

EHRI Online Course in Holocaust Studies
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Ghettos under Nazi Rule – Jewish Administration
Translation: B03 A Conversation with a Member of the Jewish Police

“Contents of a Conversation with a member of the order police”, AR I/PH/23-3-2, in: Kermish, Joseph (Hg.): To live with honor and die with honor. Selected documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives “O.S.” [“Oneg Shabbath”], Yad Vashem - Jerusalem 1986, S. 310-317.

Contents of a conversation with a member of the Order Police

The person engaged in conversation with me is a young man of twenty-odd years, Mr. G., a functionary of the Order Police. He returned to Warsaw from a POW camp in 1940, without any occupation or job and without means of making a living. At that time the Jewish Council, in connection with the establishment of the Ghetto, was organizing the Order Service Corps, and hence he took steps to be accepted into its ranks, in hope of getting steady payment. However, already during the first formal steps he was handed a declaration to sign, stating he was undertaking to serve voluntarily and without any remuneration. In spite of it, whoever entered the Order Police counted on obtaining a salary sometime in the near future. At first, soon after the first organizational steps were taken, there was no division into regional groups, as it is at present. Everything was centered in one building, on Prosta Street 12. Men were divided into platoons. These first days were spent on order-drills under instructors drawn from among military veterans, and on theoretical lectures. The latter were given by a one-time sergeant in the Polish Police, a baptized Jew, named Prusak. There were five or six of these lectures and, my partner states, they were of no use as far as the Order Policemen (OP) were concerned. This because the lectures dealt with criminology, a subject with which the OP had nothing, or only very little, to do. The command cadres of the OP were mainly composed of former policemen or military. Thus, Szerynski used to be a colonel in the Polish police, and Lederman, the lawyer, used to lecture on law in a police training school, while Schoenbach was a major in the army, and so on.

Past military records of the man was the decisive factor when awarding advancement. If one was a lieutenant in the Polish Army, he would be given a star in the OP as well, but in this respect there were numerous abuses. Many cases were decided by pull.

The first employment given to the OP was gate-keeping at the crossings and outlets from the newly-closed Jewish Quarter. Mr. G's first duty was at the corner of Chłodna and Żelazna Streets, a scene of most gruesome events. Since this was the only passage between the northern and the southern parts of the Quarter, traffic was very hectic there, and gendarmes found all kinds of opportunities to torment passing Jews. It was the rainy season, and Jews were forced to dance in the puddles, pull their hats in front of a gendarme, do

callisthenics, while the Germans kept hitting them in a most painful manner and forcing them to cross the street at a sprint. In those days crossing Chłodna was an ordeal for Jews, many of whom lost their health, limbs or lives. The OP on duty there used to remind Jews about raising hats, urged them to cross Chłodna as fast as possible, and also directed traffic.

A turn of duty at the outlet lasted a whole day, 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. without a break. This used to be hard duty, for the OP had to witness painful scenes all day, as the gendarmes made free game of Jews. Once, at half-past-six in the evening (duty lasted – it will be remembered – until 8), one of the gendarmes came up to the OP and asked to know what it they were doing here. When they answered that they were on duty, he retorted angrily that all they did was to warn Jews to bare their heads so he should not find no reason for beating them, and he ordered the OP to clear out right away.

To the present day there is no salary for the OP. They only get irregularly and at no fixed times a kind of subvention, an average 50 to 80 złotych a month. Some, however, get no subvention at all, or only less than anyone else. This pertains to people known by the commanders to have some means or to be making some money. The subvention, at any rate, cannot secure any living at all, so the greatest majority must rely on other sources. The main, and oldest way of making some money is smuggling.

Smuggling began as as [sic!] soon as the Ghetto was closed off. At first it was not as organized as at present, and its character used to be much different. Late in 1940 and in early '41 it looked like this: When one wished to pass a cart with foodstuff through a gate-keeper's post into the Ghetto, the Jewish OP would step up to the gendarme and tell him the produce is destined for a hospital, or a refugee dormitory, and request that he let it pass. Initially the OP used to do it with the best of intentions, and gendarmes consented, having confidence in the OP most of the time. A short time later, however, a few clever boys in the OP recognized this to be, after all, nothing but smuggling. Smelling revenue, they started collecting from the smugglers. In those early times the gendarmes knew nothing about smuggling and, at the request of an OP they consented from time to time to pass a cart with produce. Thus for instance Mr. G., obtained from the Joint a certificate authorizing him to transport into the Ghetto produce destined for that institution, and on the strength of that document he succeeded then in passing a number of carts into the Ghetto. Polish Police was helpful in this as well, although they were taking pay for it. However, they used to check the cart and let it pass. But time came when the gendarmes too got wind of the smuggling. Some used to combat it rigidly, other pretended not to see.

Mr. G. tells me in what way he made his first larger sum out of it. He stood duty in a heavy rain at the outlet at Twarda corner Żelazna on that day, wearing light, thoroughly soaked shoes. A gendarme came up to him and asked why he did not wear decent high boots. G. Answered he did not have the money to buy them but, if the gendarme would let him, he might make the money right here to-day. The gendarem replied that if this is so, he won't see anything this time. So G. Made over one-hundreded złotych.

The gendarmes started taking their share of the earnings from smuggling. It is significant that they never agreed to any money-business with Polish police, only with Jews.

It began with a gendarme turning to a Jewish OP saying, he wished to get a bottle of whiskey, or a bar of chocolate, or possibly a cake of soap. If the OP was clever enough, he would reply that he had no money for it, but may make it if the gendarme permits the passage into the Ghetto of a cart with potatoes, or with flour or any other food. Such earning was well suited to the taste of gendarmes, and some took to paying their officers for assignment to a good post where smuggling was extensive. Early in 1942 the gendarmerie were switched. The old company was sent to the frontline as a punishment for having tolerated smuggling, and a new one came to Warsaw. Only a small number of individuals remained from the old set, to instruct the newcomers in their tasks and induct them into their duties. Now these older instructors used to come to the outlets as often as they could, to personally check the carts of the smugglers and let them pass for money.

There are also gendarmes who permit food to pass into the Ghetto without taking anything for it. No one knows whether this is due to the character of the particular gendarme, or to his mental make-up and belief, the important fact is that some look the other way and do not obstruct it. On infrequent occasions only, they might turn to an OP asking for a "loan" of a hundred zlotys. It is mostly children who first find out such a "good" gendarme. They would stand for a long time close to an outlet and observe him and, sensing an opportune moment, would cross to the other side and bring food back into the Ghetto.

A smuggler, who would like to bring in a cart with foodstuff, turns first to a Jewish policeman and fixes his business with him. The policeman agrees with him upon the hour and on a fixed signal. Then the smuggler would ring the Aryan side and tell the supplier to send the cart. At the fixed signal the cart would approach, a Polish policeman would check it and a gendarme would let it pass. Some OP have "their own" gendarmes with whom they keep contact. These OP are called "players". They would agree with the gendarme on the smuggling to be passed, and would settle the accounts with him. The average pay for a cart, usually of 2,000 kilo, is 400 zlotys. Of this amount, the Polish policeman – usually two of them at a post – would get 100 zlotys; the gendarme would have another 100 zlotys; the remaining 200 zlotys are paid by the "player" to the OP men on duty at the outlet. There would usually be a group of eight, who would get 85 zlotys, while his own share would be 115 zlotys. It should be noted that the "player" must often bear unexpected and rather high expenses, for it is up to him to pay off the commander of the Polish police who frequently appears at the check-point; sometimes it happens that the "player" gets arrested, and his release costs a heavy sum. On some very rare occasions, gendarmes work on passage of smuggled material with Polish police and shun the OP, for, as said, they generally prefer to settle business with Jewish OP.

Sometimes, special gendarmes would be sent for duty at outlets, instructed to ferret out and destroy smuggling. In one such case, an agreement had been reached with a German to pass several carts coming in a row containing smuggled material. He did indeed pass first a few but stopped all the rest, confiscated the goods worth tens of thousands of zlotys and arrested the cartsmen. Another gendarme smelled out the existence of a large, well organized band and tracked all of them. He agreed with an OP to allow the smuggling,

but have all the carts pass at one time. He prepared to liquidate the entire band and to catch a lot of merchandise. He nearly succeeded, but not quite. At the last moment the OP people sensed the trap and did not issue the signal for the carts to come.

These instances prove that there is not one yardstick for all gendarmes, for among them, as in other groups, there are also quite different people. There for instance was recently a case at the outlet on Muranowska Street. The gendarme there was approached by a young boy in shabby clothes with a request to let him pass to the guardhouse on Konwiktorska on urgent business, for he must tell something to the Zugfuehrer there, and had been told to come now. He refused to tell the gendarme what it was that he must tell the Zugfuehrer, but insisted on seeing him. At long last the gendarme let him through. Some time later the boy returned carrying a loaf of bread. The gendarme stopped him again and asked about that business he had with the Zugfuehrer. Now the boy declared freely that he went to report on reliable and clear information that a certain hour a large transport of smuggled goods was to pass at an outlet manned by certain gate-keepers. He added, that if the gendarme let him pass through this outlet, he could bring similar information quite regularly. The gendarme listened quietly, told the boy to enter the sentry-hut, and sent an OP for some other gendarme. When that other gendarme came, the two of them entered the hut, and for some time cries and screams of the boy were heard from it. Then, the gendarme passed the boy into the hands of the several OP there, told them the story and said that for such a deed it is fitting that they, not he, should finish him off.

OP on duty at an outlet are to stand a distance of 50 meters from the gate, according to instructions. There are, indeed, gendarmes who would not let OP approach closer and who have no dealings or conversation with them, while others talk to them freely. In conversations, the gendarmes would usually ask about the situation in the Ghetto, they are curious to know about the living conditions of the Jewish population in it, about occupations, earnings, very frequently raising questions how Jews managed to live and on what. There are some who would at times speak of the political situation and even discuss their own worries and problems, complain about being so far away from their families and deprived of any contact with them. Noteworthy is the difference between their conversations with Jews and with Polish policemen. The talks with Jews are much more serious and there is more content in them. With Polish police the gendarme would make a joke from time to time; he would run to the OP inquiring if there is some cart that will pass now.

As late as November 1941, there was a meeting place in a café on Nowiniarska Street for smugglers and OP people. Every smuggler knew its telephone number, 11-33-00. They could keep contact on this phone, could speak to an OP and arrange deals with a "player".

There is also another kind of smuggling, apart from the large-scale one which goes through holes broken in walls. This other kind deals mostly with flour, or wheat in sacks, as well as with smuggling people who wish to go to the other side. Here the principal leadership is in the hands of porters. The OP people as well as the Polish policemen, whose duty is on the beat there, get some five or ten zlotys per sack or per head. Careful note must be taken of a point of difference: while at an outlet the entire responsibility lies on the

gendarme, at the walls a tremendous responsibility devolves upon the OP man, who takes a heavy risk of a German driving by any moment who might notice the smuggling. The instructions given to the Jewish police in this regard are extremely strict, and quite recently, late in April 1942, an order was issued to the OP by the Commissary for the Jewish Quarter, stating that the penalty for facilitating smuggling is, at best, three months of penal service in the Treblinka camp.

The earnings from smuggling cannot provide a livelihood for all of the OP. Take, for instance, Region Nr.4, on Gęsia Street 4. It will be seen that its area covers three outlets, and each OP gets duty at an outlet a maximum of four times a month. It may well happen, that on that day the Jewish policeman makes no money at all. Apart from this, the OP of that region stand duty along the walls on Świętojerska, Nowolipki, Stawki, Przebieg and Pokorna Streets. Some smuggling goes on there at times, but earnings are minimal. They have also foot patrol duties in the town. This situation prevents many of the OP from earning anything, and there were also people who, motivated by their outlook or conscience did not wish to earn by unethical means. As said: There were some of this kind who left the O.P. Such a one was a man from the kibbutz on Dzielna. But there are some OP who are helpless, or whp lack the necessary courage or wit, and are therefore unable to properly seize opportunities.

New possibilities of earning opened up some months ago. A number of OP found employment in the workplaces which produce for the Germans, so-called `shops, where they do supervisory work. They get 15 złotys per day, two soups and a quarter kilo bread. Many of the OP were more than eager to get accepted. Another way of earning is working as an instructor's helper. In principle, the OP does not deal with quarrels, thefts and the like. The OP (on ascertaining such facts) is supposed to pass them on to the Polish police for handling it. However, in each region a special position with a title of "instructor" has been created, whose job it is, in cases of that sort, to make an initial investigation before the case is transferred with a report to the Polish police. In many cases, Jews greatly fear such transfer to the Polish police. Since, however, there is, at present, no court to hear cases of this sort, Jews frequently turn to such an "instructor", who is – and this is significant – an experienced lawyer, requesting him to settle the issue between the parties along the lines of *Din Torah*, a Jewish ecclesiastical tribunal. In such a case the parties are hauled from their homes and brought over to the regional command if they are unwilling to come on their own. An "instructor" has three assistants from among the OP, and these carry out his errands and mediate between the populace and the "instructor". The crafty among the OP manage in general to get from the parties to a *Din Torah* a certain fee for taking care of the conduct of their case; these moneys are shared with the "instructor". Moreover, a certain type of permanent intermediary between the "instructor" and the populace has sprung up, one who collects the pay from people in an elegant and practiced way, he does quite well, and both he and the "instructor" are happy. Things developed to the point that an "instructor" would see to it that one certain OP man, a person well versed in this business, was assigned to act as his helper on a constant, fixed basis.

In April, 1941, the OP participated in collecting the men who were to be placed in labor camps. Initially, the OP would get a list of names, with the proviso that should the person not be found at home, another man could be taken instead. Many sensed here the opening for extortion. Some OP took great pains to be assigned to this work, - these were mostly moneyed men but of a low moral standard. Others felt a loathing and tried as best they could, going a long way to avoid it. The way the extortion worked was as follows: the OP would enter homes of rich people and demand a heavy bribe for not taking the men. If the man was listed by name, the OP would demand 50 or 100 zlotys for leaving him at home. The OP command tried to combat bribery, firing many policemen, and deporting two to a camp. In order to make bribing impossible, the command used to send to the same man several times in one night in order to determine whether he was really absent or had been left there for a bribe.

A special job is that of the Anti-Epidemic Society. Where a house is being disinfected, it is to make sure that all inhabitants are led to the bath, and the entry to the house is blocked; that is, no person may go in or leave. Last year, 1941, OP made good money by taking sums of between one and five zlotys for letting a person in or out, the price depending on the means of the inhabitants. By now, due to the curtailment of sanitary actions, these earnings have dwindled. The people in charge of the Anti-Epidemic action were also making good money by warning a house in advance of a steaming to be done next day. This enabled the inhabitants to remove their bedding of linen and the like.

Much money is earned by the OP in charge of a circuit. These are mostly lawyers and attorneys, and, depending on their energy or cleverness, they collect fixed pay-offs of various amounts from several shops and stores. The shopkeepers are forced to pay such tribute, or to suffer assorted persecutions by the circuit OP in charge. Such persecutions are at his disposal at every step, when the store is open a bit after seven p.m., when goods baked with white flour or sugar or butter are being sold, and what not.

There was recently a dispute between a circuit-man and a private OP. The issue was this: Flour was being smuggled at night through the wall on Bonifraterska Street, and was being stored in the house Nr. 21 on Franciszkńska. The circuit-man of that area demanded that the smugglers pay nothing to the OP but, instead, settle with him, for after all it was his domain. The circuit man won at length, but the OP got his share as well. In richer circuits, the circuit men make very good money.

The OP undertook to care for children and organized a number of points for the benefit of the children on the street. The means for this come through issuing demands to better situated Jews, and if these won't pay voluntarily, they are sent for and kept in the regional command as long as it takes to make them pay whatever is demanded.

A number of agreements have been made with bakers, who had to promise to supply the OP men with their produce at reduced prices. They have not kept strictly to this agreement for some time now. They are not afraid of the OP any more, having been forced to pay off the Polish police. But still they do supply from time to time some quantity at

reduced price. But still they do supply from time to time some quantity at reduced price, and this goes to the region commander and to the office.

The OP reports weekly to the Gestapo on its activities. The contact man between the OP and Gestapo is Erlich, who has a pass and crosses to the Aryan side daily. Higher-ranking functionaries, starting with deputy-circuit-commander, receive a steady minimum salary of 300 zlotys per month. Apart from this, OP men are under an honorary obligation to hand over to their immediate superior 20 per cent of their earnings. There exist by now some specific expressions used by the OP for certain things. Thus, "a mat" means a location where smuggled goods are stored. A "player" is an OP man who settles contraband issues with the gendarmes. "Lard" is the 20 per cent paid to a superior, and "deal" means the share of an OP man in earnings, and so on.

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Translated by Paul Bowman