Who Knows the Minsk Ghetto? The Ghetto’s Underground and the Story of the Ghetto’s Final Liquidation

In this episode we will continue to trace the fate of the Jews imprisoned in the Minsk ghetto, focusing on one of its unique facets – the strong underground that emerged in the ghetto’s very first days and lasted until its liquidation. Another unique aspect in this context is that the underground and the Judenrat – the ghetto’s official leadership – cooperated fully and jointly pursued what was virtually the only option for rescue: escape to the nearby forests, to the partisans. But could members of the general population escape? What did life in the forest among the partisans entail? And what remained of the community, its memories, and its story after the war and through to the present?

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

A quick comment before we begin: The podcast you are about to hear is the second of two episodes devoted to the Minsk ghetto. If you have not yet listened to Part A, please do so, as the subject of this episode builds on the content of the previous one.

One of the unique facets of the Minsk ghetto was the strong underground that formed within it at a very early stage. Initially, these were two separate groups, one of which was composed of refugees led by Hersh Smolar, who had fled from Bialystok at the start of the war. The second was a local group led by Nahum Feldman. In September 1941 the two groups merged into one movement. Although most of the underground’s activists were locals, its dominant figures were actually refugees from the western territories.

Dr. Daniel Romanovsky: Refugees from Poland were very driven; they were more, if one may say so, adventurous. The Jews originally from Minsk were more cautious. A Soviet person was cautious, was more cautious. As early as July 1941, and safe to say in good faith, Hersch Smolar proposed establishing self-defense groups, like those that had existed in czarist Russia. And for Nahum Feldman the main goal of the organization was to smuggle out as many capable people as possible, able-bodied fighters who would join the Soviet partisans.

In contrast to most of the other ghettos where an underground operated, the Minsk ghetto underground cooperated closely with the Judenrat. Mushkin and his partners provided underground members with fake identity cards and illegal apartments, found them work in the ghetto, and passed along information from the German authorities. Later, they established initial contact with the council of the general resistance operating in the city, as well as partisan units. After Smolar’s and Feldman’s groups united, the Jewish underground became a 500-member organization with a central leadership, propaganda apparatus, clear division of responsibilities, and large network of activists who infiltrated important institutions in the ghetto and the city. The underground created an aid fund, sent letters to the ghetto’s health department and doctors asking that they report typhus patients as suffering from influenza or pneumonia, which were “legal” diseases, and established disinfection stations. Underground members also launched a large-scale operation forging certificates of expertise for various occupations and distributing these among the ghetto’s residents. The underground exerted heavy pressure on Judenrat employees and Order Police officers who abused their position, sending letters of warning to each of them stating that unless they stopped, the “law against German collaborators” would be invoked against them. The letters were signed by “The Ghetto Committee.” Thus a rumor began to circulate among the Jewish community that there was another governing body, which was “supervising everything.”

The underground ruled out the option of an open revolt in the ghetto, knowing that it stood no chance of success. Its main goal was to smuggle as many battle-ready Jews as possible out to the forest. At the same time, it also sought ways of smuggling out residents not suited for partisan activities. The smuggling operation in which the first groups of people were transferred from the ghetto to partisan units began as early as November 1941. The relative success of this operation is largely attributable to the ghetto underground’s contacts with both the Judenrat and the city of Minsk’s general resistance. When a representative of the city’s resistance approached Mushkin, demanding that the ghetto support the resistance, Mushkin conditioned this support on the resistance helping extract people from the ghetto to join the partisans. Judenrat employees provided escapees with a few days’ worth of food and warm clothes, and added their names to the registry of the deceased. In addition, trustworthy policeman were stationed at the ghetto’s entrance to facilitate weapons smuggling and enable groups of residents to depart freely for the forests. The city’s resistance movement set the time of departure and the route these groups would follow and provided them with guides. Thanks to their experience and the special role they had been assigned, it was often children who were familiar with the dense forests surrounding the city and knew how to navigate them, guiding the escapees from the ghetto to the partisan locations.

Dr. Daniel Romanovsky: A group leaving the ghetto to join the partisans would exit under the guise of a labor crew. And the underground would prepare all sorts of forged certificates indicating that such-and-such crew was assigned to chop down trees at a certain place under the supervision of so-and-so, a German officer. But there was another problem. The members of such a crew could not bring along any personal possessions. So they needed another group to transport their possessions, and these were children. A child carrying a knapsack, bag, or something that didn’t attract the attention of the Belarusian police. An adult carrying a knapsack would be stopped by the Belarusian police. But not the child. To keep it brief and anecdotal, Michael Bess, whom I interviewed, had this job. He wasn’t a guide in the full sense of the word. He would walk at a distance of several meters from the supposed work crew that had exited the ghetto, carrying their belongings. He was small. He could hide. He was not afraid of the police. Policeman did not stop and search him.

Between November 1941 and March 1942, several hundred Jews from the ghetto joined partisan units. It was difficult to extract larger numbers of Jews, because some of the general resistance leaders and battalion commanders objected to Jews for anti-Semitic reasons. In late winter 1942, therefore, the Jewish underground started to think about establishing independent partisan bases.

Dr. Daniel Romanovsky: No one could survive alone in the forest, especially in winter. In the winter and in the freezing weather. First of all they needed some sort of housing, if you can call it that, at least bunkers. Besides that, they needed food supplies. The farmers wouldn’t give food to one, two, or five people, but when a unit turned up, armed with guns and grenades, demanding food, they got it. There were all sort of important circumstances. For example, if a Belarusian partisan showed up, a Belarusian commander, demanding food from the farmers, then the farmers provided it. Why? Because they understood, especially if it was 1943: Today he’s a partisan, today he is a partisan commander, and tomorrow he’ll be part of the Soviet government. When a Jew shows up demanding, let’s say, potatoes, it’s clear that this isn’t a future government man. Why give him food, when even the farmers don’t have that much? This is why they needed a system that could provide food for everyone. The Germans would launch operations against the partisans. From time to time, special military units would search the forests for partisans, and the first victims of such searches were small Jewish family camps.

As noted, the underground’s efforts to engage Reich Jews and warn them of the impending threat were unsuccessful.

In February 1942, Judenrat chairman Ilya Mushkin was imprisoned. He had reportedly tried to secure the release of a Jewish prisoner by bribing a German officer. He was hanged in March 1942 alongside the Order Police commander. His family members were slaughtered during one of the nighttime *aktions*. Leib Joffe, a refugee from Vienna, was appointed as Mushkin’s successor. Joffe continued the practice of cooperating with the underground.

The Germans notified him that 5,000 Jews would have to be deported from the ghetto on March 2, 1942, the Purim holiday. The deportation would not include German factory workers. In answer to the question whether to include children and the elderly, the answer was – it doesn’t matter. The aim of the deportation became clear.

Dr. Daniel Romanovsky: The Judenrat’s first inclination was to provide the Germans with a list of 5,000 old and ill people who had no chances of surviving. But the Jewish underground organization was opposed to any plan to submit a list of the elderly and ill. An underground representative stated at the Judenrat that there must be no trade in Jewish souls. This did not deter the SS from entering the Minsk ghetto on March 2 alongside Ukrainian, Latvian, and Lithuanian collaborators who supposedly just turned up. Most of the Jews hid, concealing themselves anywhere they could.

The Germans burst into the courtyards and homes and began searching. Everyone they caught was sent to the factory yard, along with the children from the children’s home on the same street. The procession of children was led by Director Fleischer, alongside Dr. Charnis, who was carrying little children in his arms.

On that day the Nazis assembled 3,412 people, according to the report that the Einsatzgruppen presumably submitted to Berlin. Einsatzgruppe 8 handled this matter, and … they had failed to reach the quota. So they waited for the workers who were doing forced labor to return, and apparently fulfilled the quota using laborers. In any case, they took 5,000 Jews to a certain place in Minsk where a monument to the Minsk ghetto now stands. And that is where they slaughtered everyone.

Anatoly Rubin wrote in his testimony:

Narrator: “As our column of about 60 people was heading back from our place of work to the ghetto, we sensed some sort of restlessness in the adjacent quarters. As we approached Uvobnaya Street, our column was stopped by a group of senior SS officers, large men with open collars all of whom were holding long rubber whips with a lead ball at the end. They took us to the ghetto’s barbed wire fence on the Aryan side and ordered us to kneel down in the snow. Then they started calling out the names of the skilled workers among us and those people were led away on their knees to where they were told. We were held there for two hours. My survival instinct was pounding inside me. How could I escape? I saw that inside the ghetto everything was calm, the purge had ended. I decided to break in, under the barbed wire. Twice I crawled over to the fence to dig a passage wide enough for my body in the snow … but the third time one of the SS officers saw me and whipped my head, blurring my vision. I crawled over to the group and lay in the snow. It was starting to get dark. The Germans finished their selection and came over to us, issuing the order “Aufstehen!” I realized that this moment was my last hope. I curled up into a ball and when everyone began standing up and getting in line, I snuck out and squeezed into the hole I had dug. A policeman shouted, “Stop! Come back!” and shot at me twice. I ran to one of the nearby houses, where a Jew led me into a cellar in which several families were hiding. The cellar was camouflaged amazingly well. They told me about the horrors that had taken place that day in the ghetto.

After the slaughter, barrels of flammable material were brought to the “pit” as they called it, and it was set on fire. More than 5,000 people were slaughtered that day.

The largest *aktion* to take place in the ghetto occurred on July 28, 1942. Toward the end of July, the Germans enlisted large forces and assembled regular trucks as well as others that had been converted into gas trucks. On July 27, a new decree was issued, ordering the ghetto residents to wear another patch, in addition to the yellow star and their home address, in accordance with the following classification:

A red tag for workers, a green tag for adults not capable of working, and a blue tag for children. On July 28, after the work crews had left the ghetto, the Germans entered. They combed through the ghetto with police units and ordered everyone to assemble in Jubilee Square. The same order was issued to the Hamburg ghetto Jews, who were also told “You’re going to Palestine!” They ordered Joffe to calm everybody down, explaining that this was a formal process of registration and replacement of their patches. In the middle of his speech, Joffe noticed the gas trucks. He stopped delivering his speech and began shouting, “Friends, they deceived me, they’re going to murder you. There’s a pogrom today!!” The Germans pulled Joffe off the stage and killed him.

In her testimony, L. Glazer described the massacre that followed:

“The frantic crowd started running in all directions, hoping to escape the horrendous death. It became chaotic. The fascists opened fire, shooting rapidly into the crowd they had encircled, but people continued to push through and break out. Face-to-face fighting began between unprotected people and armed fascists. The entire square was filled with bodies drenched in blood….”

Over the course of four days, the trucks and suffocating vehicles into which the ghetto Jews were crammed transported them from the ghetto to the nearby murder site of Maly Trostinec. Simultaneously, the Germans combed through the ghetto using sniffer dogs to locate anyone who was hiding. Close to 10,000 Jews were slaughtered during the *aktion*.

Following this large *aktion*, 9,000 Jews remained in the ghetto, which effectively turned into a labor camp. Depression and apathy prevailed among the survivors. The Judenrat was abolished and the Germans appointed a Jewish refugee named Epstein to run the ghetto. He and the “Operative Group” that he established to replace the Order Police instituted a reign of terror in the ghetto and complied fully with the Germans’ demands. In everybody’s eyes, Epstein and his associates – termed “Operativniks” – were traitors. Throughout 1943, the ghetto population dwindled. Some were sent to other labor camps, and some were killed. The ghetto was permanently liquidated in October 1943.

Minsk was liberated on July 3, 1944. The liberation was celebrated with a festive citywide parade organized by the partisans. Among them were Jews who had joined the fighting and Jews who had survived in family camps in the forests. It is estimated that close to 10,000 Jews had fled to the forests, and only half survived.

According to Shalom Cholawski, more than 90,000 Jews were slaughtered in the Minsk ghetto during the time it existed. Of the Reich Jews sent to the ghetto, only ten survived.

When the war ended, about 40,000 Jews were concentrated in Minsk. Most of them had either fled eastward when the war broke out or did not want to return to their small villages and towns. But their story did not end here.

Dr. Daniel Romanovsky: After 1945 came the Stalinist campaign against the Jews, the campaign against the cosmopolitans, and then the “doctors’ plot” with all of its ramifications.

In January 1953, toward the end of Stalin’s life, nine Jewish doctors were put on trial in Moscow on charges of belonging to a “Zionist terrorist gang” that was planning “to assassinate prominent leaders of the Soviet Union.” This marked an apex of sorts in what is known as the “Black Years” of Soviet Jewry, during which accusations of a Jewish conspiracy became widespread and libelous charges of Jewish plots were popping up almost everywhere. According to some sources, Stalin had even authorized a plan to deport all the Jews eastward, but his death in March 1953 disrupted its implementation. Even if this was an unfounded rumor that spread among the Jewish citizens of the Soviet state, as some researchers believe, the very fact that they believed such a possibility reflects the sense of persecution and insecurity that Soviet Jewry felt. On April 4, 1953, Moscow issued an official statement announcing that the doctors were innocent – and they were released.

After Stalin’s death, the Jews of Minsk began to hold an annual memorial vigil at the site where the ghetto Jews had been slaughtered in March 1942, “the pit” as it was termed, or *yama* in Russian.

Dr. Daniel Romanovsky: People would assemble there, not only Holocaust survivors, but also their children. Simply to say a word about the victims, at least, to recite the Kaddish, to do something. Only in the 1980s was a genuine monument established. Before that there was a placard of sorts with an inscription. Soviet style. And only in the late 1980s was a more serious monument erected.

But for the Minsk Jews, these vigils at the pit were part of, let’s say, Jewish life even for those who’d never been to a synagogue. For them this was more important. The authorities did not particularly approve, but they tolerated it.

In contrast to the large ghettos in the territories of Poland and Lithuania, the story of the Minsk ghetto is virtually unknown in Israel.

Dr. Daniel Romanovsky: To a large extent, this is a consequence of the Iron Curtain era. The cultural wall between the communist East and the free West greatly impeded any sort of empathy or understanding of what had happened in Soviet territory.

The fact that the Jewish underground in Minsk emerged mainly from the communist resistance is another reason why it has not received the prominent attention that uprisings by Zionist circles in Poland’s ghettos have received. Added to this, the Holocaust survivors from Soviet territories only began arriving in Israel after the Soviet Union collapsed, in the late 1980s, and more so in the early 1990s, when the collective memory of the Holocaust had already solidified in many respects. Because a majority of them did not speak Hebrew, their testimony would not have been accessible to most of the state’s citizens. In recent years, the multi-varied story of the Holocaust of Soviet Jewry has increasingly been coming to light, thanks both to the availability of previously classified archival material, and to the younger generation here in Israel.