

From the Diary of Josef Zelkowicz on Evacuating the Hospitals 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.

Life in the Lodz ghetto underwent a crisis and a total transformation after deportations to the death camps began in January 1942. From that time on, life proceeded under the heavy shadow of deportation, fear, and uncertainty of what the morrow would bring and where the deportations were heading. Between January and May 1942, fifty-five thousand inhabitants were transported to the death camp in Chelmno. The second phase of the deportations began on September 1, 1942, with the evacuation of the hospitals, and continued from September 5 until September 12. The ghetto was placed under general curfew during that time. In the course of this grim *Aktion*, which the ghetto Jews called the *shpere* (an abbreviation of the German word *Gehsperre* – curfew), more than five hundred and seventy persons were murdered in the ghetto and more than fifteen thousand Jews,

mostly children and the elderly, were deported from the ghetto to the Chelmo death camp.

Tuesday, September 1, 1942

Emptying The Hospitals

The morning of the day marking the third anniversary of the war struck the ghetto like thunder from a clear blue sky. At 7:00 a.m., trucks pulled up at the ghetto hospitals on Lagiewnicka, Wesola, and Drewnowska Streets and the patients were loaded aboard. At first the purpose of this was not clear. Some time earlier, there had been talk about evacuating the hospital buildings; the ghetto could not afford the luxury of keeping sick people in buildings that could be used to house resserts. Some also said that the shacks being erected on Krawiecka Street would replace these hospital buildings and that the patients would be transferred to the new location. Therefore, when the trucks pulled up and the patients began to be loaded aboard, it was construed as an evacuation of the buildings and no one was unduly perturbed. However, several groups of curious onlookers had gathered in front of the hospital buildings and, for no particular reason, monitored the scene that unfolded on that clear morning. As these groups became larger and the Jewish police began to disperse them, the onlookers' eyes opened wide, their gaze froze, and puzzled questions poured forth from their hungry mouths:

– Why on earth are they using military trucks for the civilian needs of Jews?

– Why are they throwing patients into the trucks like hunks of unkosher meat?

– Where are they taking them? To what shacks? Construction of the shacks on Krawiecka Street is not yet finished...!

No one answered these questions and people felt their blood freeze in their veins.

The answer came on its own and descended on each onlooker like a blow to the head by a blunt instrument.

During the war, the Jewish hospitals had already been “evacuated” and emptied twice – first, the psychiatric ward at Poznanski Hospital¹ before the ghettoization in March 1940, and then the psychiatric hospital on Wesola Street on July 17, 1941. Since the ghetto inhabitants have heard nothing from the evacuees to this very day, it is no wonder that the gravity of the situation penetrated everyone’s consciousness in all its horror.

“They’re doing another purge...!” The ghetto has no room for people who have become ill and eat bread for no purpose. In the ghetto, only the able-bodied may live. Those incapable of working are thrown on the garbage heap . . .

The morning of the third anniversary of the war was flooded with tears that hardly cleansed the ghetto streets of their dust and mud.

One cannot know how and by what means the report – “They’re taking the patients out of the hospitals” – spread through the ghetto at the speed of light. A terrible devil’s dance began, in which all the participants were ghetto inhabitants who had someone in the hospital – a wife, a child, a father or mother, a relative, a benefactor . . .

They do not move along in the street, they run! Who has the strength and the time to run? No one. Nevertheless, they gallop. No one knows how they rush so. They can hardly stand up on their lacerated, distended legs . . . but now they run. A supernatural force shortens the path. Buildings and streets vanish – everyone, the entire ghetto, young and old, head in one direction . . .

Not to the food cooperative, not to the butcher shop, not to the sausage shop, not even to the potato yard. Today, the ghetto is mortally ill. Today, the ghetto knows only one destination – the hospital. Why are they running? They have to be there, to see their ailing relatives again; perhaps that will make their death easier for them and for us . . . Perhaps, too, it will be possible to rescue someone. But the streets around the hospitals and the entrances to the buildings are blocked. Hundreds of Jewish police are standing watch. The executioners can do their work in peace. No one will disturb them. The Jews’ wailing will hardly reach their ears. Wailing can penetrate only human hearts anyway. Crying and shouting would only motivate the beasts to be even more

¹A large Jewish hospital in pre-war Lodz, named for Yisrael Poznanski, the great Jewish industrialist and philanthropist.

bestial . . . The limbs of all the people who have congregated here are truly wounded; their legs are hunks of wood, immovable except when tugged by their owners' hands. People stumble. Their throats make strange, inhuman sounds; their eyes pour tears as if someone had hired them for this purpose. One cannot understand, cannot imagine, whence such a flood of tears emanates from these starving, exhausted, tortured people who can scarcely breathe . . .

All the patients in their beds – some with an arm or a leg in a cast, some so very frail, some with high fevers, and some unable even to move – are gripped by a terrible panic. They are being thrown onto the sidewalks like calves for slaughter. The ambulatory patients, too, are frantic – they try to rescue themselves, leap from the upper stories, scale the fences, hide in the cellars, disguise themselves as hospital staff, anything to stay alive . . .

In fact, many of those who managed to steady their nerves and maintain their equilibrium did survive, somehow.

Source: Josef Zelkowitz, *In Those Terrible days. Notes from the Lodz Ghetto*, Yad Vashem 2002, pp. 251- 254.