

From the Diary of Josef Zelkowicz on the Carpenters' Strike in the Lodz Ghetto

The Lodz ghetto was officially sealed on May 1, 1940. The brutal impoverishment of the ghetto inhabitants began that summer. Very few people were working, and most Jews no longer had a source of livelihood. Although the effects of starvation were being felt, people nonetheless had the strength to protest and demonstrate. In August and September 1940, demonstrations erupted against Rumkowski and his policies. The demonstrators demanded jobs and a more equitable distribution of food. To placate the angry ghetto residents, Rumkowski reorganized the welfare system. On September 20, 1940, he issued Notice 123, proclaiming monthly support for a hundred thousand ghetto inhabitants. That month, the German authorities approved a loan of three million Reichsmarks for the ghetto, making it possible to activate the support system. Many ghetto inmates applied for relief, including some who were not indigent. To stanch the corruption, Rumkowski sent inspectors to visit the applicants' homes. Among these inspectors were Ryva Bramson and the author Joseph Zelkowicz. The vignette that follows conveys Zelkowicz's impressions of what he observed in his visits to the ghetto dwellings.

After the ghetto was gripped with severe famine in the winter of 1941, Rumkowski [the head of the Judenrat] decided to increase the population's weekly bread rations and cut back on the special supplements that workers received. His notice to this effect caused much disgruntlement among the starving, exhausted workers, and on January 23, 1941, the carpenters decided to strike in protest. This chapter describes the strike. This action, the largest and most important strike against Rumkowski's policies, was abetted by political party activists, mostly on the Left. After the strike was quelled, the parties' influence in the ghetto began to wane. Although partial strikes erupted in several ressorts in subsequent years – as workers refused to accept their soup – their effect was marginal.

Recorded on January 23, 1941

Today, after [Rumkowski] had the ghetto population's bread rations increased and simultaneously abolished the extra bread ration for those who did physical labor, riots broke out at the carpentry ressort at 3 Urzednicza Street, with the carpenters walking off the job and occupying the factory building. In the resulting clash between police and workers, several on both sides were wounded and first aid was summoned in a few cases.

Recorded on January 24, 1941

Mr. Wolff Stiebl, at the carpentry at 3 Urzednicza Street where the aforementioned events occurred yesterday, and the policeman Mr. Levy Gliksman describe what happened:

The carpentry workers have been dissatisfied for quite some time. The origin of their dissatisfaction is that all workers in the carpentry are paid the same wage – 30 pfennigs per hour – whereas before the war a special professional committee had divided the carpentry trade into four categories: master luxury furniture makers, other master carpenters, apprentices, and trainees. Another reason is that when the ration cards were introduced, the carpenters were deprived of the soup they had been given once a day, finally also losing the extra bread that was supposed to compensate them for the lost soup. In view of all these factors, they presented four demands:

- 1) A wage increase of 20 pfennigs per hour for workers in the first two categories and 10 pfennigs per hour for those in the last two categories.
- 2) Since the cost of living is such that even this wage increase will not solve their food problem, they demand that half of their wages be given in the form of food.
- 3) Since the current method of food distribution does not allow them to perform the hard labor that their occupation requires, they demand reinstatement of the extra daily soup ration that they had received previously, in addition to the ration-card allocations.
- 4) They demand the continuance of the special bread supplements that they have received thus far.

The manager of the carpentry resort, Mr. B. Freund, was in contact with the President several times in respect to these demands. [Rumkowski] responded negatively to the last three demands but promised to take a favorable view of the first demand, subject to an audit by the NIK¹ determining that the carpentry enterprise generates at least a minimum of revenue.

Yesterday morning (January 23), the workers reported to the First Department of the carpentry resort at 12 Drukarska Street but did not go to work in the usual fashion. The resort manager, Mr. Freund, telephoned the President in this matter and was given the following instruction: "Whoever wishes to work can do so and whoever does not so wish may go home."

Mr. Freund apprised the workers of this decision. Apart from workers at the mechanics department (smiths, metalworkers, electricians, etc.) and the boilers department, the remaining workers, about two hundred in number, picked up their tools and went to the Second Department of the carpentry resort at 3 Urzednecza Street to discuss matters with the workers there.

The police detachment at the Second Department, which in the meantime had been ordered by the resort manager to bar the workers from the plant, stopped the arriving workers before they reached the gate. None of the workers disturbed the peace.

A short time later, the resort manager, Mr. Freund, arrived and had the workers brought in. Inside, he convened all the workers and informed them, in the name of the President, that their last three demands would be turned down but that the first one, concerning the wage increase, would be met, provided that the NIK audit ended well. After this announcement, he asked the workers to return to their jobs today, especially since the bread supplement was still being given that day. He gave them a little while to think it over. After the time ran out and they failed to reply, Freund said: "Since you gave me no reply, I assume that you wish neither to return to work nor to leave the plant building. Accordingly, I must tell the President about this and you will have to accept the consequences."

¹*Najwyższa Izba Kontroli*, the High Auditing Authority, the agency tasked with inspecting the operations and facilities of the ghetto institutions and all aspects of the ghetto population's public affairs.

Some time later, he went to the First Department to contact the President. He sent messengers from the First Department and, using them as go-betweens, asked the workers to leave the plant building so he would not have to call the police. When the workers disregarded his warning, he returned with a unit of policemen.

The policemen were commanded by the Chief of Police, Mr. Rosenblatt, and Inspector Frenkel. When they reached the premises of the resort, Commander Rosenblatt stayed outside with the police contingent and Inspector Frenkel entered and gave the workers five minutes to quietly leave the area that they had seized. Concurrently, Commander Rosenblatt ordered the policemen to lay down their rubber truncheons (the only weapons that the Jewish police carry) and to refrain from beating anyone. The workers on the ground floor (mostly elderly people) left the hall at once. The workers on the upper stories, however, disregarded the order. The police were therefore called in and instructed to remove the workers from the premises by force.

Since the main door to the first floor was blocked, the policemen had to move in through a rear entrance. When they reached the hall, they again ordered the workers to leave the building within five minutes. Some left, others threw tools and chunks of wood at the policemen. Thus, a clash broke out between the policemen and some of the workers.

After the ground floor was finally purged, the policemen climbed to the second floor. They found the entrance blocked inside and out. The outside obstruction was dismantled. The door was broken down and the policemen again met with active resistance from the workers, who threw poles and blocks of wood at them. But they managed to take control of the situation and clear out the building.

Several workers and policemen were injured in the course of the operation. In one case, first aid workers had to intervene and take a seriously injured worker home.

Source: Josef Zelkowicz, *In Those Terrible days. Notes from the Lodz Ghetto*, Yad Vashem 2002, pp. 205- 208.

