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As much as it was possible

Activists of "Żegota" took up an impossible task as it was impossible to save the Jewish community in the occupational conditions. However, thanks to heroism and the involvement of different bodies of the Polish Underground State, thousands of Jews received help.



The tragic fate of the Jewish population was the reason why the Polish underground movement took steps to establish a special organization

to help them. This resulted in the establishment of the Konrad Żegota Provisional Committee to Aid Jews in Warsaw. On December 4, 1942, the Council to Aid Jews "Żegota", attached to the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Republic of Poland in Poland, was established in place of the Committee. As part of it, the following departments were established: children's, finance, medical, housing, clothing, propaganda and field ones. In the spring of 1943, its branches were established in Cracow and Lviv (the so-called District Councils), which covered the area of the southern and south-eastern part of the General-Gouvernement. The Council also tried to reach Jewish people from outside the General-Gouvernement.

LIFE ON THE ARYAN SIDE

Żegota's task was to save Jews from death (according to German racist laws, a Jew was a person who had at least three Jewish ancestors belonging to the Jewish religious community). The Council dealt with supplying them with valid documents (baptismal and marriage certificates, ID cards, work cards) so that they could pass as Aryans. Only a complete set of documents guaranteed the relative safety of the person who used them. In total, the Council in Warsaw issued about 40,000 documents to Jews, and its branch in Cracow at least 5,000 documents. It is difficult to determine how many people actually received them. It can be carefully estimated that the number of persons was several thousand. "Żegota" searched for suitable premises for Jews, because life often depended on having them. It

helped in finding a job for those who, due to their appropriate physical appearance, could move relatively safely in the streets. It helped the sick and provided them with medicines. It established and maintained contact with Jewish prisoners in forced labour camps (among others in Częstochowa, Mielec, Krosno, Płaszów, Pustków, Skarżysko-Kamienna, Sosnowiec and Szepietów), providing them with food, clothes, dressings and money. It also organized escapes of Jews from camps and ghettos and transported them across the border to Hungary. The Council conducted propaganda and information campaigns. It published leaflets aimed at influencing the society to help Jews being murdered. In 1943 alone, it distributed 25,000 leaflets in Polish and 5,000 leaflets in German. They were distributed around the houses, stuck on city walls and sent to offices. "Żegota" also prepared announcements about the extermination of Jews and their acts of resistance, which were printed in the underground movement press.

REAL OR SYMBOLIC AID?

Since many Jews in hiding could not earn a living and were forced to hide all the time, the Council provided them with material assistance, most often in the form of permanent or seasonal cash benefits. Funding for this purpose came from the funds of the Government of the Republic of Poland in London and the Jewish National Committee, as well as from extraordinary funds provided by foreign Jewish aid organizations. From January to October 1943, the Council to Aid Jews received 4 million 750 thousand Polish zlotys from the Polish

government. In addition, Jewish organizations transferred an average of 400,000 Polish zlotys per month. In 1944, the amount spent by the Council to save Jews gradually increased. In the first two months of 1944, it amounted to one million Polish zlotys, and in December - 6 million Polish zlotys. Smaller amounts were allocated to aid the provinces. In the period from June to October 1943, monthly subsidies for them amounted to 150,000 Polish zlotys. It was a drop in the ocean of needs. The Cracow Council itself in mid-1943 demanded that this amount be increased to 320,000 Polish zlotys. Taking into account the overall budget of the Polish Delegation for Poland, the funds allocated to the Council amounted to about 2.2 percent. On average, one person benefiting from financial aid from "Żegota" in 1943 had 500 Polish zlotys from the entire sum at the Council's disposal. With inflation, and the prevailing high prices for food and basic necessities, it was a small amount, which the Council itself defined as "a symbol of aid, not real aid". It was enough only for modest food, excluding rent and other purchases.

BLACKMAILERS PUNISHED WITH DEATH

Additionally, "Żegota" had to deal with the problem of blackmailing the hiding Jews or their guardians on a daily basis. It tried to fight blackmailers. In the opinion of the Council: "Not a day goes by without a series of blackmailings, lest the victim be robbed of the last penny and possessions [...]. There are also accidents that end in death - either by suicide or by the liquidation of the victims by the authorities,

into the hands of which they fall as a result of blackmailing." It was an extremely important problem because it hindered the rescue operation. It was necessary to provide victims of blackmailers who used the so-called Aryan papers, with new sets of documents, find them a new place and possibly a new job. For those who had to live in hiding all the time, it was necessary to find a new hiding place. All this took time and considerable financial resources. According to the Council's reports, blackmailing reduced aid to individual persons by PLN 100-200 a month. Therefore, it postulated that blackmailers should be executed and the information about it made public by posting it in cities. In the opinion of the Council, this would not only be an act of justice, but also a way to deter potential followers.

YOUNGEST PERSONS UNDER CARE

Help for children was an important element of the activities of "Żegota". This was done by the Children's Department headed by Irena Sendler. As an employee of the Social Welfare Department of the Municipal Board, she had a pass to the Warsaw Ghetto, from where, together with her colleagues, she organized smuggling of Jewish children to the so-called Aryan side. The first stage was the emergency care facilities, where children were prepared for life with a changed identity (they were taught, for example, Catholic prayers). At that time, their documents were also being prepared. Then the children were placed in foster homes, orphanages and female convents. It is estimated that about 2-2.5 thousand children of different ages were

saved in this way.

RANGE OF HELP

Unfortunately, the exact number of Jews who benefited from the care of Żegota is not known. According to the estimates of the employees of "Żegota" (Arczyński, Rek), before the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, the action of the Council (i.e. one of its various forms of assistance) covered 40-50 thousand people. The financial aid most noticeable in the Council's documents is expressed in a much more modest numbers - in the first half of 1944 it concerned from 3 to 4 thousand people. The vast majority of them were the persons under care of the headquarters. In Cracow about 100 people were provided with permanent help in 1943. In 1944, the Council paid permanent allowances to 570 Jews. Together with the people who benefited from allowances on an *ad hoc* basis, it had about 1,000 persons under care. In addition, it helped prisoners in camps. It is not known how many of them received this aid. It is much more difficult to define the scale of assistance provided by the Lviv District Council. It is known that several hundred people benefited from its help. Without contacts with people who were ready to get involved in saving Jews, although they were not in the structures of the Council to Aid Jews, help would be impossible. Permanent contact with "Żegota" was maintained, among others, by Tadeusz Pankiewicz, owner of the pharmacy "Pod Orłem" at Zgody Square in Cracow. It was the only such "Aryan" facility in the ghetto in the occupied country. Pankiewicz brokered, among others, in

smuggling messages, money and medicines for the inhabitants of the Cracow ghetto. During the deportation actions, he hid Jews who managed to escape from German hands in the pharmacy. In all these activities he was supported by the staff employed in the pharmacy. The scale of aid of the Council to Aid Jews to the Jewish population, although constantly growing, was insufficient in relation to the needs. However, covering all those who needed it definitely exceeded the possibilities of "Żegota".

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