

Judenrat (Jewish Councils in Charge of Ghettos)

Minutes of a meeting of the Jewish Council in Vilna in October 1942 reflect the tremendous burden and unthinkable choices that were forced on these councils. Jacob Gens, head of the Vilna council, reported to his fellow council members on what happened when he was ordered to reduce the population of the nearby ghetto of Oszmiana:

Gens: Gentlemen, I asked you to come here today in order to relate to you one of the most terrible tragedies in the life of Jews—when Jews led Jews to their death. Once more I have to speak openly to you.

A week ago Weiss of the SD [an official from the Nazi security police] came to us in the name of the SD with an order that we were to travel to the Oszmiana. There were about 4,000 Jews in the Oszmiana ghetto and it was not possible to keep so many persons there. For that reason the ghetto would have to be made smaller—by picking out the people who did not suit the Germans, to take them away and shoot them. The first to go should be children and women whose husbands were taken away last year by the “snatchers.” The next to be taken would be women and families with a large number of children. When we received this order we replied: “At your command.”

Mr. Dessler [another member of the Jewish Council] and Jewish Police went to Oszmiana. After two or three days the Jewish Police observed. . . . that, first of all, the women whose men had been taken away last year were now working and could not be taken away, and, secondly, that there were no families with 4 or 5 children. The largest were families of two children. There were only a few [families] with three children. So that would also not work. (I forgot to say that no fewer than 1,500 persons had to be taken away.) We said that we could not provide such a number. We started to bargain. When Mr. Dessler arrived with the report from Oszmiana, the number dropped to 800. When I went to Oszmiana with Weiss, the number dropped again to 600. In reality the situation was different. We argued about the 600 and during this time the question of the removal of women and children was dropped. There remained the question of old people. In reality, 406 old people were collected in Oszmiana. These old people were handed over.

When Weiss came the first time and spoke about the women and children, I told him that old people should be taken. He answered: “The old people would die off in any case during the winter and the ghetto has to be reduced in size now.”

The Jewish Police saved those who must live. Those who had little time left to live were taken away, and may the aged among the Jews forgive us. They were a sacrifice for our Jews and for our future.

I don't want to talk about what our Jews from Vilna have gone through in Oszmiana. Today I only regret that there were no Jews [i.e., Jewish Police] when the *Aktion* was carried out in Kiemieliszki and in Bystrzyca. Last week all the Jews were shot there, without any distinction. Today two Jews from Swieciany (Old-Swieciany) [a town near Vilna] came to me and asked me to save them. The Jews from Swieciany, Widze and other small places in the neighborhood were [collected] there. And today I ask myself

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what is to happen if we have once more to carry out a selection. It is my duty to tell them: my good Jews, away with you; it is not my wish to soil my hands and send my Police to do the dirty work. Today I shall say that it is my duty to soil my hands, because terrible times have come over the Jewish people. If five million people have already gone it is our duty to save the strong and the young, not in years only, but in spirit, and not to indulge in sentimentality. When the Rabbi in Oszmiana was told that the number of persons required was not complete and that five elderly Jews were hiding in a *maline* (hiding place), he said that the *maline* should be opened. That is a man with a young and unshaken spirit.

I don't know whether everybody will understand this and defend it, and whether they will defend it after we have left the ghetto, but the attitude of our police is this—rescue what you can, do not consider your own good name or what you must live through.

All these things that I have told you do not sound sweetly to our souls nor yet for our lives. These are things one should not have to know. I have told you a shocking secret which must remain locked in our hearts. . . .