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Das mehrsprachige Webportal publiziert fortlaufend Informationen zur historisch-politischen Bildung in Schulen, Gedenkstätten und anderen Einrichtungen zur Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts. Schwerpunkte bilden der Nationalsozialismus, der Zweite Weltkrieg sowie die Folgegeschichte in den Ländern Europas bis zu den politischen Umbrüchen 1989.

Dabei nimmt es Bildungsangebote in den Fokus, die einen Gegenwartsbezug der Geschichte herausstellen und bietet einen Erfahrungsaustausch über historisch-politische Bildung in Europa an.

Account of Szymon Bartnowski

The disaster started on 27 June 1941 when the Nazis marched into Białystok. At 8 o'clock in the morning, the Germans started their hunt for Jews with machine guns and grenades. Terrible scenes took place in the narrow winding streets of the Jewish quarter. They pulled the Jews – adults and children alike – out of the houses, stood them against the wall and shot them. Another group was led in the direction of the burning synagogue from where the piercing screams of people being burned alive could be heard. The Nazis ordered some of the wretched people to push others into the burning synagogue. Those who resisted were shot, the dead bodies thrown into the interior of the building. A sea of flames stretched from the neighbouring streets to the Kościuszko Market. The thunder of exploding hand grenades, mixed with the sound of machine gun fire, the bawling of the drunken fascists and the screams of the murdered Jews, could be heard into the night.

This barbarous crime shook the Jewish population and evoked fear and despair in the surrounding population. However, this was but the beginning of the unspeakable suffering and maltreatment the Białystok Jews had to endure.

The first hunt for people in the streets took place in the beginning of July. About 300 Jews, most of them intellectuals, were deported from the town. A bigger raid followed a couple of days later when about 4,000 men and boys were led out of the town and shot at Pietraszy. Beginning from August 1, all Jews were locked into the ghetto; leaving its boundaries meant death.

Mass murder, loss of human dignity, humiliation and robbery were used to scare the suppressed Jews and cause the greatest possible mental paralysis. It has to be said that these consequences really occurred: most people, especially those of the older generation, submitted to their fate, they waited for their annihilation or a wonderful salvation without a will of their own. The young people were the first to come to their senses again. Already in autumn, a resistance group was getting organised in the ghetto, ready to take up the fight with the occupants. They got into contact with the camp for Soviet prisoners of war at the barracks of the Xth Ulane regiment, supplied them with food and medicine and information from the front. Fighting spirit started to grow, new circles kept forming independently and co-operated in the organisation of an anti-fascist committee. They started to smuggle weapons which were either stolen from German stores or produced by themselves. Explosives, acids, knuckle rings and knives were stored at the houses of trustworthy persons.

In November 1942, the "dissolution" of the ghettos in the small neighbouring towns began. The Jews were brought to camps at Kielbasino, Boguszewo and Zambrów, and then further on... Within few months, 130,000 Jews from the Vojevodstvo were deported to Treblinka and killed there. The terrible news reached Białystok with those few Jews who did not report at the prescribed collection points and now found shelter at the ghetto as long as it existed.

The threat of annihilation hung over the town. Some informed members of the Jewish Council knew that the Białystok Gestapo, who had got the news from Treblinka that gas chambers and crematoriums were ready, were planning to "dissolve" the ghetto. The news got into the streets and caused terrible desperation. The life in the ghetto began to die.

In the night of February 4 [1943] the Jewish Council told its employees, who had been issued with fake official certificates, to seek shelter at the factories together with their families, for the Germans had demanded the handing over of all 6,000 non-working Jews. When the Nazis appeared in the ghetto, the chairman of the Jewish Council, engineer Baraś, accompanied them to the houses of those non-employed Jews, and he himself read the names of those condemned to death from a list. The Jewish police helped the Nazis by showing them the hiding places, while the scum of Jewish society robbed the apartments of those condemned [to death].

However, the self-defence strategy that had been prepared failed. Some of the leaders lost their heads and did not call the youth groups who had obviously been waiting in their hideouts for the order to put up armed resistance.

There were some isolated, uncoordinated cases of resistance. At the ulica Kupiecka [Merchant Street] 29, Icchok Malmed poured acid over a group of SS-men; one of them lost his eyesight instantly, the other one, having received severe burns, killed his comrade in the ensuing racket. The infuriated Nazis pulled 100 men, women and children from the house and shot them on the spot. They threatened to shoot 5,000 more Jews if Malmed did not surrender within the following six hours. Malmed gave himself up and was hanged after being tortured at the entrance of house no. 29 at the ulica Kupiecka.

At the ulica Ciepła [Warm Street], two young women – Fryda and Bluma – threw hand grenades on the Germans and died immediately after the assault. A group of 20 youths opened fire on the Germans at the ulica Smolna [Pechstraße], but they suffered high losses.

Such incidents of armed resistance occurred throughout the week from February 5 to February 12. Many young people who saw no way for the fight to succeed, left their families behind and fled from the ghetto into the woods to join partisan groups who had their headquarters in the east of the Vojevodstvo.

The February operation claimed 15,000 lives, 2,000 victims were killed on the spot, while the others were loaded into trains heading for Treblinka, the place of their final extermination.

The insight that our resistance had failed because our forces were divided and without joint leadership, led to the joining together of all the different groups that we young people had organised into the Anti-Fascist Fighting Block. It was led by Daniel Moszkowicz and Mordechaj Tenenbaum.

But before the newly unified organisation had had time to get organised, its leadership, which was meeting in the night of August 15, received the news that the Germans were planning to finally liquidate the ghetto. Towards morning, SS-units closed the ghetto gate and moved into the factory grounds. In the morning, they put up posters announcing the evacuation of the ghetto. Everybody was ordered to leave their houses and gather at the ulica Jurowiecka and the neighbouring streets.

The combat groups of the Jewish youth moved from the deserted quarters to the direction of ulica Ciepła, Smolna, Nowogródzka and Górna. The leadership had planned to break through the fence surrounding the ghetto. The civilians were to disperse into the grounds while the combat groups were to fight their way through to the woods and join the partisan units there.

The shooting started at 10 o'clock. There were volleys from heavy machine guns and single shots. The ghetto fighters had attacked the patrols guarding the ghetto fence. The Nazis, taken by surprise, did not withstand the attack and retired. Seeing the dead bodies of Germans and conquering their weapons gave the fighters new courage. More and more young people appeared on the scene, armed with steel pipes, stones and knives. There was fighting man against man for the fence. However, after a moment of surprise, the Germans quickly regained control over the situation. Heavy machine guns positioned in houses and factories around the ghetto caused heavy losses among the fighters. The assault on the fence was beaten back.

An air force wing appeared over the burning ghetto, firing at fighters and civilians. It was an unequal fight. About 300 badly equipped youths fought against 3,000 SS-men armed with modern automatic weapons. The ulica Nowogródzka and Smolna were covered with dead bodies. The insurgents ran out of ammunition. A group at the ulica Nowogródzka, attacked by two SS-columns from the ulica Ciepła i Poleska, kept up resistance for the longest time. The attacks were fended off, dead Nazis remained in the street. The Germans, infuriated by the prolonged fight, had tanks move into the ghetto. One of them hit a mine in a drain gutter at the corner of ulica Kupiecka and ulica Ciepła. As a consequence of the explosion, the tanks had to be redirected. The Germans deployed fresh infantry troops. Seventy-two surrounded fighters withdrew into a bomb shelter at the ulica Ciepła 7. However, they were discovered and mowed down by machine gun fire. A last group of fighters escaped through a tunnel dug under the fence into the woods to join the partisans. The leaders of the rebellion, seeing no way out, committed suicide.