written by Fels. It is impossible to say whether it was on purpose or by omission that his surname was omitted from the EK and VA holders’ list compiled on 14 June even though it included surnames of other people who died during that period.

The issue of the World War I German soldiers in the Łódź ghetto attracted my attention during the editing of *Kronika getta łódzkiego* forcing me to reflect on the perfidy of fate. It is surely not a subject for long scientific studies for it was just an episode in the eventful history of the ghetto in Łódź. The source materials I examined quite faithfully depict both the course of the event and the resulting activity of the Jewish ghetto administration and of those decorated themselves. It is surely very rich material with which to research the history of individual families. It is all the more precious if there is access to the surviving original personal documents of their male members who fought during World War I. It is also one of many examples of the functioning of the excessive bureaucracy in the ghetto. But the inside story of what happened outside the ghetto with regard to the Jewish war veterans is still unknown. The available source materials suggest only that the Gestapo was behind the exemption of the EK and VA holders from the May deportations. This is suggested both by the surviving correspondence and the general rule that all political matters in the Łódź ghetto fell within the authority of the Secrete State Police. It was common during the selections in the ghetto that people were divided into groups: some were given a chance to survive while others were not. The two most common criteria were: the ability to work and to help at the deportations. As far as is known that was the only time a certain group was exempted due to its members’ past military merit. It is difficult to specify the reasons for that decision. Did the Nazis want to create a desired atmosphere in the ghetto or were they motivated mostly by solidarity with their brothers-in-arms? To what extent did the special status of that group stem from scruples? Or was it a way to pacify those who perhaps intervened regarding the war veterans? Is so, then to what extent? During the Wannsee Conference the Nazis decided to deport all influential Jews including

⁵¹ Singer, “Przemierzając szybkim krokiem getto...” *Reportaże*, 32.

⁵² APŁ, PSŻ, 1292, Podania Żydów zagranicznych, odznaczonych wojskowymi orderami, o zwolnienie z wysiedlenia [Applications for Deportation Exemption of Foreign Jews Awarded with War Decorations], 1942, p. 352.

Iron Cross holders to the Theresienstadt ghetto in order to avoid interventions. That decision shows that at that stage of the war the Nazis did take public opinion into account to some extent even though they were just trying to keep up the appearances. Perhaps more information could be obtained through a search query in German war archives or through a comparative study of the situation of war veterans in the Łódź ghetto and in other destinations of the deportations of Western European Jews.

For me that episode, in which the Iron Cross knights played the main role, is chiefly another example of the paradoxicality and irrationality of the whole annihilation process. That moment, however, was undeniably important for the veterans themselves, for it was the last time they were treated as an entity and when they were important and special for some reason. Unfortunately, they did not avoid the fate of other Jews deported from Western European cities to the ghetto in Łódź. To reflect on their life it is enough to quote Albert Einstein's words after Fritz Haber's death – German Nobel Prize laureate of Jewish descent: "It was a tragedy of the German Jew, a tragedy of a spurned love."

Translated by *Anna Brzostowska*

Abstract

At the end of 1941 20,000 Jews were deported from Western Europe to the ghetto in Łódź. Among them there were a few hundred World War I veterans, many of whom were Iron Cross holders. The group was officially excluded from the deportations of Western European Jews to the Chełmno nad Nerem death camp in May 1942.

Key words

Łódź ghetto, deportations of Jews from Western Europe, Jews in the German army during World War I, military decorations