

Czerniakow, Adam

(1880-1942), Chairman of the Warsaw *Judenrat*. Born in Warsaw, Czerniakow was trained as a chemical engineer. He served on the Warsaw Municipal Council from 1927-1934, and was elected to the Polish Senate in 1931. Even though Czerniakow was a member of the Jewish community's executive council before World War II, the Jews of Warsaw did not consider him to be one of their leaders. He was not a member of any Jewish political party, was considered to be an assimilated Jew, and could not speak Yiddish very well.

In spite of this, when the Nazis invaded Warsaw and the chairman of the Jewish community council fled the city, the mayor asked Czerniakow to take his place as the leader of the Jews. The Germans ordered him to establish a *Judenrat* in October 1939. During the first few months of the occupation, some leading *Judenrat* members managed to leave the country. Czerniakow also had this opportunity, but he refused to shirk his leadership duties and criticized those who did.

The Warsaw Ghetto was established in October 1940. At this point, the *Judenrat*, led by Czerniakow, took on many new municipal-like responsibilities, including food, work, sanitation, housing, culture, and health services for the inhabitants of the ghetto. The *Judenrat* grew to encompass 25 different departments and 6,000 employees—more than 11 times the number of workers in Warsaw's Jewish Council before the war.

Czerniakow was strenuously criticized by Warsaw's underground resistance for what they saw as collaboration with the Nazis. However, Czerniakow's policy of trying to work within the system was his attempt at saving lives. He tried to keep the Germans out of the internal affairs of the ghetto as much as possible; this enabled Jews to illegally smuggle food and other necessities restricted by the Nazis. In his daily contact with the German police, Czerniakow tried to arouse some sympathy for the plight of his ghetto's Jews and extract aid from them. This did not usually work, though, and Czerniakow was even beaten up twice for his efforts. He was able to get some help from

the ghetto commissar, Heinz Auerswald. But, Auerswald also betrayed Czerniakow when he hid the truth about plans for mass deportations.

Czerniakow was also criticized by the ghetto's lead historian, Emanuel Ringelblum, who felt that because of his assimilated background, Czerniakow could not fully identify with his Jewish constituents in the ghetto. It is true that Czerniakow appointed other assimilated Jews to important positions, such as Joseph Szerynski—a police officer who had converted to Christianity—whom Czerniakow made commander of the ghetto police. However, unlike other *Judenrat* chairmen, Czerniakow did not use his position for personal gain, and would only go so far in cooperating with Nazi demands.

The Germans began a two-month wave of deportations to the Treblinka Extermination Camp during the summer of 1942. On July 22 Czerniakow was ordered to round up Jews for "resettlement in the east." He knew what that innocuous term really meant, and was not prepared to surrender the Jews of his ghetto to certain death. The next day, at 4:00 p.m., Czerniakow took his own life. Some say that he left a note to his wife explaining his actions: "They are demanding that I kill the children of my people with my own hands. There is nothing for me to do but to die."

Czerniakow kept a diary from September 1939 until the day he died; it can be found today at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. This public diary, which serves as a vital primary source, consists of 1,009 pages that chronicle the current events in Warsaw from the German invasion, through the establishment of the ghetto, to the beginning of the deportations.