

The Election of Elkes as Head of the Judenrat in Kovno

...In the first days of August, Kaminsky informed the Jewish Committee that the ghetto in Slobodka would be headed by an *Aeltestenrat* (Council of Elders) which would be elected by the Jews themselves. But first of all they would have to elect a "Head of the Jews" – that was the demand of *Hauptsturmfuehrer* Jordan, who was responsible for Jewish affairs in Kovno. This created a very grave problem for the Kovno Jews: whom to elect to this position of exceptionally great responsibility, which was at the same time difficult and dangerous. For this purpose the Council called an enlarged meeting of all those who had been active in public affairs of any kind and had remained in the city. The meeting was held on August 5 in the offices of the Council in Daukshos Street, and about 30 persons attended.

This Jewish meeting, the last in the city of Kovno itself before it was left by its Jewish residents, was unusually dramatic. Everybody was deeply aware that a solution must be found for a problem that literally involved their lives. It was not easy to find a suitable candidate for this unusual position. The candidate would have to know how to find a common language with the Germans, and know also how to appear before them as the representative of the ghetto. Even if it was understood from the outset that the man elected would be only "Head of the Jews," that is, the lowly representative of the "accursed Jews" – in the defiled vocabulary of the Germans – nevertheless it was also understood that everything possible must be done that the man elected would, despite everything, have a certain authority in the eyes of the Germans and that they would take into consideration what he said. Everybody understood that the man elected must have qualities that enabled him to influence the Germans to a certain degree. It was also necessary that the man who would stand at the head of the ghetto must have a clean public record, be a good Jew and a good man, discerning and clever, courageous and of strong character, so that he would not be easily discouraged and would not bend his knees when he had to stand before the Germans as the tragic messenger of an unhappy Jewish community, without salvation and surrounded by ravaging beasts.

Several candidates were proposed at the meeting. However, none of them could unite those taking part in the meeting around himself. In addition, the candidates proposed all refused to accept this task. A great feeling of depression spread through the meeting. After lengthy discussions Dr. Z. Wolf, the chairman of the meeting, proposed the candidacy of Dr. E. Elkes, a loyal and Zionist Jew, and a famous doctor in the city of Kovno. The proposal was accepted immediately by the whole assembly, and with great enthusiasm. But Dr. Elkes refused to accept this appointment. Again there was great confusion of spirit. Rabbi Schmukler then rose from his place and made a speech that was moving and full of pain, and shook everyone deeply. "How terrible is our position" – he said in a trembling voice – "that we are not offering the revered Dr. Elkes the respected position of head of the Jewish Community of Kovno, but the shameful and humiliating one of 'Head of the Jews', who is to represent us before the Germans. But please understand, dear and beloved Dr. Elkes, that only to the Nazi murderers will you be 'Head of the Jews'; in our eyes you will be the head of our Community, elected in our most tragic hour, when blood runs from all of us and the murderer's sword is suspended over our heads. It has fallen to your part to accept duties of unequalled difficulty, but at the same time it is also a great privilege and deed of charity, and you do not have the right to escape from it; stand at our head, defend us, you shall be with us and we will all be with you, until we arrive at the great day of salvation!" When Rabbi Schmukler had finished speaking he wept, and all the assembly wept bitter tears with him. Dr. Elkes stood pale and silent. All could see what was happening in the depth of his soul and all felt that in these tragic moments Dr. Elkes understood that it was his duty to make this great sacrifice that a cruel fate had imposed upon him. A feeling of relief descended on all, and a ray of secret hope shone into the broken hearts of all those present....

Source: Y. Arad, Y. Gutman, A. Margaliot (editors), *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, pp. 384-386.

