

The Discussion on Fighting Aims by the Activists of the Bialystok Ghetto, February 27, 1943

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Mordecai [Tenenbaum-Tamaroff]: It's a good thing that at least the mood is good. Unfortunately, the meeting won't be very cheerful. This meeting may be historic, if you like, tragic if you like, but certainly sad. That you people sitting here are the last *halutzim* in Poland; around us are the dead. You know what happened in Warsaw, not one survived, and it was the same in Bendin and in Czestochowa,* and probably everywhere else. We are the last. It is not a particularly pleasant feeling to be the last: it involves a special responsibility. We must decide today what to do tomorrow. There is no sense in sitting together in a warm atmosphere of memories! Nor in waiting together, collectively, for death. Then what shall we do?

We can do two things: decide that when the first Jew is taken away from Bialystok now, we start our counter-*Aktion*. That nobody will go to the factories from tomorrow, that none of us is allowed to hide when the *Aktion* starts.

Everybody will be mobilized for the job. We can see to it that not one German leaves the ghetto, that not one factory remains whole. It is not impossible that after we have completed our task someone may by chance still be alive.

But we will fight to the last, till we fall. We can also decide to get out into the forest. The possibilities must be considered realistically. Two of our people went off today to prepare a place, but in any event military discipline will be in force after the meeting today. We must decide for ourselves now. Our daddies will not take care of us. This is an orphanage. There is one condition: our approach must be ideological, the ideas of the Movement must be our guide. Anyone who wishes, or believes or hopes that he has a real chance of staying alive and wants to make use of it well and good. We will help him any way we can. Let everyone decide for himself whether to live or die. But together we must find a collective answer to our common question. As I do not want to impose my views on anybody, I will not come out with my one answer for the time being.

Yitzhak [Engelman]: We are today discussing two ways of dying. To move out into attack means certain death for us. The second way means death two or three days later. We must examine both ways, perhaps there is something that could be done. As the exact details are not known to me, I would like to hear more from better informed comrades. If some comrades believe that they could stay alive, then we should think about it.

Hersh [Rosental]: ...Here in Bialystok we are fated to live out the last act of this blood-stained tragedy. What can we do and what should we do? The way I see it the situation really is that the great majority in the ghetto and of our group are sentenced to die. Our fate is sealed. We have never looked on the forest as a place in which to hide, we have looked on it as a base for battle and vengeance. But the tens of young people who are going into the forests now do not seek a battlefield there, most of them will lead beggars lives there and most likely will find a beggars death. In our present situation our fate will be the same, beggars all.

Only one thing remains for us: to organize collective resistance in the ghetto, at any cost, to let the ghetto be our Musa Dagh,** to write a proud chapter on Jewish Bialystok and on our Movement....

Our way is clear: when the first Jew is taken away, the counter-*Aktion* will begin. If anyone succeeds in taking a rifle from one of the murderers and getting to the forest fine. A young, armed person can find his place in the forest. If we still have time left to prepare the departure to the forest, then it is a place for battle and revenge.

I have lost everything, all those close to me; and yet, subconsciously, one wants to live. But there is no choice. If I thought that there might be escape, not just for individuals, but for 50 or 60% of the ghetto Jews to survive, I would say that the way of the Movement should be to stay alive at all costs. But we are condemned to death.

Sarah [Kopinski]: Comrades! If it is a question of honor, we have already long since lost it. In most of the Jewish communities the *Aktionen* were carried out

smoothly without a counter-*Aktion*. It is more important to stay alive than to kill five Germans. In a counter-*Aktion* we will without doubt all be killed. In the forest, on the other hand, perhaps 40 or 50% of our people may be saved. That will be our honor and that will be our history. We are still needed, we will yet be of use. As we no longer have honor in any case, let it be our task to remain alive.

Hanoch [Zelaznogora]: No illusions! We can expect nothing but death down to the last Jew. We have before us two possibilities of death. The forest will not save us, and the counter-*Aktion* will certainly not save us. The choice that is left us is to die with dignity. The outlook for our resistance is poor. I don't know whether we have the necessary means for combat. It is the fault of all of us that our means are so small, but that is in the past, we must make do with what we have. Bialystok will be liquidated completely like all the other Jewish cities. Even if the factories were exempted, their manpower left untouched in the first *Aktion*, nobody can believe now that they will be spared this time. Obviously the forest offers greater possibilities of revenge, but we must not go there to live on the mercy of the peasants, to buy food and our lives for money.

To go to the forest means to become active partisans, and for that one needs the proper weapons. The arms that we have are not suitable for the forest. If there is still time we should try to get arms and go to the forest. If the *Aktion* starts first, then we must respond when the first Jew is taken.

Chaim [Rudner]: There are no Jews left, only a few remnants have remained. There is no Movement left, only a remnant. There is no sense speaking about honor. Everyone must save himself as best he can. It does not matter how they will judge us. We must hide, go to the forest....

Mordecai: If we want it sufficiently, and make it our aim, we could protect the lives of our people to the end, as long as Jews remain in Bialystok. I want to ask a drastic question: do those members who favor going to the "forest" think

we should hide and not react during the coming *Aktion*, so as to escape into the forest later?

(Voices from all sides: No, not that!)

We have heard two opinions, from Sarah and Chaim on the one side, and from Hershl and Hanoch on the other. You decide. One thing is certain, we won't go off to the factories and pray to God there that they should take away the people in the streets in order that we may be saved. Nor will we watch from the factory windows when our comrades from another factory are taken away.

We can take a vote Hershl or Chaim....

Shmulik [Zolty]: This is the first time in my life that I have taken part in a meeting on death. We are planning the counter-*Aktion* not in order to write history but to die an honorable death, as befits a young Jew at this time... Now about the *Aktion*. All our experience teaches us that we can have no confidence in the Germans despite their promises that the factories would be safe, and that only those who are not working will be taken away, etc. Only with the aid of deception and confusion did they succeed in taking thousands of Jews to slaughter. But despite all that we have a chance of surviving the *Aktion* alive and safely.

Everybody is playing for time, and we must do the same. In the short time that is left to us we must work to improve our weapons, which are at present poor and small in number.

We must also do what we can as regards the forest, where we can fulfill a double task. I don't want to be misunderstood and have the fact that we hid during the *Aktion* judged as cowardice.

No, no, no! Man's instinct to live is so great that we must consider our self-interest first here. I don't care if others go in our stead. We have a much better claim to life than others, and by right.

We have an aim in life: to stay alive at all costs. We were brought here from Vilna because there was a threat of total liquidation there and some witnesses must stay alive. For that reason, if there is not to be total liquidation here, we

must wait and try to gain time. But if there is to be liquidation let all join in the counter-*Aktion*, and let me die with the Philistines....

Ethel [Sobol]: Practically speaking, if an *Aktion* should take place within the next few days then there is only one way left open to us, to start the counter-*Aktion*. But if we should have more time at our disposition then we should think in the direction of getting away to the forest.

I hope I will be able to carry out the duties that will be imposed on us. Perhaps, in the course of events, I will find myself stronger. I am determined to do everything that needs to be done.

Hershl was right when he said that we are starting out on a desperate move. Whether we want it or not, our fate is already sealed. It only remains for us to decide between one kind of death and another. I am calm and cool.

Mordecai: The opinion of the comrades is clear we should do everything to get out as many people as possible to join the partisans battle in the forest. Every one of us who is in the ghetto when the *Aktion* begins must move as soon as the first Jew is taken. There can be no bargaining with us over life; one must understand the situation as it is.

The most important thing of all is to maintain until the end the character and pride of the Movement.

* This estimate is the result of lack of information on what happened in Warsaw. In the deportation that took place in Warsaw in January, the Jewish Fighting Organization lost only part of its people. The information on Bendin and Czestochowa is also based on incomplete knowledge of the situation.

** The reference is to the book by F. Werfel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, which describes the mass murder of the Armenians by the Turks during World War I.

Yad Vashem Archives, M-11/7.

Source: *Documents on the Holocaust, Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland and the Soviet Union*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1981, Document no. 137