



## MICHAŁ ZYLBERBERG

On 1 July 1946 in Warsaw, prosecutor Z. Rudziewicz interviewed the person named below as a witness. Having been advised of the provisions of art. 106 of the Polish Code of Criminal Procedure, the witness testified as follows:

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<b>Name and surname</b>	Michał Zylberberg
<b>Date of birth</b>	29 February 1902
<b>Names of parents</b>	Abram and Hinda
<b>Place of residence</b>	Warsaw, Nieporęcka Street 14, flat 16
<b>Place of birth</b>	Płock
<b>Religious affiliation</b>	Jewish
<b>Occupation</b>	secretary general of the Organizing Committee of the Union of Jewish Religious Congregations
<b>Relationship to the parties</b>	none
<b>Criminal record</b>	none
<b>Education</b>	University of Warsaw

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I speak on behalf of the Organizing Committee of the Union of Jewish Religious Congregations in Poland.

During the war, I was headmaster of two vocational schools until the anti-Jewish operation of July 1942. I had contacts with people in top positions at the Jewish community and in religious circles. Thanks to this, I have information regarding the persecution of Jews in general, and of religious Jews in particular, the latter attracting more attention because of external features (e.g. clothes, beard).



In November 1939, I paid a visit to rabbi Kahance [Kahane?] in Warsaw. During my visit, Gestapo men burst into the flat, smashed things, took away valuables and money, beat up the rabbi and shaved half of his beard off to publicly humiliate him.

Cases of rabbis having their beards shaved off were frequent. The same month, as I was passing through Sochaczew, I witnessed how [...] Gestapo men ordered a group of orthodox Jews, along with a rabbi, to do physical exercises, during which they were beaten, ridiculed and ordered to perform dance figures, jumping, singing etc. This was done to humiliate religious Jews. The administrative authorities were aware of this because it happened in broad daylight, in the marketplace next to Kreish[...] office. Such events would recur throughout the entire district [...].

[...] in the religious life of the Jews, already in 1939 the administrative authorities ordered the closure of all synagogues. They were either blown up and looted (the synagogue on Tłomackie Street) or adapted to serve as storehouses, stables etc. In Warsaw, out of all the prayer houses, which numbered some 100, only one synagogue survived because it served German strategic purposes. In other towns in the district, not a single synagogue survived. Jewish cemeteries were also razed to the ground by the Germans. This was done by the German general administrative authorities.

The most significant decrees that hit the Jews, issued by Fischer and the authorities responsible to him, were announced on holidays of special religious importance. The decree concerning the creation of a ghetto in Warsaw was issued on the Day of Atonement in 1940; the decree concerning the deportation of Jews to the East and the first [...] of the operation of liquidating Jews (22 July 1942) were on the day of [...] Tisha B'Av – the anniversary of the loss of state independence in Jerusalem. On the Day of Atonement in 1942, SS Polizei issued a decree according to which Jews in the so-called *szopy* (German factories in the ghetto employing Jewish laborers) had to themselves make a selection of people to be eliminated as unfit for work. This offended the Jews' most important religious feelings.

Fischer was particularly zealous when it came to persecuting the Jews. He issued the following orders:

1. The obligation for Jewish residents to wear armbands; this decree was issued in the Warsaw district earlier than in other districts of the General Government and applied



even to children aged 10 – if I remember correctly, Frank's regulation stipulated a higher age threshold.

2. The requisitioning of valuables and property, the freezing of bank accounts, a ban on practicing the liberal professions. That way, Jews were deprived of the possibility of providing for themselves.

3. The German authorities in the district imposed contributions on the Jews and arrested those responsible for collecting them. I know of two such cases in Warsaw from high-ranking officials of the Judenrat. In November 1939, the Gestapo demanded a contribution of 300,000 zlotys from the Judenrat in exchange for 54 Jews arrested on Nalewki Street; the money was paid on time but the detainees were executed. I myself saw their graves in the Bródno cemetery. The other case happened the same month. The Gestapo demanded a contribution of 100,000 zlotys for a Jew arrested on charges of insulting a German woman. The money was paid, but the Jew was not released. Fisher, as the Gestapo's superior authority, is directly responsible for contributions.

4. The creation of a ghetto in Warsaw before the issuing of such orders for Krakow. As regards the creation of the ghetto, let me emphasize that the German authorities knowingly and falsely assured Jews that Jewish workshops and shops located in the Aryan district would not be affected by the relocation orders. The day the ghetto was closed, Jews were deprived of their workshops located outside the Jewish quarter and lost all of their property outside the ghetto. Let me emphasize that in spite of the decree regarding the requisition of property, some Jews retained their workshops and shops.

After the ghetto was set up, the Germans did not stop violating the religious feelings of Jews. Because of the typhus epidemic and hunger, mortality in the ghetto increased significantly. There were up to 900 corpses every day. Groups of Gestapo men would arrive at the cemetery to mock the deceased. I witnessed one such scene in 1941. A group of Gestapo men arrived at the cemetery. They ordered that the bodies be assembled to form certain shapes and photographed them; they kicked the bodies with their feet, throwing them all over the place; during the funeral, they laughed at the graveside and ridiculed the religious practices; all this was done in the presence of the family of the deceased. In light of the fact that such situations recurred frequently, and because they involved large groups



of Germans (100 – 200 persons), it is inconceivable to me that Fischer could have been unaware of such practices and opposed them.

In order to vilify Jews all over the world, the Germans made a film called *Asia in [Central] Europe*. It was shot in the Warsaw ghetto. At that time, I was headmaster of the vocational school at Nowolipki Street 35, which was managed in exemplary fashion. In the spring of 1942, two army officers and one civilian came to the school. They told us get the children and staff to come elegantly dressed the next day. Each child was supposed to have a lavish breakfast (we were told that the children should bring oranges) and on the next day, lectures, recreation and [...] were filmed at the school.

I also saw other scenes being filmed, and so a funeral procession with a cantor in religious attire, people enjoying themselves at a restaurant, shops whose windows were purposely packed full of sophisticated [products?]. At the order of the filmmakers, the merchants were supposed to wear appropriate clothes and makeup and [...] the extras. The whole film underlined the contrast between abject poverty and wealth in the ghetto; it was intended to arouse disgust for everything Jewish and everything related to the Jewish religious and national traditions.

Since entering the Jewish quarter was only possible with a *Transferstelle* pass, the film was made with the consent and knowledge of the district's administrative authorities and Fischer, quite possibly at his own initiative.

In the ghetto, the Germans often organized round-ups for [...] and those targeted in particular were religious Jews, who stood out by virtue of appearance.

Work-related issues were dealt with by the *Arbeitsamt* for Jews. In spring 1942, the *Arbeitsamt* issued an order which obliged those classified as unfit for work and sick to register. When a group of a couple hundred people was gathered, they were taken a few dozen kilometers outside of Warsaw and murdered. I learned of the details from Ms. Żychlin, my relative (deceased), whose husband, who had a lung condition, was in that group.

On 22 July 1942, the forced deportation of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto commenced. The aim of this operation was to exterminate the Jews in Warsaw, the area with the largest concentration of Jews in Europe (550,000 people), but the insidious German authorities



announced that the Jews would be deported to the East, to labor camps. In order to substantiate this story, the elderly were removed from a transport at the reloading site and murdered in the cemetery over dug graves. I know this from the cemetery superintendent, Fain (deceased), and from a gravedigger, whose name I do not remember. People would thus explain to themselves that those being deported were indeed earmarked for work, since those unfit for work were being killed.

I was present during the deportation operation in the ghetto.

At the beginning of August 1942, I lived at Chłodna Street 17. Expecting that the house would be locked down, almost all the residents hid in a walled-up basement. Hiding there, I heard the Germans running around the house, calling for the concierge, in vain, and then I heard shots. When it got quiet, we left the hideout and spotted a dozen or so corpses. The Germans murdered everybody they had found in the house; men were murdered with a shot in the temple and women in the underbelly. Kramsztyk, the painter, was murdered at that time.

Another lockdown happened on Zamenhofa Street. I was home that evening. That day, the set quota of 8,000 people had already been deported from the ghetto. Even so, SS-men stormed the houses on Zamenhofa Street and took everybody, women naked and [...] and almost everybody was rushed to the wagons on Niska Street. On the way there, the sick who could not keep up with the healthy were killed. I managed to escape from this group.

In September 1942, there was a selection of all Jews still left in the ghetto. At that time, I was working in the Hoffman *szop*. All the workers of this *szop*, together with their families, were rushed to Libelta Square. We stood in the scorching heat for half a day, without a single drop of water. Finally, Brandt, an officer with the Warsaw Gestapo, whom I knew by sight, arrived and picked out 500 people from the 3000-strong group, while the rest were directed to the reloading site. In Libelta Square, next to us, was a group of women, men and children who had no proof of employment. All of them were murdered on site, shot with a revolver. Since the operation was headed by Brandt, a member of the Warsaw Gestapo, I believe that the [...] German authorities were aware of the operation.

I remained in the ghetto until spring 1943. Three days before the uprising broke out, I made it to the Aryan side. Living in the Old Town, I could see the ghetto being destroyed, blocks blown up and houses burnt. This continued from May 1943 to June 1944. After the uprising



in the ghetto was suppressed, the German Gendarmerie, SS Polizei and Gestapo remained in the outer perimeter of the district and, from what I could see, directed the operation of destroying houses, looting property and executing Jews up until the Warsaw Uprising.

During the Warsaw Uprising, insurgents from the Old Town stormed the ghetto and found a labor camp for Hungarian Jews there. I spoke with them and they told me that for an entire year after the [ghetto] uprising had been suppressed, executions of Jews and Poles had continued in the area. These executions were carried out by the German Gendarmerie.

When living in the Aryan district, I came into contact with different social strata of Polish society and I can say that the Germans continued their anti-Jewish hate propaganda. In May 1943, Fischer issued a decree imposing the death penalty on Poles who sheltered Jews. *Nowy Kurier Warszawski* newspaper was a platform for constant anti-Jewish propaganda, for which the district authorities are responsible. I personally saw illustrated brochures in Polish, talking about old [Jewish] ritual murders in Blois, Fulda etc.; the illustrations depicted the most appalling scenes from the Middle Ages. They were handed out for free to workers of German factories. Executions of Jews from the Aryan district were carried out publicly, without a court sentence; they were performed by gendarmes. I saw such executions in Skolimów and Chylice near Warsaw.

As a result of the German authorities' criminal activity, nearly the entire Jewish community of Warsaw perished. The Jewish conservative faction was completely purged; for instance, the union of conservative rabbis in Warsaw used to be 350-strong; not a single one of them has survived. Not a single child attending a religious school in Warsaw – there used to be eight such institutions – has survived. 25 progressive rabbis, themselves a separate union, were also murdered, including e.g. the world-famous Rabbi Nissenbaum, Rabbi Zemba – called [...].