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Abandoned libraries in the Warsaw ghetto 1942–1944. German librarians' plans

Summary: At its peak, approximately 450,000 people lived in the Warsaw Ghetto (1940–1943). Many of them had home libraries. There were also bookshops, public lending libraries, and a thriving street trade in antiquarian books. All of these books remained in the ghetto after their owners were deported to extermination camps, and eventually, after the ghetto uprising, the number of these volumes is estimated to be around 500,000.

The German librarian, Wilhelm Witte, commissary manager of three of Warsaw's most significant libraries, offered to the ghetto authorities to collect and store the abandoned books in the former Main Judaic Library building on Tłomackie Street. However, this turned out to be an unrealistic request, as the SS had seized all remaining Jewish possessions as well as the Library building and denied Witte any access to these books. Thus, the books of the ghetto's inhabitants were destroyed in the ghetto's ruins.

Keywords: Jewish libraries - Warsaw Ghetto 1940–1943 - Nazi occupation of Poland

The text below outlines the unrealistic plan of two German librarians, Gustav Abba and Wilhelm Witte, delegated by the Third Reich authorities to manage the academic libraries in the General Government. They attempted to save the remnants of the Jewish book collections remaining in the Warsaw Ghetto after the mass deportations to extermination camps from July 22 to September 21, 1942 and after the uprising of April 19 to May 16, 1943.

The author's intention is that this story, while it can contribute to research on the history of the Jewish book in the Warsaw Ghetto, presents a different approach from the one dominating the research on the fate of Jewish culture and its losses, which, as a rule, takes the perspective of the victims and not the perpetrators. A clear expression of such a perspective is the concept of "libricide", described, among others, in Rebecca Knuth's fundamental work¹ or Katarzyna Liszka's extensive article² analysing this concept in philosophical and historiographical terms.

However, following the interests of the author, a library historian, research tools specific for book studies are used in this project, analysing the book as a carrier of information and a tool of communication in society. It is, therefore, not the object of this article to define the role of books in preserving Jewish culture but rather to describe the activities of two German librarians, unknown in the literature to date. What were their intentions? What did they want to find among the ruins of the ghetto? Did they expect to discover anything valuable for German science after all among the books belonging to a culture doomed to extinction? Or was it the professional reflex of a librarian, trying to add to the collections of 'his' libraries every book, even those found in the ashes? That is something we will never know again...

The text describes the efforts of German librarians Wilhelm Witte and Gustav Abba to manage the stray books remaining in private flats and business premises in the Warsaw Ghetto after their owners had been deported to the extermination camp in Treblinka.

The Reich had directed the two German librarians mentioned above to look after Polish academic libraries.³ They recognised the problem of Jewish

1 R. Knuth, *Libricide: the regime-sponsored destruction of books and libraries in the twentieth century*, London 2003.

2 K. Liszka, *Dwie modalności libricide*, „Studia Judaica” 2017, No. 2, pp. 187–207.

3 German librarians Witte and Abb were sent to Poland in 1940 to look after the scientific libraries. Abb organised the Main Board of Libraires (Główny Zarząd Bibliotek) in Krakow, managing libraries within the General Government, and Witte headed the Warsaw libraries as commissioner. See A. Mężynski, *Dwa oblicza niemieckich bibliotekarzy w Polsce podczas okupacji 1939–1945*, „Z Badań nad Książką i Księgozbiorami Historycznymi” 2022, vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 393–406.

libraries and wanted to take over the books remaining in the ghetto after the deportation of their owners. Unsurprisingly, in the enormous literature on the Warsaw Ghetto and its losses, little has been written about books, which were, after all, intensely present in the lives of the inhabitants of all ghettos in the German-occupied areas. A few pages are devoted to them in the compendium by Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak.⁴ Some, but not sufficient information is provided by the publications *The Holocaust and the book: destruction and preservation*⁵ and David Shavit's article *Jewish Libraries in the Polish Ghettos during the Nazi era*.⁶

What is known about books and libraries in the Warsaw Ghetto? They can be divided into private books (the home libraries of ghetto inhabitants) and public books, i.e. those from lending libraries, libraries and bookshops. Barbara Temkin made valuable discoveries in 1934, namely assessing the number and characteristics of Jewish books in Warsaw, i.e. not yet in the ghetto, six years before its establishment (12.10.1940). These data can be considered at least partly authoritative for books from the period of the ghetto's existence. Temkin calculated that in 1934, there were 50 Jewish libraries in Warsaw. These were divided into workers' libraries (13), those attached to Zionist institutions (11), those attached to trade unions (6), Judaic libraries (2), private for-profit lending libraries (10), and small in-house libraries (6).⁷ In 1935, 19,349 readers used them; it should be emphasised that they were primarily workers and small merchants. However, they were also the readers in the Library of the Great Synagogue in Tłomackie Street, a scientific institution.

All the libraries mentioned above were public; besides, there were smaller or larger book collections in the ghetto houses, to which the inhabitants were very attached. It is impossible to count these books since no data are available; at most, it can be recalled that the Jewish population of Warsaw, even before the establishment of the ghetto in November 1940, is estimated at approximately 400,000 inhabitants.⁸ These were both the inhabitants of the districts which were to become part of the future ghetto, only some of whom owned larger or smaller home book collections, while there were residents moving in without books from other districts of Warsaw (about 138,000 Jews forced to move

4 B. Engelking, J. Leociak, *Getto warszawskie. Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście*, Warszawa 2013.

5 *The Holocaust and the book. Destruction and preservation*, ed. J. Rose, Amherst 2001.

6 D. Shavit, *Jewish Libraries in the Polish Ghettos during the Nazi era*, "Library Quarterly" 1982, Vol. 52, No. 2, pp. 103–121.

7 B. Temkin, *Biblioteki żydowskie w Warszawie w świetle cyfr*, „Dos Wirtszafteche Lebn” 1934, No. 6–7, pp. 20–27.

8 B. Engelking, J. Leociak, *op. cit.* p. 66.

into the ghetto) and, already later, resettlers inside the ghetto itself, where the authorities forced them to move frequently. At the same time, some 113,000 Poles moved out of the ghetto area, probably some of whom did not manage to take their books. Whether entering the ghetto or moving within it, only a small package was allowed to be taken with them. Carrying a large luggage with books was impossible.

Public book collections, i.e. those gathered in bookshops, lending libraries or antiquarian bookshops, also played a significant role. These books were read and circulated extensively among the ghetto community, but all these categories were threatened at some point. The occupiers introduced gradual restrictions on the functioning of these institutions. As early as February 9, 1940 (i.e. even before the ghetto was formally established), all private Jewish lending libraries were closed. On May 10, 1940, Polish booksellers were forbidden to purchase any publications from Jewish publishers, and on June 1, 1940, the Jews were banned from the book trade in general.

Unexpectedly, however, in spring 1941, the Judenrat [Jewish Council] obtained permission from the Germans to open bookshops, reading rooms and lending libraries. The people of the ghetto took advantage of this opportunity, and by April 1942, there were officially 24 libraries, reading rooms and bookshops in the ghetto. A list of these lending libraries was given by B. Engelking and J. Leociak (however, without indicating the number of books).⁹ They also stipulated that their inventory did not determine the addresses of small private lending libraries.¹⁰ The authors report an intensive readership and librarians delivering books to the readers, but they also state, "Today, it is impossible to reconstruct the addresses of small private lending libraries". On the other hand, ghetto chronicler Emanuel Ringelblum, recorded in February 1941: "in dozens of tenements there are libraries with Jewish and Polish books."¹¹ Ghetto residents exchanged these books, what should be recalled, but only those already available in the ghetto were involved, as new residents were not allowed to bring them in.

During the first and most numerous deportation from the ghetto to Treblinka from July 22 to September 21, 1942, some 300,000 people were deported from Warsaw, who obviously did not take their home libraries with them. These books, along with other abandoned possessions, often became the loot of Polish and Jewish plunderers...

It may be noted that in a similar situation of the liquidation of the Lodz Ghetto, the Jewish ghetto authorities collected 30,000 books from abandoned

9 B. Engelking, J. Leociak, *op. cit.* p. 585.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 583.

11 Quoted after: B. Engelking, J. Leociak, *op. cit.* p. 583.

flats, temporarily saving them from destruction. However, they did not manage to create any library from this mass of books, just an unused book repository,¹² which survived until the war's end, its fate unknown.

Returning to the main topic of this text, i.e. the fate of the books left behind in the Warsaw Ghetto after their inhabitants had left their homes, let us recall that SS units requisitioned the property left behind by the displaced Jews, specifically the Werterfassung Commission within their structure.¹³ In the General Government (GG), they were led by Odilo Globocnik, the police and SS commander of the Lublin district. He coordinated the "Aktion Reinhardt," targeting the Jews of the GG. He was given a special mandate to act independently to solve the "Jewish question" in the General Government, regardless of the competence of the local administrative authorities or the SS. SS squads confiscated the goods of prisoners brought to the extermination camps, but also property left by them in the deserted ghettos. The role of these troops was "the displacement itself, the use of manpower, the consumption of movable property, the capture of hidden values and real estate."¹⁴ Globocnik completed his task of taking Jewish property in the GG on October 19, 1943, and summarised his gains in a report submitted to Heinrich Himmler on January 5, 1944.¹⁵ In addition to calculating and summarising the value of money, foreign currency, jewels and diamonds, he counted the value of requisitioned household equipment and ordinary "clothing, underwear, feathers, and rags". Works of art, such as sculptures, paintings, and also books, occasionally appeared in these meticulous lists.

Books tended to remain in abandoned private dwellings or the premises of closed public libraries. Nor were they of primary interest to the SS squads robbing the property left behind due to their negligible commercial value.

They were, however, brought to the attention of the commissioned head of the State Library in Warsaw, Wilhelm Witte. The State Library was an artificial creation which came into being in July 1940 and which administratively united the National Library, the University Library and the Library of the Krasiński Ordinance. The manager, Witte, was a German librarian who had arrived from

12 *Kronika getta łódzkiego, Litzmannstadt Getto 1941–1944*. Vol. 5: *Suplementy*, compiled and edited by J. Baranowski [et al], Łódź 2009, p. 277. See also I. Olejnik, *Głód słowa drukowanego: o bibliotekach i czytelnictwie w Getcie Łódzkim*, „Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Librorum” 2013, No. 17, pp. 97–108.

13 Werterfassung – a SS-subordinated institution collecting and sorting the property of Jews deported to their deaths. It managed a number of warehouses; it employed around 4,000 workers. Almost all of them were deported to Treblinka in April 1943. After: Ringelblum Archive, Vol. 33, 2024, p. 480.

14 S. Piotrowski, *Misja Odyla Globocnika. Sprawozdania o wynikach finansowych zagłady Żydów w Polsce*, Warsaw 1949, p. 24.

15 Ibid, pp. 27–30.

Breslau, where he had headed the Slawik Department at the University Library. In the GG, it was subordinate to the Main Library Board (GZB), located in the GG capital, Krakow. The director of the GZB was Gustav Abb, seconded to Krakow from Berlin, where he was director of the University Library.

These two German librarians would try to take over the books left in the ghetto after the deportations that began in July 1942 and would fight a battle with the SS on this issue, started by Witte. In August 1942, he sent a letter to SS man Heinz Friedrich Auerswald, commissioner of the Jewish Housing District in Warsaw (Der Kommissar für den jüdischer Wohnbezirk in Warshaw). In this letter, he euphemistically referred to the mass deportation to Treblinka (July 21 – September 12, 1942) as a “reduction of the area of the Jewish residential district” and added that in the abandoned houses, there would remain

znacząca liczba książek i zbiorów książkowych, których zniszczenie byłoby niecelowe, ponieważ:

1. Znajdują się w nich liczne dzieła, które poczynając od wybuchu wojny 1939 r., zostały wypożyczone przez żydowskich użytkowników z bibliotek publicznych – także z Rzeszy Niemieckiej – i mimo wszystkich monitów, nie zostały zwrócone.
2. W zbiorach książek dzielnicy żydowskiej znajduje się bardzo dużo dzieł, które powinny znaleźć się w bibliotekach państwowych Rzeszy Niemieckiej i Generalnego Gubernatorstwa z powodów politycznych i naukowych.

W związku z powyższym proszę o spowodowanie:

- I. by wszystkie zbiory książkowe dzielnicy żydowskiej, niezależnie czy duże czy małe, własności prywatnej czy publicznej, znajdujące się również w handlu księgarskim, zostały przez odpowiednie władze skonfiskowane i zabezpieczone;
- II. by Biblioteka Państwowa w Warszawie, jako biblioteka dystryktu, otrzymała upoważnienie do przejęcia tych książek i do wykorzystania ich pod względem bibliotecznym, w interesie władz GG i Rzeszy.¹⁶

[a significant number of books and book collections that it would be inadvisable to destroy because:

1. They contain numerous works that, starting from the outbreak of war in 1939, were borrowed by Jewish users from public libraries, including those of the German Reich, and, despite all reminders, were not returned.
2. The Jewish quarter's book collections contain many works that should be included in the state libraries of the German Reich and the General Government for political and scientific reasons.

16 *Biblioteki naukowe w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie w latach 1939–1945. Wybór dokumentów źródłowych*. Selected and compiled by A. Mężyński with the collaboration of H. Łaskarzevska, Warszawa 2003, pp. 115–116.

Given the above, I ask you to cause:

- I. that all book collections of the Jewish quarter, whether large or small, of private or public ownership, also found in the book trade, be confiscated and secured by the relevant authorities;
- II. that the State Library in Warsaw, as the district library, is to be authorised to take possession of these books and to use them in library terms in the interests of the GG and Reich authorities.]

At the same time, Witte notified his superior in Kraków, G. Abb, of this intervention. He also informed him that the Jewish quarter's population after two months of liquidation action would be reduced to 70,000 people because the rest, about 200,000 people, would be deported.

Nie wezmą oni ze sobą swojej własności – przekonywał Abba – i z całą pewnością można oczekiwać, że pozostanie bardzo wiele książek, wśród których znajdą się, bez wątpienia, liczne zbiory wartościowego piśmiennictwa a nawet rękopisów.¹⁷

[They will not take their property with them, he convinced Abb, and it is certainly to be expected that a lot of books will remain, among which, no doubt, numerous collections of valuable writings and even manuscripts.]

He presumed there would be around 500,000 of these abandoned books, and he even drew up a cost estimate for transporting them in wagons to the State Library, which he managed. It was estimated at 10,000 zlotys. The problem for Witte, however, was finding storage space for so many books. Neither the National Library of Warsaw nor the University Library in Warsaw, which had already suffered from a shortage of storage space before the war, would accommodate them. They were additionally filled during the occupation with the library collections of liquidated institutions and private individuals. Witte, attempting to find a way out of this situation, intended to take up the former Main Judaic Library building at the Great Synagogue (Tłomackie Street). Its collection of approximately 40,000 volumes was taken by Kommando Paulsen¹⁸ to the headquarters of the Reich Security Headquarters in Berlin (RSHA) in the first months of the occupation, while the Library building survived the blowing up of the Synagogue (May 16, 1943), despite being in its immediate vicinity, and exists, renovated, to this day. During the occupation, the building, which was deprived of its collections, was used by the SS for various non-library

17 A. Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy w latach 1939–1945*, Warszawa 2010, p. 201: W. Witte's letter to G. Abb, August, 18 1942.

18 A. Mężyński, *Kommando Paulsen. Październik-grudzień 1939 r.*, Warszawa 1994.

purposes, including as a temporary staging area for Jews from Germany who were being transported to death camps.

Witte's plan was apparently simple: search the ghetto's abandoned flats and other places where books might have been collected, then transport them to the storages of the former library building on Tłomackie Street or to the State Library. Witte probably knew little about the books he planned to find in the ghetto ruins. One can only assume that apart from the private ones, he could have also accepted the collections of the Jewish public libraries, many of which worked in Warsaw before the war.

During the occupation, the sale of antiquarian books revived throughout Warsaw, including the ghetto, and the street book trade flourished. The impoverished intelligentsia of the entire city sold off their home book collections to earn a living. Witte could also count on such a loot.

However, the road to the realisation of his plan was long. Auerswald did not reply to Witte's letter of August 1942. The librarian did not give up and sent another letter on October 24, 1942, to SS-Oberführer Arpad Wigand, the district's highest SS authority, i.e. the SS and police commander in the Warsaw district (in 1941–1942). He repeated the argumentation known from his letter to Auerswald, adding that a useful role in this action could be played by, as intermediaries, the Jewish Council (Judenrat) and Professor Majer Bałaban, known in the State Library in Warsaw because he had attended it on German authorities' commission during the occupation, with the task of continuing the "Bibliography of the Jews in Poland".

Wigand reacted quickly. Two days later, Witte was received by Sturmbannführer Max Jesuiter, head of the organisational department in Wigand's office. He informed Witte that the books and library collections of the 'former ghetto' had been requisitioned by the Reich Security Main Office in Berlin, and their further fate is unknown to the SS in Warsaw. The SS man thus most likely disposed of Witte, using an argument that the librarian could not argue with at the time because no one could oppose the decisions of the powerful German police headquarters in Berlin. The argument was just an excuse. The RSHA could not take any interest in the books remaining in the ghetto, if only because transporting them to Berlin was not possible. The RSHA was building its library, where the Warsaw collection of the Main Judaic Library at the Great Synagogue was brought in 1939. However, space shortage meant that some of the books that had been looted all over Europe remained in unpacked bundles in the basement of the RSHA library in Berlin. Moreover, it was in 1942 that the Berlin libraries began a gradual evacuation of their collections for fear of Allied air raids. The RSHA Library also exported part of its collection to Lower

Silesia and the Czech lands.¹⁹ However, it is possible that SS intended to send some books collected after the suppression of the ghetto uprising by the Jewish Werteerfassung kommandos to Wartheland, with Poznań as its capital, according to the arrangements between Himmler and Frank at the time concerning other types of orphaned objects.²⁰

Having obtained such an explanation from SS headquarters in Warsaw, Witte capitulated. However, his superior, G. Abb, did not give up. He prompted Ludwig Eichholz, head of the Department of Science and Education in the GG government, to intervene with Friedrich Krüger, the SS and police commander in the General Government. On December 7, 1942, Eichholz sent a letter to Krüger questioning the RSHA's intention of book requisition in the ghetto. All public and private libraries in the General Government, including the libraries of the ghettos in Warsaw and Krakow, remain at the disposal of the State Library, he argued, so these books cannot be exported from the GG without the explicit permission of Governor General Hans Frank. The Main Board of Libraries should also be notified of all exports.²¹ The police and SS in the GG were in constant conflict with H. Frank's civil authorities. To avoid any accusations of formal failings, Krüger had to reply to a letter from a high official of the GG government. Thus, on Krüger's behalf, SS-Obersturmbannführer (signature illegible) replied on March 20, 1943.²² He explained that it was on Krüger's orders that from the very beginning of the resettlement action, all the property of the Jewish ghetto was being confiscated for the benefit of the SS and that no exceptions were to be made. The books remaining in the Warsaw Ghetto were examined by a special SS commission and brought to the attention of the RSHA. This office sent an appraiser from Berlin who expressed interest in certain items, namely fundamental scientific publications, encyclopaedias, bibliographies, and dictionaries. After this selection, the RSHA envoy took the selected books to

19 On the RSHA Library in Berlin see, inter alia, D. Schidorsky, *Confiscation of libraries and assignments to forced labour: Two documents of the Holocaust*, 'Libraries and Culture' 1998, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 347–348.

20 In the summer 1940, the civil administration gained exclusive authority over the Judenrats and forced labour of the Jews, in early 1942 also in matters of confiscation and displacement. The RSHA prepared two trials against corruption in Frank's inner circle and forced establishment of the post of State Secretary for Security in the Governor General's office, which in May 1942 became Friedrich W. Krüger, chief of police and Himmler's plenipotentiary as RKFDV. De facto this meant that the SS and Gestapo gained full authority over the Jews and their property. In the summer 1943, Frank and Himmler concluded a compromise, but Jewish property accumulated in SS warehouses was not transported to the GG Trust Office until June 1944 at the earliest.

21 A. Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy...*, p. 203; L. Eichholz's letter to F.W.Krüger of 7 XII 1942.

22 A. Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy...*, p. 203.

Berlin. Moreover, the letter assured that the SS would still work on the ghetto books, wanted to centralise them and divide by language. This narrative was mainly untrue and aimed solely at shutting the mouths of Witte and Abb.

Therefore, Abb and Witte had to capitulate when Krüger, the chief SS officer and chief of the GG police, declared that the SS had supreme possession of all the goods remaining in the ghettos and would not allow anyone into them. They knew, of course, that Krüger was describing events that most likely had not taken place, such as the visit of the RSHA expert to Warsaw, which was hardly probable.

However, Abb raised the issue of the post-Jewish books once again, immediately after the fall of the ghetto uprising, addressing Krüger directly this time and repeating his request to transfer both the books and the building of the former Central Judaic Library. Again, the same SS-Obersturmbannführer, name unknown, responded on Krüger's behalf. This time, he ignored the subject of books, and as for the building, he explained that it had been transferred to the administration of the military garrison of Warsaw.²³ Thereby, the police authorities cut off the discussion about books in the Warsaw Ghetto and the Library building remaining there, proving their superiority over the civilian administration, including the two librarians Abb and Witte and Eichholz, the GG government's representative.

These decisions, resulting from the breakdown of political forces in the GG, were the reason that the SS did not allow anyone to seize the few books in the ghetto that did not burn after the uprising (April – May 1943) and remained in the ruins, even though they were utterly useless for them, as it was the only owner of all Jewish property. Finally, after the end of the uprising, they became objects of looting and shady trade, which continued even after the war.

Two rhetorical questions can be posed in conclusion. Why do the events described above find so little resonance in the literature? The book, although often mentioned in the correspondence and memoirs of ghetto inhabitants, rarely appears as a part of library collections. Supposedly, given the enormity and gravity of the existential threats, problems such as the fate of libraries were relegated to the background.

The Polish reader of historical studies relating to World War II may be surprised to learn that German librarians, sent to the General Government to bring German order to Polish libraries, wanted to rescue books in the ghetto. Both Abb and Witte were members of Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), and the former was also a declared Nazi. Nevertheless, they attempted to snatch from the clutches of the SS and save from destruction

23 Ibid, p. 204: letter of September 16, 1943.

ghetto books of unknown value. A complete answer cannot be given, but one can hypothesise that the object of their concern was the book itself, regardless of its provenance. They were librarians of the old German school, thus they could not accept the idea of destroying a scholarly book, and they considered as such, at least some of the books in the ghetto, and for the sake of principle and pragmatics of their profession, they took action to seek their protection, although their position in the clash with the SS proved too weak. Witte's and Abba's professional integrity should not, however, obscure the fundamental conclusion to be drawn from their correspondence quoted above and the argumentation contained therein. Concerned about the fate of the orphaned books, they were undoubtedly well aware of the fate of their owners who had been deported to Treblinka, only that this was of no interest to them.

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