Who Knows the Minsk Ghetto? Part A

The Minsk ghetto was the fourth-largest ghetto, but for many reasons, its story is virtually unknown. Most of the witnesses and testimonies relating to it remained behind the Iron Curtain for many years, or else their words were kept sealed in archives that were only recently opened. This is not a story about “another ghetto.” The Minsk ghetto was unique in many respects: its location within the Soviet Union; its population, which had gone undergone Sovietization as early as the 1920s and also absorbed refugees from Poland and deportees from the Reich; and the strong underground that operated in the ghetto almost from its inception. This time on “Making Memory – a Yad Vashem Podcast” we will devote two episodes to the story of the Minsk Ghetto.

Featured guest: Dr. Daniel Romanovsky, historian and researcher at the Yad Vashem Research Center

Episode transcription:

Irit: At 12:00 noon on June 22, 1941, with much fanfare and a large crowd in attendance, an artificial lake was due to be inaugurated in the Minsk city center. But on the morning of that day an entirely different announcement began spreading like wildfire. War had broken out! Throughout the day, the city was bombarded by German planes. On June 27 regular army forces began arriving at the city’s outskirts, and simultaneously units that blocked the red Army’s escape routes started parachuting in. Four regular brigades of the Russian infantry were met with three German armored divisions from the north and two more from the southwest, which employed a pincer movement to capture the city on the following day. The residents of Minsk were completely stunned. A witness described the sense of chaos that gripped everybody: “There was panic, but there was no time for panic.”

The significance of the attack was particularly devastating for the Jewish population. Germany’s military invasion into the Soviet Union marked the introduction of extremism in German anti-Jewish policy. The reason for this is reflected in remarks by one of the senior Wehrmacht commanders who was also a leader of the war on the eastern front, General Field Marshal Erich von Manstein: “Since June 22, the German nation has been immersed in a life-and-death battle; the Bolshevik Jewish system must be obliterated once and for all.” The attitude toward Soviet Jews, including the Jews of Minsk, was particularly violent. This time on “Making Memory,” the Yad Vashem podcast, we devote two episodes to the story of the Minsk ghetto. The fourth-largest ghetto, it was unique in many respects, but its story … is virtually unknown. The episode features Dr. Daniel Romanovsky, a historian at the Yad Vashem Research Center. His studies focus on Lithuania and Belarus, his birthplace. During his time there, Dr. Romanovsky collected many testimonies on the Holocaust of Belarus’s Jews, which are now part of the Yad Vashem Archives.

I’m Irit Dagan from the International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem. Let’s begin.

On the eve of World War II, Minsk’s Jewish population numbered about 70,000, accounting for roughly one-third of the city’s population. At this point the community had already experienced numerous upheavals over the course of the twenty years since the Bolshevik revolution. In the summer of 1920 the city had become the capital of the newly formed Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus. The imposition of the Soviet regime dealt a severe blow to the independent communal and political life of Jews in Minsk, as in all the Soviet territories. Jewish community institutions closed in the early 1920s, a branch of the Bund was disbanded, and in the late 1920s, any official Zionist activity was restricted.

Dr. Daniel Romanovsky: The Yiddish culture was the only version of Jewish culture that the Soviet government recognized, and Minsk was very important in this regard.

Minsk had schools that operated in Yiddish, and newspapers and periodicals, a genuine variety of periodicals and newspapers in Yiddish. It had a theater that operated in Yiddish, and the Belarus Academy actually had a Jewish, rather than a Yiddish, Department, because it dealt not only with the Yiddish language but also with the history of Jews in Belarus.

The great purges in the latter half of the 1930s dealt a blow to Soviet Yiddish culture as well, and a number of its prominent writers and activists were slaughtered during this time. In the summer of 1938 all the Jewish educational institutions were shut down. Although there was still some Jewish cultural and religious life during this period, by the time the war broke out Minsk’s Jews had no organized, independent leadership of their own in practice. The Jewish community ceased to exist as a community.

In September 1939, thousands of Jewish refugees began arriving from Poland, having fled the German occupation. At this time Germany and the Soviet Union were still bound by a ten-year non-aggression pact, which Germany would violate within two years of its signature.

From the testimony of David Taubkin:

“On June 22 we heard that war had broken out. At first I thought, war is fun, it will be really interesting. When I heard the news, I rushed out to the street and saw a lot of cars, Soviet cars as well as trucks. My father saw this and told all the children to go back to the courtyard. He told us not to go out into the street. We were generally obedient children, so we no longer went out into the street.”

Irit: David Taubkin was born in Minsk in 1932. He had an older sister. His father was a doctor. When the war broke out his father received a draft notice and by the following day had to leave for the city of Borisov, where he was stationed.

From the testimony of David Taubkin:

“Nobody could have imagined what was to come. Because the Soviet propaganda was always talking about how we would easily crush the enemy and everybody assumed that the situation was temporary, that the war would be over in two-three weeks, that the Soviet army was unbeatable. So saying goodbye was easy. The next day, on June 24, the bombing began. We sat in the bomb shelter. The feeling was that everything around us was exploding. And then the explosions stopped. I went outside when they let us, and first I had a look at our house. Our house was still standing. Then I turned to the west and I saw that the whole city was destroyed. A pillar of smoke and fire was rising up to the clouds. The city stopped existing. We went home. On the radio they were announcing that all citizens had to stay in place, not to panic, and to wait for new instructions. That was the order issued by the Soviet authorities.”

Irit: By June 25, the third day of the war, the Soviet leadership had fled Minsk. But in practice, the city had been without a leadership or police forces since the very first day. The Jews began fleeing eastward. Refugees who were arriving from parts of Poland brought grim news and descriptions of the Nazi occupiers. On the first day it was still possible to squeeze into a train, but by the following day people had to flee by horse and carriage. The roads were packed with German tanks. Many of those who tried to flee were sent home under German orders. Residents of the bombed and abandoned city began breaking into food warehouses, seizing food and property by force. Thousands of Soviet soldiers who had been taken prisoner marched for days in kilometers-long columns throughout the city’s streets. The summer heat was sweltering. Any prisoner who reached out to ask for a bit of water was shot. The prisoners were confined to a number of camps in Minsk and its surroundings.

A German report prepared in late July 1941 describes the situation in Minsk during the first days of the occupation: “Three quarters of the city was destroyed by the bombings and fires. Water, gas, and electricity supplies are not working, and all of the city’s previous administration has left.” Section 3 of the report, titled “the Jewish Question,” stated: “The high concentration of Jews in Minsk requires that the Jewish question be addressed immediately, all the more so because the Jewish element is expressly hostile to Germans.”

A few days after their arrival, the Germans issued an order instructing all men aged 15-50 to report for registration. They were then driven into prisoner-of-war camps. One camp was set up in the Staro-Radzievsky Cemetery, and they were held there for ten days without food or water. When water was brought into the camp, people ran toward the barrels and the Germans shot them. After several weeks the civilians were separated from the prisoners of war, and the Jews were separated from everyone else. Some of the non-Jewish men were released. Large numbers of prisoners of war and civilians were also confined in the Drozdy camp, which was set up in an open field.

Testimony by Anatoly Rubin, from *In the Storm of Annihilation*:

Narrator: “At night people were brought by groups to the open field. It was cold and people lay down next to each other to warm up. The night ended and the day began. There was a large mass of people, and no food distribution. When people tried to ask [for food], the Germans shot them. And so the second day passed, and night arrived. People were lying on the ground, hungry, and freezing cold. On the following day [they] brought more groups of people. A German shows up with a bucket and starts distributing water. People called to him, surrounded him, and almost knocked him over. And again the scumbags start shooting people.”

Irit: Most of the Jews who survived these camp imprisonments were later transferred to the ghetto. The violence toward Jews, abductions, and theft had already started on the very first day of the occupation. Throughout this time, rampant looting of people’s homes continued, the Germans took up positions in the municipal school and shot at passersby from the windows, and at night small groups continued stealing. There wasn’t a moment of quiet.

Dr. Daniel Romanovsky: On the tenth day of the German occupation, the Germans assembled educated Jewish people – that is, intellectuals who had skill-based professions – on the pretext that they would give these people intellectual work. They simply assembled about 500 people and executed them in a suburb of Minsk. From the perspective of Minsk, this was not a mass slaughter; it was still a group slaughter.

Irit: In early July 1941, the Germans appointed the Judenrat, with Eliyahu (Ilya) Mushkin as its first chairman. The order establishing the ghetto was issued on July 19, and on the following day an announcement was disseminated throughout Minsk.

From the testimony of David Taubkin:

“Many people were actually happy to move to the ghetto because they thought it would prevent pogroms…. All the Jews went to the ghetto, taking all their property with them. First of all, we took food, but the food we had at home was only enough for a few days, not for a long stretch of time. We took a few jars of jam, a bit of flour, a loaf of bread, another bit of something. They led us to a house and said: You’ll live in this house. Five families were already living in that house. We had just one corner, where we could place the two beds we had brought. And lie on them. I remember that when we lay there, if somebody turned over, the entire row would have to turn over. All our family members slept on those two beds. About 35 people lived in that room, maybe even 40, and in our corner there were 12 people.”

The Judenrat’s first task was to conduct a census. All the Jews were required to report for registration, and they were issued “ghetto passports” without which they could not receive an apartment, food, and so on. Another task was to collect money and valuables. When these items were depleted, the Germans began to demand possessions – leather products, fur, and even electrical appliances, bedlinen, candles, and soap. In mid-October 1941, an order was issued to turn over all household property. The Jews were only allowed to keep one pair of undergarments and a bed. The order also decreed that anyone caught with other possessions in their home would be shot. This order created severe hardship for ghetto’s population, which until then had survived largely by bartering property for food. In addition to the official confiscation of property, soldiers and policemen also randomly stole whatever they could.

Barbed wire fencing was installed around the ghetto. The entire ghetto spanned 2 square kilometers and included 34 streets and alleys. Part of the ghetto also housed the Jewish cemetery. The ghetto’s population was very multi-faceted, comprising Jews from Minsk, refugees who had come to the city from Poland, and Jews who were brought to the ghetto from surrounding towns. At its peak, the Minsk ghetto had an estimated population of nearly 100,000.

Jews would be abducted for hard labor, and some never returned home. In addition to wearing a yellow star on their chest and back, the Jews were also ordered to sew a white triangle, with their address, onto their chest. Any Jews who were caught trying to escape or simply outside their residence were placing themselves and their family members in danger by doing so. The punishment was usually death. There was another German marking that was intended to distinguish between workers whose occupation the Germans considered essential and the rest of the ghetto’s population. Red for workers. Green for the others.

There were many mixed families in Minsk. With the establishment of the ghetto, Jews were separated from their non-Jewish spouses and sent to the ghetto. Children would go with the father. In his book *The Storm of Annihilation*, historian Shalom Cholawski describes how reactions to this order differed. For instance, a Christian husband would urge his Jewish wife to hurry up and leave for the ghetto. The children would plead, “Papa, where are you sending Mama?” And then the mother-in-law would intervene, taking her son’s side. Afterward, non-Jewish husbands and wives would boast that they “got rid of their Jews.” There were other types of cases as well. There was a Russian husband who hid his Jewish wife and their three children, but his sister-in-law informed on them, and everyone, including the husband, was put to death. There were also cases in which the couple stuck together. One non-Jewish wife went with her Jewish husband to the ghetto, and later they jointly escaped to the partisans.

The German occupation, and even more so the transition to the ghetto, also intensified inter-generational gaps within Jewish families, both mixed and not mixed. Young people who had received a Soviet education – and in many respects lost their ties to Judaism – were at a complete loss when they arrived in the ghetto. A. Movshezon stated in her testimony that “people who had received a different education looked at us with scorn. The old people told us that what was happening was punishment for having abandoned or Judaism.”

Inside the ghetto, unlike elsewhere, the violent incidents that began at the start of the occupation continued. Rape, looting, and pursuits, even within the closed ghetto, were daily occurrences. A large pit was dug in the cemetery, and Jews who had “sinned” were shot into it – one for walking too close to the fence, another for not removing his hat for a German, and another for not wearing a yellow star. Assaults and abductions were daily events. Roads would suddenly be blocked, and anyone who fell into the Germans’ hands would be forced onto trucks, never to return.

It is estimated that more than 5,000 Jews were abducted and killed in August 1941, and the sporadic killing continued. The EK8 Einsatzgruppen (Action Squad) came to Minsk for six weeks, during which it committed seven massacres of Jews. Six of those massacres resulted in the slaughter of at least 800 Jews. The seventh, at which SS leader Heinrich Himmler was present, resulted in the slaughter of about 300 Jews. All this occurred even before the major *aktion* massacres began.

Dr. Daniel Romanovsky: Such killings continued throughout the ghetto’s existence, in parallel with truly large-scale mass slaughter. Whether it was night or day, no Jews in Minsk could be sure that they were not about to be killed, that they would not be caught and killed somewhere in the city’s outskirts.

Irit: In his book, Y. Greenstein wrote: “The Minsk ghetto had a terrifying exterior. Several streets surrounding Jubilee Square in the old part of the city were fenced off with barbed wire. The houses had been broken into and torn up. Their fences and every piece of wood had been uprooted to be used as firewood for heating…. There were no yards, and the old wooden sheds stood in isolation…. Most of the windows had been ripped out, replaced with rags and grimy old boards.”

The housing situation was unbearable. Calculations show that each person was allocated 1.5 square meters. Several families were crammed into every room no matter how small. At night not everyone had space on the floor. The electricity was disconnected, and candles or kerosene lamps, if available, were used for lighting. For heating and cooking, people started using pieces of wood that were smuggled into the ghetto, after all the wooden fences and sidewalks had been disassembled and all the household furniture used for kindling. Anything that could burn was used for heating during the cold spells. The ghetto had no running water, and the Jews had to carry buckets with water from the pump located within the ghetto. Every day groups of people were taken out of the ghetto to serve as laborers in factories established by German companies in the city. They usually had to walk 5-6 km in each direction. Their workday lasted from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Jews who were used for manual labor suffered from the strenuous nature of the work, the scant amount of food they received, and the violence inflicted by their supervisors.

But anyone who did not work was destined to starve to death along with their families.

A special fate awaited children: They faced a daily battle for survival. Picking through garbage, collecting peels and crumbs, and going from home to home begging for handouts. Children played an inestimably major part in smuggling food into the ghetto. They would squeeze through the fences, sneaking out to search far afield and scavenge for food. The children were left alone while their parents worked, and they were not exempted from the sporadic slaughter and violence.

The Judenrat was, as noted, formed in early 1941. Because the community had lacked a leadership even before the war, the Germans seized ten Jewish men on Karl Marx Street, took them to the administrative building, and informed them that they would now serve as the Jewish Council, carrying out the Germans’ instructions.

Mushkin, a Minsk native, was a tall, educated man who spoke Russian and Yiddish. His deputy was Leib Joffe. Mushkin chaired the Judenrat from the time of its formation until March 1942. Ghetto Jews referred to the Judenrat as “*die Yiddishe kehila*” (the Jewish community), viewing it in a positive and respectful way, without a hint of criticism.

They regarded Mushkin as a fair and capable man. Unlike the situation in other ghettos, the first large-scale *aktions* in the Minsk ghetto were carried out directly by the Germans, without any involvement by the Judenrat or the Order Police (Ordnungspolizei). This contributed to a positive image of the Judenrat among the community, at least initially.

Dr. Daniel Romanovsk: The massacre was on November 7, 1941. That date is an official Soviet holiday, the anniversary of the October Revolution. And the Nazis intentionally carried out the first mass *aktion* on that day.

Irit: The Germans’ objective was to “make room” for Jews who were slated to be deported from Reich territories. According to a German source, the *aktion* victims were assembled in a furniture factory warehouse. From there they were taken to a place named Tuchinka, where two ditches had been dug. The Jews were ordered to undress and lie in the ditch face downward, in the same direction as those shot before them. Then the barrage of bullets began.

Before the *aktion*, rumors that the Germans were about to reduce the ghetto area had been circulating in the ghetto. In the underground circles, there was news that the Germans were about to “disconnect the streets.” No one knew what this meant. On November 6, hundreds of skilled workers and Judenrat employees were transferred from the ghetto to Shiroka Camp. On November 7, Einsatzgruppen personnel stationed in the city, backed by Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian auxiliary forces, charged into the ghetto. Residents of the ghetto, having drawn lessons from the experience of the sporadic killings, had prepared hiding places in advance, which were located in cellars, attics, and between double-paneled walls. The Jews within the besieged part of the ghetto were forced to dress in their holiday clothes and march in four columns, carrying signs and red flags, singing Russian songs, and chanting “Long live Stalin!” Thus they proceeded through the city streets toward those warehouses. According to the Judenrat, at least 12,000 Jews were led to the ditches.

**Daniel**: As one witness describes, for example, “People were ordered to wear their best clothes and dress their children in their holiday clothes. They were even ordered to take their babies with them. Everybody was arranged in four columns and led, under guard, to Novo Krasna Street. Next to a small square there was a parked car, from which they photographed one of the columns. And then the machine gun began firing, and the entire column was shot.” The Nazis turned this first *aktion*, into a sort of … propaganda show, let’s put it that way.

Irit: During the *aktion*, theft and looting took place in stages. First the Germans, then the rank-and-file police, then the siege was lifted and the hordes poured in like wolves pouncing on their prey, seizing the property of the victims. They stripped everything down to the bones. First objects and food. Then furniture. Anything they could rip out and carry – even windows and doors. Wooden houses were dismantled beam by beam. In the end, only skeletons of broken houses remained.

Thus the phased annihilation of the Minsk ghetto began. A few individuals, who had managed to play dead and escape, returned to the ghetto and have described the events.

On the day after the *aktion*, the skilled workers and Judenrat employees were returned to the ghetto. This *aktion* caused the terror of extermination to begin seeping into the ghetto Jews’ consciousness. Another German measure that reinforced both the fear of extermination and the division within the ghetto population was the concentration of all craftsmen and skilled workers in four streets that were protected against an *aktion*, and their separation from the rest of the population, which was concentrated in the larger part of the ghetto. The ghetto residents called those four streets “the Holy Quarter.” The fate of those who remained in the larger part of the ghetto became evident. These residents went crazy. Panic spread. Young girls sought men with professional certificates, young women married old men….

Only three weeks passed before the next *aktion* began, on November 20, 1941. More than 7,000 Jews were taken from their homes and sent to Tuchinka, where they were brutally slaughtered.

In his testimony, Anatoly Rubin describes this *aktion*:

Narrator: “This time too, they grabbed people from their homes as they found them. In undergarments, nightshirts, barefoot. It was late November, the ground was frozen, a light snow was falling. This time a special penal battalion of Lithuanians was sent to help the Germans and the local police. The people behaved differently, some tried to escape from the column but were immediately shot. Some prayed and cried. Nobody knew how to act or what the best course of action was. I walked next to my little sister Betty, next to her was our mother, and on my right at the end of the row was my sister Tamar. As we approached Zamkova Street, Tamar bolted and disappeared through the gates of one of the houses. My mother called after her, “Be careful, Tamar, they’ll kill you.” Later Tamar managed to cross over to the Aryan side, where she met with members of her underground. But somebody informed on her and she fell into the hands of the police. They jailed her, abused her, tortured her, and later hanged her as a partisan. Now I was marching at the end of the row; I can’t say that I was thinking about anything because I was planning to escape. And when the Lithuanian walking along the edge turned to look behind, I bolted without realizing what I was doing. And I burst through a broken fence into a yard. The Lithuanian saw this and managed to shoot at me, and the bullet whistled past me. I reached the Aryan side. I removed my yellow patches and walked on the ice of the frozen lake. But where would I go? It was already dark. Supposedly I was in my city, the city in which I was born and grew up. Everything is familiar to me. I used to spend so much time at this lake, swimming, playing, tanning…. Now I suddenly sense hostility from every direction. Everything has changed, dropped its mask. It seems to me that even the trees, the benches, and everything around me are looking at me with hate, pointing at me, “Zhid! Zhid!” Since I couldn’t find anywhere to go … I returned to the ghetto.”

Dr. Daniel Romanovsky: In both these *aktions*, the Nazis cleared out a certain part of the ghetto, and part of it, which they supposedly cleared out, they used as space for a German ghetto, or as it was called in the Minsk ghetto, “Hamburg ghetto.” In that month, November 1941, they brought German Jews to Minsk. The first group was from Hamburg. This is where the name “Hamburg ghetto” comes from, the counterpart to the “Russian ghetto” as it was called.

Irit: After these two *aktions*, seven transports of Jews from Germany and Vienna were brought to Minsk. Each transport had about 1,000 people. These Jews, termed “the Reich Jews,” were housed in a separate ghetto, named “Sonderghetto” or “the Reich Jews’ ghetto.” And the Minsk Jews, as noted, called it the “Hamburg ghetto.” It was surrounded by a barbed wire fence, and passage between the ghettos was prohibited. In May 1942, the transports from Vienna resumed, and by October of that year close to 10,000 people had arrived from that city. Between June and September 1942, fourteen transports from Theresienstadt arrived as well, bringing 19,000 people. Upon their arrival, most of these people were slaughtered at Maly Trostinec, in ditches prepared for them in advance. The lack of a common language and the cultural differences between the residents of the two ghettos resulted in relations that were characterized by mutual estrangement and mistrust. Moreover, the German Jews, at least initially, saw themselves as higher class and more entitled, and they were certain that the *aktions* were directed solely against the “Ostjuden” – the Eastern Jews. They received a certain measure of protection from the *Generalkommissar* of the district, Wilhelm Kube – who believed that they should be treated differently from the “beastly masses” of local Jews, although he still believed that they should be exterminated – and this reinforced the illusion that their fate would be different and fueled their aversion to the local Jews.

This impression among the Reich Jews also prevented them from trying to escape the ghetto into the forests. Such escapes were occurring in increasing numbers among the Jews of the local ghetto, inspired and encouraged by the underground.

This brings the first of our two episodes on the Minsk ghetto to a close. In the next episode we will present the unique story of the Minsk ghetto underground and describe what the ghetto Jews underwent up until October 1943, when the ghetto was liquidated.