

Polish Jews Encounter an “Ethnic German” (January 1942)

Abstract

Jozef Zelkowicz was a Polish Jew who chronicled life in the Lodz Ghetto. Like countless other Holocaust survivors, he described how his “Aryan” Polish neighbors were able to become classified as so-called *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) after the invasion of Poland in 1939. Many exploited their newfound power for material benefit—some to murderous effect.

Source

Twenty-Five Chickens and One Dead Document

Through a cock and a hen Tur Malka was destroyed.

—*Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Gittin 57a^[1]

History loves to repeat itself. Its nuances, however, can be found in documents, though it is the nature of such documents either to tell us too much, and so to hide those nuances from us, or to tell us too little, so that their story must be enlarged by oral tradition. Documents are often so laconic in their tone, so dry, and seem so devoid of anything important to relate that they might as well be discarded, with nothing to be carefully considered and nothing remembered. But beware of those little scraps of paper that seem to tell us nothing at all. Don't throw them away until you've examined and researched them thoroughly.

Should you come across an unimportant, meaningless scrap of paper like the following, for example:

At approximately 7 o'clock on Shabbat, twenty-five live chickens were seized at 19 Podrieczna Street and brought to the HIOD. In consultation with Rozenblat, they were disposed of as follows:

13 hens left on-site

6 hens to Drewnowska Street

1 hen—Rozenblat

5 hens, i.e., 20 meal portions—distributed to HIOD.^[2]

Do not, under any circumstances—though it is unsigned, undated, and written in pencil—throw it away. Such a scrap of paper can sometimes be a very important document.

Though it says nothing at all, such a piece of paper can sometimes represent a crucial confirmation of the saying *Vox populi, vox dei*.^[3]

Such a dry and almost mute scrap of paper, discovered among junky old books, will illuminate—if you know how to read it properly—one of the ghetto's most murderous and tragic stories and bring it right before your eyes.

It's the story of twenty-four who perished senselessly, for absolutely nothing at all—twenty-four Jews.

It's the story of twenty-four human beings whose lives came to an end in the street, as if they were rabid dogs.

It's a story of twenty-four human beings shot down by a beast over a period of several days.

The little scrap of paper, found by chance in the ghetto archive, makes no mention of twenty-four murdered Jews; it speaks only of twenty-five live chickens. The Department of Vital Statistics tells us a little something—numbers are its business. Shot and killed in July 1940: twenty men and fifteen women. Total: thirty-five people. The details: their given names, family names, ages, occupations, and causes of death can be found in the burial department of the Jewish Community, if you rummage through the roughly fourteen hundred death entries recorded for the month of July.

The actual story, however—and the logical connection between twenty-five live chickens and those who were shot dead—must be learned from the mouths of the people and begins with a *sheygetz* from the city.^[4] He was a *sheygetz*, a city boy, though born and raised in Zielony Rynek among Jews. It was there, in Zielony Rynek, that he came to be known by the name “redheaded Janek,” and it was there, after considering his situation carefully one day, that he decided to become a turncoat and transform himself into an ethnic German, or *Volksdeutscher*.

As a *Volksdeutscher*, since all Jewish doors were open to him, he made it his business to barge in wherever he pleased, and without fear of any consequences, to plunder any Jewish possessions that caught his eye. And as a *Volksdeutscher* he was free to snatch Jews off the street for forced labor, with some paying him off willingly or having their pockets emptied by him when they refused. As a Pole bred and born, Janek was probably familiar with the Polish proverb *Nie masz gorszego chama, jak ze stugi pana*—that is, “There is no worse boor than a servant turned lord.” And through his actions he labored mightily to confirm what the common folk have always known: from a lowly porter brought up in Zielony Rynek, and a life hauling sacks for the Jews, Janek had been reborn a prince.

In constant wailing and woe when the noose of hauling sacks had been pulled tight round his shoulders, Janek the *Volksdeutscher* could now saunter about midweek in his Sunday best and drink himself silly whenever he pleased. Where before Janek had hauled hundred-kilogram sacks for twenty groschen apiece, now his pants pockets—that once contained the beans he managed to steal from Jewish shops for his pigeons—are stuffed with twenty-mark notes. Before, Janek had to beg for the round beans or steal them. More often than not he stole them. When caught, he’d get a rap right across his paws or a slap on the snout. Today those twenty-mark notes are handed over to him in a docile and willing fashion, and when the giver is not willing or quick enough Janek lays into him from head to toe.

When Janek received slaps for his petty thefts they were delivered with a sense of justice and mercy. The few beans he nabbed didn’t amount to much, they were nothing—but the redheaded dog needed to learn what not to touch, so raps across the knuckles and little slaps were what he received. Janek was happy enough, since his punishment felt like little more than a fleabite to him and the Jews were satisfied as well, since they imagined they’d taught the thief a lesson. When Janek hits you, however, he understands neither justice nor mercy. He never goes halfway. Janek loves blood. Lots of blood.

That’s our Janek: straightforward. A black-or-white kind of guy. As a porter, he carried sacks for a few groschen apiece, lived on dry crusts of bread, and kept the leftover coins from his earnings wrapped in a rag until Sunday came, and on Sunday, he’d use those savings to drink himself silly. As a porter he wouldn’t hurt a fly, even when drunk. As a prince, however, a twenty-mark bill was suddenly small change to him, and every smack and blow he deals out as he walks about must be a wet one, soaked in blood. Lots of blood.

“Bravo, Janek! *Aut Caesar aut nihil!*”^[5] Bravo, Janek! You’ve convincingly acquired the qualities of a real live German! Bravo, Janek! You’ve decked yourself out like the real thing, a young and wanton beast. You’ve transformed yourself into a dog who grabs what he wants even when you give it to him and snatches it away from

you when you don't—into a dog that lusts for blood. Well done, Janek! You're a real German now! But woe be unto you, Janek! Now that you've played the young beast so convincingly, they've decided to place a muzzle on your snout. Woe be unto you, Janek! No sooner have you become a real live German than you have fallen prey to the Germans' own economic logic—to the Germans' special economic gift for not letting a single piece of trash or crap go to waste. And even for turning crap into merchandise!

In the old days, Janek was such a sad sack that he couldn't even manage to carry one properly—he was little more than a stray and mangy dog. Still, he was good enough to protect German law and order. For as long as you could hang a rifle on his shoulder and place a policeman's cap on his head, Janek could be turned into a German police official—and stand guard over Jewish life in the ghetto. As a German policeman (it goes without saying that he now called himself Johann), he was posted in one of the guard huts at the ghetto boundary, with the job of preventing any Jews from escaping. Still, he never felt comfortable in his uniform, given how different it was from the tattered rags he was used to wearing. No dog likes having a muzzle placed on his snout. By then, all his twenty-mark notes were long gone. And with all Jews now having been forced into the ghetto, there was nowhere else to look. Somehow Janek had to get by on the paltry policeman's salary. And you can't go get drunk when you have to do guard duty—stand guard like a dog on a chain. Janek wasn't used to it—he was a street mutt who liked to grab what he could.

And street mutts hate having chains placed around their necks. They'll always struggle against it until one of two things happens: either the chain breaks or, if the chain is stronger, the dog goes mad.

So Janek kept pulling and yanking at his chain. The more rebellious and disobedient he became, however, the less he was able to show that rebellion openly, since he would have been shot down like a rabid dog. So he swallowed his gall and kept it muzzled until life became bitter in his much-reduced world. Though he stood on the other side of the wire with the entire world open to him—to him, that world felt as if it had been narrowed, as if he were one of those on the inside of the ghetto with only a pittance to eat, [he] felt like those with only the tiniest crumb or the most minuscule scrap of garbage to call their own. Now the Janek used to scooping up cash with both hands and drinking it up even faster was thirsty ever since being stuffed into his uniform. It felt as if his tongue had dried out and been stuck to his palate: full of gall, his mouth felt like a dried-out piece of clay—gall mixed with clay.

Janek craved—he thirsted for—freedom. He longed for the days not so long ago when twenty-mark notes could be harvested with ease. Dim-witted as he was, he started to use his small, piggish blue eyes to look for them even there—even there next to his guard booth, to which he'd been chained like a guard dog. Even there, right at the border of the ghetto.

One day as he was standing there, his dry tongue hanging out of his mouth like a thirsty animal, he happened to notice the redheaded Leyzer. They barely recognized each other: redheaded Janek, crammed into his uniform, looked like an entirely new man. When redheaded Leyzer had his flour business in Zielony Rynek he knew Janek as a good-for-nothing *sheygetz* porter, dressed in tattered clothes and running around barefoot, his hollow cheeks studded with thick, reddish pig bristles. Only on Sundays would Janek put on his single decent black suit, bought four years ago off the rack in the Old Town; on Sundays, barefoot Janek would put on a pair of stiff red shoes. His chin would be freshly shaven, and the thick, reddish bristles he had for hair would be forced down into a kind of flattop, like nails forced back into the sole of a boot. On Sundays, however, Leyzer's shop had been closed, so he had never seen Janek decked out before. As a result, it never occurred to redheaded Leyzer that such a worthless wastrel—that sorry-looking scoundrel of a redheaded Polish *sheygetz*—could have become a German soldier with a rifle propped on his shoulder and could be standing guard duty over him.

When redheaded Leyzer had his flour business in Zielony Rynek, he also had quite a paunch. In summer he would wear a splendid alpaca cloak that shone like a polished mirror. His feet wore a pair of soft chamois boots with flexible toes. In winter he wore a fur coat made from beaver with a wide, skunk-lined collar. He wore felt-lined boots and sometimes galoshes but was always seen in his handsome, carefully tended red beard. As a result, it never occurred to redheaded Janek that the tattered, shabby, skin-and-bones Jew in front of him with the scraggly red, unkempt, and strange-looking beard was actually the wretched redheaded Leyzer from Zielony Rynek.

So they met, without either recognizing the other. But they had looked for each other too long not to recognize one another once they finally met up. To say that they had looked for each other doesn't mean, of course, that redheaded Leyzer had been looking for redheaded Janek in particular or that redheaded Janek had been looking for redheaded Leyzer alone. Leyzer had been looking for a German soldier on the make who believed in the principle of live and let live—a soldier who, as they say in the jargon of the marketplace, would agree to get a little dirty and do some business on the side. Redheaded Janek, meanwhile, was looking for more Jews who might, before too long, supply him with twenty-mark notes.

They met face to face, albeit at a distance—with redheaded Leyzer on one side of the barbed wire and redheaded Janek on the other—staring at each other a long time, a good long while, the way a man and a woman look each other over on a deserted street at night. The man is not overly bold in his attentions in case she does not do that sort of business, while she strikes an offish pose so that, if he approaches her, she can demand a higher price. Only after they'd checked each other out silently—with Leyzer noting Janek's newfound stature and Janek recognizing Leyzer's steep decline—Janek looked around carefully, checked behind him and to either side, and when finally convinced that no one was watching, motioned to Leyzer to approach the fence: "*Jak się masz, Leyzer. Chodź, nie bój się*"—"How ya doin', Leyzer? It's all right, don't be afraid."

And so it went. Deep inside, Janek had not forgotten how enormous the gap had once been between them, and now he could address his former boss and employer "*per tu,*" in the same way he might talk to a child or to an inferior. Leyzer, for his part, wasn't shocked at all by this change in station and was even satisfied with this familiarity, this newfound proximity to the powers that be. Once our *sheygetz*, always our *sheygetz*—he's still just a farmhand. And so Leyzer approached him without fear. Janek, who had been raised on Jewish soil and had always lived among Jews and earned his living from them, had mastered several Yiddish expressions, such as *mamele* (mamma), *tatele* (daddy), a *shlak* (a bad turn), a *kholere* (a curse on you), a *kapore* (the hell with it), and the like. In an attempt to ingratiate himself, Janek thus used the following words: "You see how it is, Leyzer, the Jews have come under a *kholere*; it's a done deal. All your sacks of flour at Zielony Rynek, they're all ours now—it's all ours. The whole world is going to belong to us. I'm Johann—I'm a *pan*, a 'sir,' and you, Leyzer, are a mangy Jew, a lowly servant."

Leyzer got it right away: if Janek kept insulting him like this, it wouldn't be easy to make a deal. But tossing the insult back in Janek's face might cost him his life. Instead he needed to pass the time with him, carefully flatter Janek's ego ever so slightly, then give it a little nick—just a tiny one—and so start to lead him down the garden path. Letting a moment elapse before he answered, he emitted a deep sigh, as if to let him know, "You're right, Janek, we're in deep trouble." He then continued in Polish: "*Nie bój się, Janek. Tam, gdzie woda była, woda będzie, a gówniarz—gówniarzem się zostaje.*" ("Don't be afraid, Janek. Where there once was water, there will be more water, and scum will always be scum.") That is, Janek, he who had money before will have it again, and a pig will always find the shit.

The conversation continued in this manner. With Leyzer trying to feel him out and Janek delivering a jab wherever

he could, a kind of agreement eventually emerged. Janek would toss over the fence whatever he could buy in the city, Leyzer would resell the merchandise in the ghetto, and they would split the take. "You know how it goes, Janek: live and let live."

"*Tak jest, panie Leyzer*" ("That's right, Mr. Leyzer"), Janek replied in Polish. "*Tam, gdzie woda była, tam i będzie*" ("Where there once was water, there will be more"). "Money goes to money," he went on in Yiddish. "You'll get yours, I'll get mine," before going back to Polish once more. "*Jak kiedyś, pamięta Leyzer?*" ("Just like before, remember, Leyzer?")

The ghetto had just then been fenced in and cut off from the city, and the public had not yet grasped the real horror that awaited them. They were, so to speak, still in the honeymoon period of ghetto life and so resembled a young newlywed. Not yet having squandered his entire dowry, he chases one deal after another and eats his fill. Everything in the ghetto thus became a piece of merchandise. Everything the stomach could digest.

After all the turmoil in the city, the shooting of people in their homes during the *planmäßige Übersiedlung* (resettlement process), the kidnappings for forced labor, and the fear and dread of what the next day, or even the next hours, might bring, people in the ghetto—where Jews could be among their own—reveled in the *dolce fare niente*, or what the Italians call the pleasure of doing nothing. They gathered in the streets and alleys and exchanged good news, sat in the courtyards of their buildings playing cards, or stashed away the little bit of cash they'd been able to carry with them from the city and bought food. Prices rose by the day. But with so much Jewish property having been destroyed, and with the wedding having been so costly, as it were, a few more marks here and there hardly seemed like much of a sacrifice! There was food, and you could keep on getting it from the other side of the fence, though you'd pay a hefty price.

This was the period of "prosperity" in the ghetto—a prosperity in reverse. People were not earning, then spending, what they earned, for only a few were making anything at all: those who were shrewd enough to take risks and to engage in smuggling from the other side of the wire. Those without any income spent the last of their cash buying up everything they could, whether a piece of soap, a nail, sugar, flour, toilet paper, meat, and most precious of all, live hens.

Live hens, where your investment grew more valuable day by day and which paid daily interest—in the form of an egg. An egg in the ghetto—oh Master of the Universe—that means every day a fresh harvest: a daily income of two, two and a half marks! Leyzer's impulse was thus an obvious one: "Janek, by god, think about hens! Not geese, not turkeys, but hens!"

Janek really did in truth have a good head on his shoulders, and the best evidence of it was the police hat he was now wearing on it. But he used it like a banister on a flight of stairs or as little more than a prop for the heavy bags he had carried on his shoulders. Unable to follow Leyzer's plan in its depths, he interpreted what he heard for himself: "Ha-ha, so the little Jews have had to curb those appetites of theirs in the ghetto, have they? No more geese or turkeys for them, so they've got to make do with chickens." And so the peasant women, bringing their birds to the city, would have them "requisitioned" by him. Though Janek didn't scrutinize the merchandise all that carefully. While supplying Leyzer with the hens he requested, he sometimes mixed in a few roosters, especially since merchandise return had never been discussed as part of the deal.

So when eggs suddenly began turning up in the ghetto shops at two to two and a half marks apiece, when plates of quartered chicken pieces were suddenly for sale on the ghetto streets at fifty marks a plate, and when a live chicken walked down the street in broad daylight and the early morning quiet began to be broken by the sound of

cock-a-doodle-doo, the Jewish police became restless. “How is it possible? Chickens are coming into the ghetto—eggs in the ghetto—without our knowing anything about it? People are smuggling in goods, getting rich—with no cut of the action for us? What chutzpah! These Jews have to be removed—cut out root, stock, and branch!” And who better for the job than the Jewish police? They searched until they discovered redheaded Leyzer along with twenty-five live chickens: those provided him by redheaded Janek.

What became of the twenty-five live chickens themselves has already been narrated by the aforementioned document: according to the “50-50” System, thirteen chickens were returned to redheaded Leyzer and the rest, have no fear, went to the Jewish *Hilfsordnungsdienst*, or Jewish police, which, modeling itself after the German police—the KRIPO, the SCHUPO, and the like—shortened its name to HIOD.[6]

Six of those chickens, as the document states, were sent to Drewnowska Street. Since the addressee was not specified any further, we may assume that this meant the hospital located there. It is difficult to make the further assumption, however, that the sick ever received the food. Rather, common sense tells us that the following possibility is far more likely: that the hospital brass devoured those chickens long before they reached the patients of the infectious disease wards. One hen was sent to the commander of the Jewish police, the chief guardian of justice in the ghetto, so that he would agree to the remaining five chickens being divided into twenty portions and distributed among the HIOD staff. So the principle of “one for all” came to be established. Said redheaded Leyzer and his paltry twenty-five chickens were thus able to supply the needs of an entire hospital and an entire department of the Jewish police, with its commander at the front of the line.

The second half of the aforementioned principle goes as follows: “and all for one.” It was given systematic application by redheaded Janek, though the details do not appear in any official document, which only the oral lore can supply. Redheaded Leyzer did not want to pay redheaded Janek for the twelve chickens taken from him. Janek wasn’t as upset about the money as he was about the nerve of those Jewish troublemakers who without his permission had made use of his method of “requisitioning” at will, and he thought to himself: Good enough—if the damn Jewish troublemakers take twelve of his chickens, he’ll take out two Jews for each one he’s lost.[7] And if those damn Jewish troublemakers think fifty-fifty is fair, he’ll just have to double their return: twelve hens—that’s twenty-four Jews. That way they’ll remember who they’re doing business with! So they’d remember redheaded Janek, the *sheygetz*, in the uniform he’d been crammed into: the sorry *sheygetz* porter who’d wandered off on his own like a mangy dog and was good enough to hang a rifle on and stand guard at the ghetto’s edge.

Let the ghetto remember redheaded Janek: two months and two days after the ghetto was closed off, he began systematically, and for nothing—for absolutely nothing—to shoot down twenty-four Jews. Here is a list of all those shot dead by redheaded Janek—shot in their tracks in the middle of the street like wild and rabid dogs:

On the second of July in the year nineteen hundred and forty, he shot a fifteen-year-old girl in the heart.

Three days later, on the fifth of July, when sent to the same post again, he shot a twenty-nine-year-old young man and a young woman, age twenty-one. After a five-day break, on the tenth of July he shot a thirty-year-old woman in the head.

On the eleventh of July, a young man of thirty-three.

On the twelfth of July he blew out the brains of a sixty-seven-year-old man.

On the sixteenth of July he put away a fifty-year-old woman and a well-to-do, well-brought-up young man of sixteen.

On the eighteenth of July he shot a sixty-nine-year-old woman in the head.

On the nineteenth, he put a bullet in the heart of a sixty-two-year-old Jew.

On the twentieth he murdered a sixteen-year-old girl.

With murderous precision he waited until the next day, the twenty-first. That day he shot five victims total: a girl of seventeen, a boy of twenty, two twenty-one-year-old boys, and a young man of thirty.

On the twenty-second, he murdered a young boy of thirteen and a thirty-eight-year-old Jew.

On the twenty-fourth, two older women.

On the twenty-sixth he shot a sixteen-year-old boy in the head.

On the twenty-seventh, a forty-four-year-old Jew.

On the twenty-eighth, the last two of his victims: a seventeen-year-old girl and a fifty-year-old woman.

The details—surname, family name, age, and address of the murdered—can be found, as previously mentioned, in the official files of the burial department. But official documents often have the disadvantage of telling us too much, like a gypsy reading fortunes from the cards. By telling you everything they hit the crucial point by accident and then deny all the previous, irrelevant material, the way the fortune-tellers are wont to do. Or the documents simply remain silent. The official statistics, for example, record the fact that in July 1940, thirty-five people were shot dead, forgetting to add that of those thirty-five who were eliminated, eleven were shot down on the 23rd of July—not by redheaded Janek or anyone connected to him but by another protector of German justice.

Redheaded Janek killed twenty-four and not a single Jew more: took twenty-four with a German sense of precision. Not a single Jew more. Nor do those twenty-four Jews shot dead in his settling of accounts receive a single word of mention in any official document, just as not a single word is given that might tell us whether the Commander of Order and the Guardian of Justice in the ghetto enjoyed his chicken or, God forbid, not.

—In the ghetto, January 1942

NOTES

[1] The line from the Talmud is quoted in the original Aramaic. Zerkowicz is referring to the Talmudic discussion of how seemingly minor incidents can have catastrophic repercussions. In this case an altercation between Jews and Roman soldiers over some fowls set off a train of events that led to the destruction of Jerusalem in the second Century CE.

[2] The Jewish police organization in the Lodz ghetto was established by the Germans on March 1, 1940, and was called the *Ordnungsdienst*, or Order Service; its Commander was Leon Rozenblat. HIOD was the *Hilfsordnungsdienst*, or Auxiliary Order Police, which was to supervise children in the streets, fight against prohibited street trade, and maintain order at ration distribution shops. It was dissolved on November 3, 1940. See Isaiah Trunk, *Lodz Ghetto: A History*, translated and edited by Robert Moses Shapiro, introduction by Israel Gutman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006 [1962], p. 42.

[3] Latin proverb: “The voice of the people is the voice of God.”

[4] *Sheygetz* is a Yiddish term for a Gentile lad.

[5] Latin adage: “Either a Caesar or nothing!”

[6] KRIPO was the abbreviation for *Kriminalpolizei*, the German criminal investigation department or plainclothes police; SCHUPO was the *Schutzpolizei*, or German municipal police.

[7] Jewish troublemakers: here and below Janek uses the German epithet *Judenbengel*.

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