

The Kraków *Judenrat* and Its Evolution

The Establishment of the Judenrat in Kraków

After the Germans entered Kraków, the prewar Jewish Council¹ headed by Rafał Landau self-disbanded, and the Jewish population was left without a representative body.² There are a few testimonies that describe how the new Kraków *Judenrat* was established and composed, with two distinct versions describing this process. The author of the first, which was published and has been repeatedly quoted, is Aleksander Bieberstein,³ a doctor and the brother of the first head of the *Judenrat*. The memoirs of Henryk Zwi Zimmermann⁴ confirm Bieberstein's version of events. Second, there is a report from the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, which was submitted in 1945 by Leon Salpeter,⁵ a member of the Kraków *Judenrat*. It offers a different interpretation of events, backed up by a report published in *Gazeta Żydowska* in 1940.⁶ Bieberstein and

1 This article was created from research previously published in: Andrea Löw and Agnieszka Zajączkowska-Drożdż, "Leadership in the Jewish Council as a Social Process: The Example of Cracow," in *The Holocaust and European Societies: Social Processes and Social Dynamics*, ed. Andrea Löw and Frank Bajohr (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 189-205; Agnieszka Zajączkowska-Drożdż, "Krakowski Judenrat," *Studia nad autorytaryzmem i totalitaryzmem* 37, no. 1 (2015): 51-80, Agnieszka Zajączkowska-Drożdż, *Od dyskryminacji do eksterminacji. Polityka Trzeciej Rzeszy wobec Żydów w Krakowie (1939-1943)* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2020), 93-125. In the article, the terms *Judenrat* and Jewish Council appear interchangeably and refer to the same institution.

2 Henryk Zwi Zimmermann, *Przeżyłem, pamiętam, świadczę* (Kraków: Baran i Suszyński, 1997), 88.

3 Aleksander Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1985).

4 Zwi Zimmermann, *Przeżyłem*, 91.

5 Leon Salpeter, untitled testimony, Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute (hereafter AŻIH) 301/448.

6 *Gazeta Żydowska*, no. 1, July 23, 1940, 5. *Gazeta Żydowska* was a propaganda newspaper controlled by the Germans, but due to its reach, it was also used by the

Salpeter each described the composition of the Kraków *Judenrat* differently, and in both cases, these descriptions differ from the one that appears in the German document.⁷

All of the accounts agree that the *Judenrat*, as a representative office of the Jews in Kraków, was established at the beginning of September 1939; that it was headed by Marek Bieberstein; and that the position of deputy was held by Wilhelm Goldblatt. The headquarters of the Jewish Council was located at 41 Krakowska Street. According to Aleksander Bieberstein's account, the occupation authorities ordered Marek Bieberstein to establish the *Judenrat*.⁸ The reasons given for his appointment were that he was a teacher and a well-known social activist in Kraków, and that prior to the war, he had cooperated with the city administration. For these reasons, the vice mayor of the city of Kraków, Stanisław Klimecki, recommended Bieberstein to a representative of the Gestapo. On September 8, 1939, Marek Bieberstein received a written order from SS-Oberscharführer Paul Siebert requesting the creation of a *Judenrat* consisting of twenty-three people with Bieberstein at the helm.⁹ According to this account, Bieberstein managed to convince the Zionists to join the new body, which was officially established on September 12, 1939. Initially, it consisted of sixteen people. An additional seven members joined later. The new Jewish body was given the authority to determine how it would carry out the functions with which it was charged. The council was also divided into separate departments, which over time were either expanded or reduced depending on the situation and needs of the community. The most important departments focused on social welfare, housing, finance, health, and the economic and general administration of Kraków's Jewish community.

The first meeting took place after the German mayor of the city, Karl Schmid, approved the composition of the council. According to Aleksander Bieberstein's memoirs, during that meeting with the occupation authorities, Paul Siebert clarified the position of the *Judenrat* to all present: "Do you think we appointed you to have power? You are here to obey our orders fully and without question and to follow our commands carefully. All matters must be carried out under the supervision of the

Germans to inform Jews about new regulations and decisions. In some cases, this newspaper may be considered a useful source of information.

7 The German document *Ältestenrat der jüdischen Gemeinde in Krakau*, AŻIH 241/24. Archiwum Ringelbluma, sygn. Ring. I/785/I, Obwieszczenie z 17 IX 1939 r. o powołaniu nowego zarządu Tymczasowego Zarządu Gminy Wyznaniowej w Krakowie.

8 Similar information can be found in Zwi Zimmermann, *Przeżyłem, pamiętam, świadczę*.

9 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 156-57.

officers present here; you should only contact them at the Gestapo headquarters at 2 Pomorska Street.”¹⁰ Moreover, he stated that the Germans were in Kraków as victors and had no intention of supporting the Jews. The head of the *Judenrat* was directly responsible for the activities of the whole council, and all Jews were subject to the orders of the security police (*Sicherheitspolizei*), meaning that they were not allowed to negotiate with any other authorities.¹¹ Henryk Zwi Zimmermann offers a similar description of these events.¹² He refers to an interview with Marek Bieberstein’s daughter, from whom he obtained information on Bieberstein’s appointment to serve as chairman of the *Judenrat*.

A different version of the events is recounted in the testimony of Leib Salpeter.¹³ According to Salpeter, it was Polish vice mayor Stanisław Klimecki who ordered the establishment of a temporary council consisting of members from the Jewish community—to be appointed by him—shortly after German troops entered Kraków. The reason for this was that because representatives of the prewar Jewish community had fled Kraków, the Jews had been left without any formal representation. The temporary management board consisted of twelve members headed by Marek Bieberstein. Only at the beginning of 1940, on the orders of the Gestapo, was the council reorganized. Twelve members proposed by the Jews and approved by the Gestapo were added, and the composition of the *Judenrat* was approved by the Gestapo clerk for Jewish affairs, Oskar Brandt. Salpeter described the first meeting of the new council differently than Aleksander Bieberstein. According to Salpeter, it took place in mid-February 1940 in the presence of Brandt. The new members received their papers, and they established different commissions to function as advisory bodies. The commissions consisted of both members of the council and people from outside its ranks.¹⁴

In the July 1940 edition of *Gazeta Żydowska*, there was an article that contained information about the Jewish community in Kraków that tends to confirm Salpeter’s account. It stated that the departure of the Jewish representatives from the city after the outbreak of the war created

10 Zwi Zimmermann, *Przeżyłem, pamiętam, świadczę*, 91; Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 18. All translations in the article are the author’s.

11 Dora Agatstein-Dormontowa, “Żydzi w Krakowie w okresie okupacji niemieckiej,” *Kraków w latach okupacji 1939-1945. Studia i materiały*, *Rocznik Krakowski* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii i Zabytków Krakowa, 1957), 187, Dawid Szlang, untitled testimony, AŻIH 301/240.

12 Zwi Zimmermann, *Przeżyłem, pamiętam, świadczę*.

13 Salpeter, untitled testimony, AŻIH 301/448.

14 Salpeter, untitled testimony, AŻIH 301/448.

a very difficult situation for the Jewish population of Kraków. Additionally, the financial situation of the community was dire; thus, on the initiative of the Jews, an aid department was established which later transformed into the *Judenrat*. The report continued:

With the encouragement of Marek Bieberstein and Dr. [Wilhelm] Goldblatt and their understanding of the current state of affairs, including the need to take care of the local Jewish population ... and the requirements of the war refugees, who arrived in the thousands during the war, wandering the streets without shelter, food, or a livelihood, the Aid Department, composed of several Jewish men who were regarded as very responsible, was approved by a resolution of the then municipal board, which turned the Aid Department into the Temporary Board of the Jewish Religious Community in Kraków.¹⁵

It is not known what caused the discrepancies in the descriptions of the *Judenrat's* establishment. It is also difficult to judge which version was true, especially because both descriptions fit with what we know about how Jewish Councils were often created in different places across occupied Poland. They also correspond with the behavior of the German occupiers and Jewish communities in Poland during the first months of the war. Aleksander Bieberstein, Zimmermann, and Salpeter were all social activists involved in the life of the Jews in Kraków both before and during the war who witnessed and often participated in the described events. A significant point to make is that while both Bieberstein and Zimmermann published their memoirs many years after the war, Salpeter's account dates back to 1945 and was submitted to the Central Jewish Historical Commission at the Central Committee of Jews in Poland immediately after the end of the war.¹⁶ For this reason, the version of events presented by him may be considered more plausible even though his account is nowadays less familiar to researchers. Furthermore, the report in *Gazeta Żydowska* also supports the claim that the initiative to establish a Jewish representative office in Kraków did not come from the occupation authorities. As part of the *Judenrat*, the *Ordnungsdienst* (OD)—the Jewish police force—was also established, initially to help maintain order; however, it quickly became independent from the *Judenrat*.¹⁷

15 *Gazeta Żydowska*, no. 1, July 23, 1940, 5.

16 Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna (CŻKH) przy Centralnym Komitecie Żydów w Polsce (CKŻP).

17 The *Ordnungsdienst* (OD—Jewish Police), headed by Symche Spira, carried out Gestapo orders; its duties included, in particular, performing police functions in

It is very important to consider the ways *Judenräte* were established alongside the motives behind them. This approach allows us to understand the attitudes of members of the Jewish communities at the beginning of the war to the new political reality forced upon them, in addition to helping us grasp the perilous situation Jewish inhabitants of Polish cities were faced with. If we assume that the prewar Jewish Council in Kraków (later transformed into the *Judenrat*) was established on the initiative of the Jews, this indicates that the Jewish community elite felt a sense of responsibility, a willingness to both help and attempt to organize the lives of Jews in rapidly deteriorating conditions. It also suggests that they (community elites) were *able* to get involved for the good of the community. It is also worth emphasizing that by creating the Jewish Council, the Jews of Kraków demonstrated courage and initiative, showing their desire to have an impact on the further fate of the Jewish community in the city.

The process of forming *Judenräte* in occupied Poland turned out to be very difficult as leading social activists refused to join bodies that had to cooperate or negotiate with the German authorities.¹⁸ This was also the case for the Jews in Kraków. Zwi Zimmermann recalled that even though activists recognized that there was a need to support the Jewish community, they were reluctant and fearful not only of cooperating with the occupation authorities but also of the responsibility that came with it.¹⁹

In return for working on the council, members were given certain privileges such as the ability to inhabit their personal residence. Additionally, both their residences and possessions were protected from searches and confiscation, and they had the ability to move freely after the curfew was announced.²⁰ At the same time, they bore personal responsibility for carrying out German orders and were in danger of being punished for executing orders improperly.

the ghetto, transporting Jewish workers from the ghetto to places of forced labor, and guarding the ghetto gates. This institution also took an active role in actions related to deportations, participating in the creation of transport lists, house searches, and escorting people to trains. In various postwar accounts, Symche Spira is described as a person who ruthlessly followed the orders of the Germans, provoking fear among the inhabitants of the ghetto. To read more about the OD in Kraków, see: Zajączkowska-Drożdż, *Od dyskryminacji*, 137-39.

18 Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 17-21.

19 Zwi Zimmermann, *Przeżyłem, pamiętam, świadczę*, 89-90.

20 Salpeter, untitled testimony, AŻIH 301/448.

The Agenda of the Judenrat

The main task of the *Judenrat* was to implement German regulations. Initially, these orders related mainly to the organization of the Jewish community's life. The first regulations concerned the registration and marking of Jews and their property with the Star of David. During the first phase of the occupation, which lasted until the creation of the Kraków ghetto in March 1941, the *Judenrat* carried out orders concerning the maintenance of statistics, the execution of a census, and the need to register the Jewish population and businesses, allocate food to Jewish residents, as well as announce and implement the orders of the occupiers. Initially such orders included organizing Jews for forced labor, but later the *Judenrat* was enlisted to coordinate the resettlement of the majority of the Jewish residents from Kraków.²¹

At the same time, the *Judenrat* was obliged to provide all the necessary equipment to run offices and buildings occupied by German officials attending to the increasing number of German residents in Kraków.²² Salpeter wrote: "Due to the fact that the German authorities chose Kraków as the capital of the General Government, thus, various offices were established here which the Jewish community had to furnish. To this end, the *Judenrat* was forced to confiscate furniture and other items from the Jews and buy a whole range of items for these authorities."²³

Acts of Terror

From the beginning of the occupation, the Germans used violence and terror against the Jewish population without sparing the members of the *Judenrat*. An example of such harassment and threats was the order issued by the German authorities on the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur (September 22-23, 1939), which forced the Jews to fill in all the anti-aircraft ditches that had been dug by the Polish army before the German invasion.

21 In accordance with Hans Frank's decision to reduce the number of Jews in Kraków, an order was issued on May 18, 1940, stating that Jews were to vacate Kraków. Only 15,000 Jewish workers were allowed to stay in the city. The resettlement of Jews lasted from May 1940 to March 1941. Jews were resettled mainly in nearby villages. See: Zajączkowska-Drożdż, *Od dyskryminacji*, 39-65.

22 Agatstein-Dormontowa, "Żydzi w Krakowie w okresie okupacji niemieckiej," 188.

23 Salpeter, untitled testimony, AŻIH 301/448.

All members of the *Judenrat* were threatened with the death penalty if the Jews failed to complete the order.²⁴

The Germans also organized raids on the Jewish quarter during which they searched apartments and confiscated personal property. These raids took place in Kazimierz—the Jewish quarter of Kraków—on December 5 and 6, 1939, and in Podgórze in February 1940. In both cases, the Germans plundered inhabitants' property.²⁵ Some of the most heinous crimes against the Jews, including members of the *Judenrat*, were reported by Eugeniusz Redlich, who explained that on December 5, 1939, his uncle Maksymilian Redlich, who was part of the *Judenrat*, was taken by the Germans to the synagogue on Issac Street and ordered to set it on fire. His uncle refused and was shot dead as a result.²⁶

The Germans used terror and intimidation to compel Jews' obedience. The members of the *Judenrat*, who were also victimized by the occupiers, sought to alleviate the impact of the terror. Aleksander Bieberstein described the first months of the *Judenrat's* activity as follows:

Countering and mitigating the harassment of the occupier was one of the main tasks of the council. This activity was very costly and consisted mainly of giving gifts and money to the Germans, in particular, SS members. This activity absorbed the strict leadership of the council to such an extent that other matters were often handled by the heads of particular council departments, as well as by the heads of different social institutions. The interventions of the members of the Council of the Jewish Community with the German authorities were generally effective, especially during the first period of the occupation.²⁷

The Organization of Social Assistance

As the situation of Jews in Kraków under the German occupation grew increasingly difficult, one of the most important tasks of the *Judenrat* was the organization of social assistance. The activities of all prewar Jewish charitable and social institutions were suspended due to the lack of funds and because the mass flight to the east, away from the approaching

24 Salpeter, untitled testimony, AŻIH 301/448, Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 19.

25 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 22-23.

26 Eugeniusz Redlich, untitled testimony, AŻIH 301/779.

27 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 17.

Wehrmacht, caused chaos.²⁸ Another important motive for organizing social assistance was the broad resettlement policy of Germany, which especially affected Poles and Jews from the territories incorporated into the Reich, as well as Jews and Roma expelled from Germany to the General Government in the first months of the war. This caused the number of Jews in Kraków to balloon. Moreover, the Jews were gradually excluded from economic life: they were deprived of their sources of income, their accounts were frozen, and they were not allowed to work in certain professions.²⁹ Bieberstein described the situation at the time as follows: “The pauperization of Kraków’s Jewish population was increasing. Poverty was growing among pensioners ... the disabled, as well as among clerks who had been fired, and especially among the constantly growing number of displaced people.”³⁰ Salpeter also emphasized:

It should be noted that, in addition to the refugees, a large number of Jews from Kraków remained homeless because the Germans were expelling Jews from their flats, which were located in the streets outside of ... the Jewish district of Kazimierz.³¹

Many similar descriptions can be found in archival documents. For example:

There were many people in need of help because first, there were numerous Jewish public officials and pensioners who had been deprived of their positions and salaries by the Germans. Second, many workers were closed in barracks in labor camps located near Kraków. They were supported with cash and in-kind benefits.³²

The *Judenrat* soon realized that they had to provide the community with social assistance. Bieberstein wrote: “Helping these people was of special concern to the council.”³³ The *Judenrat* began setting up administrative structures to ensure assistance was provided to those most in need and established a Social Welfare Department, among other things. It also created shelters for the homeless, kitchens to provide free food, a sanitary commission, and a housing department. Bieberstein recalled:

28 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 17.

29 To read more, see: Zajączkowska-Drożdż, *Od dyskryminacji*, 11-63.

30 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 29.

31 Salpeter, untitled testimony, AŻIH 301/448.

32 Anonymous testimony, AŻIH 301/5093.

33 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 29.

The housing office of the Jewish Community, headed by Dr. Emil Wasserlauf, tried to solve the increasingly difficult housing problems; the homeless were placed partly in private Jewish apartments in Kazimierz and partly in both collective quarters and shelters.³⁴

The *Judenrat* also called on the Jewish inhabitants of Kraków to help refugees. An example of this request appears in a document that somehow was preserved. It states that the Council of the Jewish Community in Kraków was informed that some Jewish owners of real estate in Podgórze refused to allow refugees who had been taken in by the Jewish Community to access water. The council demanded that all Jewish owners of properties neighboring the refugee centers unconditionally allow refugees to draw water from their homes during a transitional period, until the water supply in the refugee centers was repaired. Any Jew who did not obey the order was threatened with immediate punishment, though the document did not specify what those penalties were.³⁵

Another very important task facing the *Judenrat* was the need to create soup kitchens for the most impoverished. Bieberstein recalled:

The matter of food was no less a concern; communal kitchens were established, often thanks to the spontaneous initiative of private individuals who obtained funds from charity donations to run them. When these funds turned out to be insufficient, the Jewish Community imposed an additional tax on the Jewish inhabitants in order to support the communal kitchens and shelters. In October 1939, there were only a few kitchens, and in the spring of 1940, the number reached 50.³⁶

In January 1940, *Gazeta Żydowska* presented an analysis of the data available from the kitchen at 3 Dajwór street, according to which between five hundred and six hundred meals were served daily either for a minimal fee or completely free of charge. The announcement also explained that “due to the difficult financial condition of the Jewish community, the kitchen relies on the dedication of Jewish society.”³⁷ According to the financial

34 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 29, Salpeter, untitled testimony, AŻIH 301/448.

35 *Do żydowskich właścicieli realności w Krakowie—Podgórze!*, March 13, 1940, RG-15.072M/5001, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM); and AŻIH 218/4.

36 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 29.

37 *Gazeta Żydowska*, no. 4, January 14, 1941, 3.

report of the Jewish Council in Kraków, for the period September 1939 to September 1940, communal kitchens served about 3.5 million meals.³⁸

In addition to soup kitchens, the *Judenrat* also supplied funding to support other aid institutions, such as hospitals, dormitories, an old people's home, among others. Dr. Maurycy Haber, a member of the *Judenrat* board, came up with an initiative to establish a Sanitary Commission that could help oversee the condition of personal hygiene to avoid possible epidemics among Jewish inhabitants of Kraków. After his appeal, 156 doctors and 110 other medical staff volunteered to work at the Commission for free. The first meeting was held on 26 February 1940. Before the ghetto was created (March 1941), the commission functioned in three districts of Kraków: Kazimierz, Stradom, and Podgórze. It played a very important role during the war, until the liquidation of the Kraków ghetto in March 1943. Its main tasks included controlling and maintaining the level of cleanliness mainly in collective quarters but also in private apartments. In addition, campaigns which raised awareness on the basic principles of hygiene, targeted at the Jews in Kraków, were conducted by the committee. The *Judenrat* also established a Disinfection Department. As a result of the activities of these institutions, no epidemic ever broke out in the Kraków ghetto;³⁹ however, the situation changed in 1943, when the Nazis liquidated the ghetto and sent the remaining Jews to the Plaszow camp, where a typhus epidemic broke out.⁴⁰

The above-mentioned examples of *Judenrat* members' involvement in social matters and the ways in which they tried to solve the problems of everyday life indicate that they were fully committed to maintaining the most important elements of the functioning of the Jewish community. As long as they could, every effort was made to organize help for those most in need.

Composition of the Kraków Judenrat

All *Judenräte* played a very important role in the implementation of the German policy toward the Jews. Due to the fact that both German policies and their goals were constantly evolving, the nature and role of the *Judenräte* also kept changing. At the beginning of the occupation, the

38 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 35.

39 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 175.

40 Julian Aleksandrowicz, "Ludzie Służby Zdrowia w okupowanym i podziemnym Krakowie," *Przegląd Lekarski*, no. 1a, (1963): 132.

Germans strived to isolate Jews from society by concentrating them in larger cities using a resettlement policy, took control of how the Jewish communities functioned, and enclosed Jews in ghettos. During this period, the Kraków *Judenrat* performed administrative functions, and at the time, local Jews saw the institution as representing their interests, and they were still treated as part of the Jewish community, regardless of the orders they had to implement.⁴¹ At the same time, their members had to be very skilled at different tasks to be able to meet the German requirements. The newly established Kraków *Judenrat* consisted of people who had previously had a positive impact on the Jewish community and who, before the war, had performed various functions in communal structures. They were also well-known locals who had authority in the community. The first chairman, Marek Bieberstein, was a teacher, and his successor Artur Rosenzweig was an attorney. Attorney Dr. Dawid Szlang and pharmacist Leon Salpeter, among others, dealt with various social matters.

The education, prestige, and competences of the *Judenrat* members were of fundamental importance for the Germans at the beginning of the occupation. Their responsibilities required a wide range of skills and abilities related to, among others, logistics and legal and social issues. In addition, knowledge of the German language was essential. Henryk Zwi Zimmerman, who worked in the Social Welfare Department, recalled: “Many of us received clerical positions in line with our education or talents. In this way, we could help and have a certain influence on what was happening.”⁴² Moreover, the Germans introduced terror as well as the threat of very strict penalties for failing to comply with their orders. This allowed the Germans to fully utilize the combined skills of all the council members.⁴³

We can observe a fundamental tendency when analyzing the attitudes of the members of the *Judenrat* and the ways they cooperated with the German authorities. As the Nazis radicalized their anti-Jewish policy, it became increasingly valuable for the Germans that the character traits of the *Judenrat* members changed from the skills already mentioned to submission, that is, showing a willingness to cooperate and carry out all German orders without hesitation. At this point, it is worth emphasizing

41 See: Raul Hilberg, “The Judenrat: Conscious or Unconscious ‘Tool,’” in *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe 1933-1945* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1979), 31-44.

42 Zimmermann, *Przeżyłem, pamiętam, świadczę*, 93.

43 See: Aharon Weiss, “Jewish Leadership in Occupied Poland—Postures and Attitudes,” in *The Third International Historical Conference* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977), 335-65.

that in Kraków, the chairman of the *Judenrat* decided the direction of the council's policies and, together with his deputy, personally maintained contact with the Germans. Therefore, it is justified to characterize the *Judenrat* and its activities by analyzing the attitudes of its chairmen.

The first chairman, Marek Bieberstein, was a well-known and respected social activist who had been involved in many charitable activities and had cooperated with the Kraków city authorities before the war. He held this position until his arrest in September 1940. The main challenges he and his team had to deal with were related to the introduction of a number of regulations that ultimately limited the rights of the Jews: for example, the organization of forced labor, the sudden increase in the numbers of Jews being resettled in Kraków and, subsequently, the process of displacing them from the city, which according to the Germans orders had to be freed from the Jews.⁴⁴

At the time, the members of the *Judenrat* cooperated with each other to fulfill German demands, which were mostly implemented without delay. Bieberstein, together with the other members of the board, put in a lot of work into helping displaced people survive this difficult period in Kraków. They established kitchens that supplied free food, night shelters, as well as a sanitary commission and fundraisers for the homeless and most destitute. Because of the intervention of the *Judenrat*, the situation was soon brought under control. One of the challenges they faced was the displacement of Jews from Kraków, in response to which Bieberstein tried to bribe a member of the resettlement commission, the Volksdeutscher Eugen Reichter, to obtain permission for more Jews to stay. Unfortunately Bieberstein was arrested along with others for the part he played in this plan and prosecuted. A document from Bieberstein's interrogation during the trial in German courts has been preserved. In it, he explained: "I was aware that I was acting against the law ... Nevertheless, I still decided to act in this way, convinced that as a superior, I could help my Jewish brothers the best I could ..."⁴⁵ Marek Bieberstein was sentenced to eighteen months in prison.⁴⁶

This event illustrates the willingness of the first *Judenrat* to help their fellow Jews. It is also important to underline that the members of the *Judenrat*, at that time, were willing to take huge risks and make sacrifices in the hope that these could improve the situation of the Jewish population.

44 As the capital of the General Government.

45 Postępowanie procesowe, Kraków, dn.13.09.1940, AŻIH 218/2, published in: Andrea Löw and Marcus Roth, *Krakowscy Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939-1945* (Kraków: Univeritas, 2014).

46 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 33.

Artur Rosenzweig was the second chairman of the *Judenrat*. He held this position from the beginning of 1941 until his deportation from the Kraków ghetto on June 4, 1942. During his term in the office, many important events took place including the creation of the ghetto, the allocation of housing in the ghetto, the organization of forced labor, and the first deportation of Jews to the extermination camps. Tadeusz Pankiewicz described Rosenzweig as a highly decent man who treated his new position as a burden.⁴⁷ He also wrote that Rosenzweig was accused by the broader Jewish community of inactivity and reacting too passively. This was explained by his resignation and powerlessness in the face of violence, which deprived him of believing in the effectiveness of any of his efforts.⁴⁸ Aleksander Bieberstein also confirmed that Rosenzweig was forced to take the position of chairman of the Jewish Council, and that he found this position extremely unpleasant and burdensome.⁴⁹

As the *Judenrat's* composition changed, so too did its relationships with both the German authorities and the Jewish population. During the functioning of the second *Judenrat*, as the situation of the Jews deteriorated, we find information in memoirs about the council's reluctance and lack of faith in striving to help the Jewish population, as well as its lack of commitment to carrying out German orders.⁵⁰ As chairman, Rosenzweig—among others—was responsible for the efficient deportation of Jews to the extermination camps. During the first deportation to Bełżec, the Germans were not satisfied with the outcome of the operation because the number of people collected was not sufficient; thus, they ordered the search be repeated several times in order to reach the allocated number. To punish Rosenzweig, the Germans dismissed him from his position and deported him to Bełżec together with his family. This situation was witnessed by Pankiewicz, who wrote:

47 Tadeusz Pankiewicz was the Polish owner of a pharmacy which, after the creation of the Kraków ghetto, was located within its walls. Pankiewicz managed to keep the pharmacy and continued working in it throughout the functioning of the ghetto. The pharmacy was situated at Plac Zgody, from where all transports from the ghetto departed. Pankiewicz witnessed all the key events in the ghetto, and he published his memoirs: Tadeusz Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003). See also: Anna Pióro, *Magister Tadeusz Pankiewicz* (Krakow: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa, 2013).

48 Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim*, 96-97.

49 Alicja Jarkowska-Natkaniec, "Jüdischer Ordnungsdienst in Occupied Kraków during the Years 1940-1945," *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 11 (2013): 150; Testimony of Michał Weichert, *AŻIH* 302/25, p. 200.

50 Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim*, 227.

After a few minutes, Rosenzweig appears: he is walking slowly without his hat, with slightly disheveled graying hair, an elderly gentleman. He stops in front of both the Gestapo and SS men and bows his head slightly. After a moment of silence, words of woe are uttered from the mouth of one SS man: "Rosenzweig, you are now dismissed from your position, the operation did not offer satisfactory results either in terms of the numbers or in terms of the technical delivery of people to the square. You are guilty for it!" While saying this, he hits Dr. Rosenzweig on the head. ... Dr. Rosenzweig does not say anything, bows his head slightly again, and walks away.⁵¹

Such brutal treatment of the second *Judenrat* chairman was a clear signal that working in the Jewish administration, even holding the highest position, did not shield one from deportation. Failure to comply with German orders was synonymous with death.

Dawid Gutter became the new *Judenrat* chairman. Before the war, he had been a shopkeeper. During the war, he first worked for the *Judenrat* in Tarnów before going on to collect orders for local workshops. He then moved to Kraków to reorganize the craft workshops before being chosen to serve in Kraków's *Judenrat* as an outsider.⁵² However, even after his appointment, he was formally recognized only as a ghetto commissioner. He remained in this position until the liquidation of the Kraków ghetto. During his tenure, the Germans deported Jews to Bełżec and reduced the ghetto area in October 1942, before finally liquidating the ghetto on March 13-14, 1943. Unlike previous leaders, the new chairman was actively involved in helping the German authorities implement their extermination plans. This was allegedly due to his low social status before the war as well as the ease with which the Germans bribed him.⁵³

Pankiewicz wrote about Gutter as follows:

A former traveling salesman and a salesman of journals, an extremely nervous man, as if constantly busy, with uncoordinated movements, sly, with a great enthusiasm for listening to and obeying German orders ... Since the Germans elevated him into such a "high" position, he became conceited, he had a superiority complex which distracted him ... During the deportation, he ran from one German to another like a madman, screaming and gesturing madly with his hands.⁵⁴

51 Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim*, 94-96.

52 Weichert, *AŻIH* 302/25, p. 286.

53 Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim*, 227.

54 Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim*, 96.

In memoirs, Gutter's rule is widely regarded as the period when the Germans treated the Jews in Kraków with increased brutality.

Finances

From the beginning of its operation, the Kraków *Judenrat* had major financial problems. Aleksander Bieberstein recalled that in September 1939, “the finances of the community board were scarce.”⁵⁵ The *Judenrat* needed an abundance of money to both launch social institutions and carry out the orders of the occupation authorities. One of the most important sources of income both before and during the war, in addition to taxes, was fundraising in the Jewish community. During the first year of the occupation, it constituted a significant percentage of the communal budget.⁵⁶ In the period from September 1939 to September 1940, the *Judenrat* also received some funding from the municipal authorities to support social welfare institutions and displaced people; unfortunately, these amounts were not sufficient.⁵⁷ Jews in Kraków also received financial support from Jewish Social Self-Help (*Żydowska Samopomoc Społeczna—Jüdische Soziale Selbsthilfe*)⁵⁸ and the AJJDC (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee).⁵⁹

One of the ways the *Judenrat* tried to improve the financial situation was to take advantage of the forced resettlement policies the Germans imposed on the Jewish population in Kraków, as wealthier Jews were willing to pay large sums to the *Judenrat* for permission to remain in the city. Michał Weichert, chairman of the Jewish Social Self-Help, recalled in his account that “Stadthauptmann allowed the *Judenrat* to accept financial donations from the wealthier (Jews), turning the proceeds from this source into support for the poor evacuees. In this way, it was officially possible for people to buy themselves out of resettlement, and,

55 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 17.

56 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 36.

57 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 36.

58 Jewish Social Self-Help was established in the summer of 1940 and operated throughout the entire General Government. It was subordinated to the Department for Population and Social Welfare under the government of the General Government; its headquarters was located in Kraków at Stradom Street 10. After the establishment of the ghetto, it was then moved to Józefińska Street 18. The chairman was Michał Weichert. See: Sabina Mirowska, *Dzieje zakładu sierot w Krakowie podczas okupacji niemieckiej*, AŻIH 301/2048, p.11-17.

59 Elżbieta Rączy, *Zagłada Żydów w dystrykcie krakowskim w latach 1939-1945* (Rzeszów: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2014), 241-42.

thus, the Council had a displacement fund.”⁶⁰ Survivor Zenon Szpingarn also described this situation in his account:

The community, chronically suffering from financial difficulties, tried various tricks in order to bring in profits. In this case, the council was too eager to fulfill this task ... So they displaced very wealthy people who bought themselves out from this practice for a few thousand.⁶¹

The *Judenrat* also created a reserve funded by money paid by people who had been called up for forced labor but wanted to avoid it.⁶² Szpingarn recalled:

Everyone had to work cleaning the streets etc. ... There was, however, a convenient alternative from which the council, wanting to supplement its meager budget, profited. Whoever wanted to avoid forced labor paid the community 5 złoty a day; however, someone replaced those who paid for 2 złoty a day.⁶³

Starting on October 1, 1940, the *Judenrat* introduced a compulsory community contribution of 10 złoty per month for every Jew over the age of twenty-one.⁶⁴ Those who were unable to pay were exempt, while those who could afford to pay more were required to pay a higher fee called an extraordinary tax.⁶⁵ Szpingarn justified these actions of the *Judenrat* as follows:

If the pressure and blackmail of the German authorities ... forced the council and its enforcement body, the O.D. [the Jewish Police], to take harsh and ruthless steps against its fellow believers, it should be emphasized that in such a difficult situation, the council was able to set up many charitable activities. A perfectly furnished hospital, self-help kitchens, allowances and assistance for widows and orphans, matzah baking, potato distribution—all of these can be remembered, with relief, to give a good account of the unfortunate council.⁶⁶

60 Weichert, AŻIH 302/25, p. 95.

61 Testimony of Zenon Szpingarn, AŻIH 302/8, p. 8.

62 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 19.

63 Szpingarn, AŻIH 302/8, p. 8.

64 *Gazeta Żydowska*, no. 23, October 3, 1940, 3.

65 *Gazeta Żydowska*, no. 23, October 3, 1940, 3; *Gazeta Żydowska*, no. 27, October 21, 1940, 3.

66 Szpingarn, AŻIH 302/8, pp. 8-9.

After the ghetto had been created, the *Judenrat* held many fundraising events. Bieberstein recalled:

The financial difficulties the Jewish Council faced meant that all social institutions were largely supported by donations from the society and through money collected through fundraising on the street taking place every Sunday. The proceeds from these collections and events organized for charity purposes were divided among individual institutions.⁶⁷

Szpingarn also wrote: “The community’s budget was constantly empty. In order to support it, a theater and a buffet were created in the Optima space.”⁶⁸ The *Judenrat* frequently requested voluntary donations to support its activities, and these calls were usually effective.

The *Judenrat* used all possible methods to obtain additional funds to help run the institutions inside the ghetto, an example of which was the establishment of a post office. According to an anonymous testimony, “This depot was an organ of the Jewish Council; it had separate clerical staff and several postmen. Since special fees were charged for each delivery as well as for the receipt of a registered letter, parcel, or money order, and, in addition, from the sale of postage stamps, this institution turned out to be a profitable enterprise, especially because the quantities were very high there.”⁶⁹ The Germans banned this activity in July 1942.

The food available for ghetto inhabitants depended on rations. The Kraków City Board decided on the amount of food to be delivered to the ghetto. Meanwhile the *Judenrat* established a special unit in the ghetto, the *Vermittlungsstelle* (Special Distribution Unit), to distribute food cards (rations). The sale of the rationed products took place in local stores run by the *Judenrat*.⁷⁰ Many reports show that the population in the ghetto did not suffer from hunger. Bieberstein confirms this:

The official food rations were more than modest: 100g of bread a day and 200g of sugar and the same amount of fat per month ... Additional food was supplied to shops, public kitchens and institutions such as hospitals and the orphanage ... Food was brought in via an illegal route, mainly through the wide gates of Podgórze Market

67 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 53.

68 Szpingarn, AŻIH 302/8, p. 8.

69 Anonymous testimony, AŻIH 301/5093, p. 7-II.

70 *Gazeta Żydowska*, no. 27, April 4, 1941, p. 4.

Square, opened by policemen for bribes. Horse-drawn vehicles and vans with supplies entered the ghetto through these gates mainly at night. Garbage trucks also brought significant food supplies to the ghetto. I have been involved in the retrieval of such illegal shipments several times.⁷¹

Szpingarn also recalled:

Smuggling has developed on a large scale. As a result, wealth was earned. The Germans and the police were given large bribes for allowing carts with food to enter. The charge was between 20 to 1000 zloty. There were few people suffering from hunger back then. The intelligentsia, unprepared for similar living conditions, suffered the most. Not having cash or entrepreneurial possibilities, they lived in poverty, using folk kitchens and communal benefits ...⁷²

In Weichert's account, we read: "Food delivery was good, also the difference in the price of food products between the ghetto and the Aryan side was relatively low."⁷³

The situation deteriorated after the Jews were more tightly controlled and when the work columns leaving the ghetto were closely escorted by the Germans. In addition, barracks for the Jews at workplaces were established, which prevented people from returning to the ghetto. Both of these changes had a great influence on the amount of food available in the ghetto. The reduced numbers of interactions with people from the "Aryan side" made it more difficult to smuggle food into the ghetto. "On the streets of the ghetto, one could see more and more emaciated, malnourished people," reported Bieberstein.⁷⁴

The Judenrat and the Deportations to the Extermination Camps

The Kraków *Judenrat* cooperated with the Germans during the organization of the deportations of the Jews to extermination camps. During the first deportation, it had to review the residents' identification cards

71 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 52.

72 Szpingarn, AŻIH 302/8, p. 14.

73 Weichert, AŻIH 302/25, p. 196.

74 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 69.

and work certificates. People with a certificate of employment received a stamp that gave them permission to remain in the ghetto. However, office workers, with the exception of the council and the Jewish Social Self-Help, were refused stamps. *Judenrat* members also participated in the inspection of documents, bringing people without stamps to Plac Zgody, from where they were later taken to the Bełżec death camp.⁷⁵ As Szpingarn recalled: “The Council members were responsible, with their lives, for ... finding those in the ghetto without a stamp. So they were zealously carrying out their task.”⁷⁶

It is difficult to say whether the *Judenrat* members already knew the destination of the deportation trains. Aleksander Bieberstein wrote that

In June 1942 we had already known about the existence of a death camp in Bełżec. The messages had come from Polish railway conductors, who accurately described the siding diverging from the main railway route into the forest. They had described trains full of people leaving this siding, heading into the forest and returning from the forest empty after a short time.⁷⁷

Only in November 1942, one of the transported Jews, the dentist Buchner,⁷⁸ managed to escape from Bełżec and returned to the Kraków ghetto, where he informed people about what was happening with those deported to the death camp. Pankiewicz recalled: “It was from him ... that the ghetto inhabitants learned that it is true, that there are camps in which the Germans murder, gas, and burn the transported prisoners.” Despite the information at hand, the *Judenrat* continued to carry out the German orders.⁷⁹ During the deportation process, the *Judenrat* organized bread to be distributed to the deportees: Carts full of bread are still coming. The last gift displaced people could receive from the rest of the community.⁸⁰

In October 1942, during the second deportation from the ghetto, *Judenrat* members actively participated in its organization. After the deportation had commenced, they made an announcement stating that all those going to work had to appear in front of the local office buildings. The only buildings that were exempt from inspection were those of the

75 Agatstein-Dormontowa, “Żydzi w Krakowie w okresie okupacji niemieckiej,” 210.

76 Szpingarn, *AŻIH* 302/8, p. 20.

77 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 57.

78 He is mentioned in the accounts as the dentist Buchner, without a first name.

79 Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim*, III.

80 Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim*, 85-86.

Judenrat and the Jewish Social Self-Help organ; thus, all the representatives, together with their entire families, took refuge in these buildings.⁸¹

Before the Germans started the final liquidation of the ghetto, the *Judenrat* tried to postpone the decision. This was recalled by Szpingarn: “The ghetto population has long been aware of the planned liquidation of the district. News was circulating about being resettled to special barracks.”⁸² The commander of the Płaszów camp Amon Goeth ordered the *Judenrat* to deport Jews working outside of the ghetto to the camp every day, according to a specific plan which started on March 10, 1943. The *Judenrat* chose the date when individual workplaces would move to the Płaszów camp.⁸³ However, due to the fact that the expectations of the Germans about the numbers of people displaced were not met, they ordered that all Jews from the ghetto would be resettled to Płaszów on March 13, 1943. On that day, the *Judenrat* received an order stating that within the next six hours, all the inhabitants of ghetto A, which housed all those recognized by the Germans as able to work, must be relocated to Płaszów. On the other hand, the inhabitants of ghetto B—people unfit for work—were to be gathered at Plac Zgody on March 14, and then, as the Germans ordered, moved to the “Ostbahn” barracks, where they were to be employed.⁸⁴ The lack of apartments in Kraków was used as the pretext for the resettlement.⁸⁵

The *Judenrat* tried to delay the liquidation of the ghetto, as evidenced by the following statements: “The community did whatever it could to revoke this terrible moment of resettlement.”⁸⁶ In addition: “The Jewish Council, headed by Gutter, tried to postpone the liquidation of the ghetto at all costs for several days in a row.”⁸⁷ Despite their strenuous efforts, it was not possible to postpone the deportation date. Therefore, the ghetto inhabitants were informed about the planned resettlement. Szpingarn declared:

At 11 o'clock, the community delegates returned with commandant Goeth and announced that all those working, including children

81 Bieberstein, *Zagłada Żydów w Krakowie*, 71-72; Agatstein-Dormontowa, “Żydzi w Krakowie w okresie okupacji niemieckiej,” 214.

82 Szpingarn, AŻIH 302/8, p. 28.

83 Szpingarn, AŻIH 302/8, pp. 36-37.

84 On December 6, 1942, the ghetto was divided into two parts: A and B. See: Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim*, 164.

85 Agatstein-Dormontowa, “Żydzi w Krakowie w okresie okupacji niemieckiej,” 218.

86 Szpingarn, AŻIH 302/8, p. 37.

87 Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim*, 180.

over 14 years of age, were to move to the barracks within the next two hours. The rest of the people were to stay in ghetto B, along with the children in the kindergarten.⁸⁸

The next day, those who remained in ghetto B were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

After the ghetto was liquidated, members of the *Judenrat* remained there for additional two weeks before the Germans sent them to Płaszów. A few weeks later, the head of the *Judenrat* Gutter and his deputy Streimer were executed together with their families.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The shifting German policies targeting the Jews largely influenced the constantly shifting dynamics and character of the *Judenrat*. During the war, the Kraków *Judenrat* underwent an evident transformation from being helpful toward the Jewish community to following German orders, whatever the consequences.

In many accounts and recollections, the feelings toward the Kraków *Judenrat* are either positive or indifferent, although there were also critical voices. For example, Pankiewicz, a non-Jewish observer, stated:

For honest people who worked in the Judenrat, it was very harsh. Carrying out orders against one's will, circumventing the law, stalling, finding moderation and peace in convincing thousands of people that the Judenrat did not give orders but only obeyed German ones was not easy. Many people criticized the activity of the Judenrat in the ghetto, although its members could not be accused of anything specific apart from, of course, a few exceptions. ... the accusations against members of the Judenrat were raised only after the war, when the circumstances and atmosphere in the ghetto had been forgotten; in addition, most accusations were made by those who survived the occupation, away from Poland.⁹⁰

The *Judenrat* could not influence the basic principles of Nazi anti-Jewish policies. However, it did enjoy authority among the Jews, and it was

88 Szpingarn, *AŻIH* 302/8, p. 38.

89 Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim*, 220.

90 Pankiewicz, *Apteka w getcie krakowskim*, 120.

apparent that its actions could influence the fate of individual people. Providing aid and following a humanitarian approach toward the Jewish community was easier to implement in the initial period of the war. Over time, members of the *Judenrat* faced tragic circumstances, and regardless of the decisions they made, the community they led was doomed from the outset.