

‘ALL THOSE RUMORS OCCUPY PEOPLE’S THOUGHTS...’ ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUMORS AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST IN THE WARSAW GHETTO*

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On 24 March 1942, an anonymous Jewish informer wrote in his report about the situation in the Warsaw ghetto that was submitted to the German authorities:

People talk about the supposedly very difficult situation of Jews in Łódź. [...] There are rumors about the deportations taking place there, which caused great concern in Warsaw. In connection with claims that those people were deported to an unknown destination, a rumor is spreading that they were gassed to death [...]. Similar information has appeared about deportations from other cities. For example, they say that in the last week twenty thousand Jews were deported from Lublin, the district capital, to an unknown destination. There are reports about similar events in Chełm and other cities. In those cases, too, people talk about use of poison gas. [...] All those rumors occupy people’s thoughts and cause serious concern and fear in the community (Browning and Gutman 2006, 322).

The objective of the person submitting this report was to inform the Germans about the atmosphere on the streets of the Warsaw ghetto. In his report, informer wrote what “was talked about’ by the inhabitants of the closed district, what aroused their concern, and how the public responded to events taking place

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outside of the ghetto. He also reported on the most important cultural events and discussed the current economic situation, especially the changes in food prices (Browning and Gutman 2006, 315).

In the quoted fragment, the contemporary reader must take note of the fact that the rumors mentioned in the report rendered so very accurately the events taking place at that time in German-occupied Poland. This is because the first deportation from the Łódź ghetto to the Chełmno on the Ner River (Kulmhof am Ner) death camp took place in January 1942 (Löw 2012), and the Lublin ghetto was liquidated and the Jews from there were taken to Bełżec death camp during the night of 16 and 17 March 1942 (Silberklang 2013), which was just one week before the above report was written.

Since the beginning of the occupation, the Germans consistently isolated Poland's people from credible sources of information. Since October 1939, it was prohibited to own radio receivers and the only press that was published was censored and licensed by the Germans (Ferenc-Piotrowska and Zakrzewski 2016, XV–XVII; Gregorowicz 2014; Janczewska 2012). The public sphere was subject to strict control by the occupiers. Underground publications were published in all parts of Poland, with the largest number in Warsaw, including in the ghetto, but their circulation and range were not large (Kozłowska-Frejlik 2012, 206–208). For majority of residents of the Warsaw ghetto, the most important source of information was rumors heard on the overcrowded streets¹. The fact that they had such accurate knowledge about the deportations in other cities and that the knowledge was so common, runs counter to commonly-held beliefs concerning life in Warsaw's closed district separated from the world with a 4-meter high wall. This raises the questions that I wish to answer in this article: What was the source of the rumors about the exterminations in other towns? How were the rumors spread and what were the reactions to them? How can their commonness be explained? What meanings and senses were attributed to these reports?

A problem that also deserves a thorough analysis is the status of the 'knowledge' built based on news coming from such a fuzzy and uncertain source as the rumors spread in the ghetto, passed between people without information about their source. Can this be described as 'knowledge'? I would also like to analyze how the information received cut across, entwined, and clashed with the previous beliefs of the ghetto's inhabitants. What processes

¹ The objective of this article is not to analyze the phenomenon of rumors in the course of the Holocaust as such, but rather to analyze their relationship with the 'knowledge' about the Holocaust. More information about rumors during the Holocaust can be found in the articles by Stoll 2012, Goldberg 2016, and Ferenc-Piotrowska 2017.

related to social absorption of knowledge about the Holocaust can be seen reflected in the personal documents dating back to the war and the accounts of the survivors?

Another subject of my reflection is how the emotional attitude of ghetto residents to the information contained in the rumors about the Holocaust contributed to the emergence of deeper knowledge about the extermination. Did reception of news about the extermination translate in a simple way into 'knowledge' about this topic? I will analyze this problem by studying rumors about letters that were allegedly received in the Warsaw ghetto from those who were deported – as the Germans called it – to work 'in the East' or rather, as was actually the case, were transported to the death camp in Treblinka. The news spread in the ghetto about letters from the deported conformed to the German version of events and confirmed the hopes of ghetto residents, but clashed with the information about the actual facts which were already available at that time.

In order to analyze in more detail the relationship between the rumors and 'knowledge' about the Holocaust, the main object of analysis is the opinions of 'ordinary people' who had no contacts with the underground and did not hold important positions in ghetto institutions which could give them access to more detailed and certain information about events taking place outside of the ghetto walls. I will try to recreate a mental image of the reality shared by persons who based their 'knowledge' about what was happening 'outside' most of all on rumors. I also want to indicate the importance of the phenomenon of 'avoidance' or 'obstruction' of knowledge which, in my view, is of key importance to understanding the attitudes of ordinary people toward news about the Holocaust.

The article is based on documents written during (diaries, and letters) and after the end of the war (accounts and memoirs), as well as on oral history accounts recorded on video. In my analysis, I refer most of all to the intellectual heritage of cultural history (referred to in the French school as the history of mentalities – *histoire de mentalités*) (Hutton 1981), but I will also use social science theory (including awareness context theory and symbolic interactionism). I define 'mentality' as the attitude toward reality, the standard ways of thinking and responding, the coded values and visions of the world manifested in the psychology of a given community – its behaviors, sensed emotions, and meanings attributed to different phenomena (Szpak 2012, 37–41)². Suppression,

² I do not support the ethnological perspective, e.g. of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, which defines 'mentality' as a type of magical or primitive thinking (Szpak 2013, 9–11). The research

obstruction, dilution, and familiarization – a reaction of ordinary people to knowledge about the Holocaust originating from rumors – I will regard as phenomena typical of the mentality (or culture) of the Warsaw ghetto.

I intend to look at rumors as a medium for conveying information. Typically, information received through gossip is looked at with a certain distance and ambivalence typical of a message which is so susceptible to deformations and does not allow clear determination of whether the received news is true or not. At the same time, as I show later, the credibility of rumors is higher if they include certain phrases that refer to the experiences of specific people. In conditions where access to trustworthy information is limited, rumors provide people who have no ‘underground’ social contacts with the possibility to obtain information that they could not obtain otherwise, thus filling the ‘information gap’ (Stoll 2012, 217).

This article is divided into two parts. In the first part, I analyze the rumors spread in the Warsaw ghetto about extermination and the existence of death camps which, as subsequently became clear, were largely true. In the second part, I look at letters that supposedly were sent to Warsaw by persons who were reportedly deported ‘to the East’ but who in reality were murdered in the Treblinka death camp. As I have shown here, there is no proof that such letters were really delivered to the Warsaw ghetto and even if they did, they presented a manipulated and untrue vision of the world that conformed to the policy of the Germans towards their victims. Those two contrasting examples show the ambivalent aspects of rumors as a medium for conveying information.

RUMORS ABOUT EXTERMINATION IN OTHER CITIES

Sources of rumors

Before I analyze the content of rumors and the reactions of the public to them, I want to turn to the question of what the sources of the rumors about the extermination that were spread in the Warsaw’s closed district could have been. The Warsaw ghetto had a post office that received about 4,000 letters a day from occupied Poland (Sakowska 1963, 109). The letters were censored at the location from which they were sent. Letters and postcards could be written only in German and Polish and use of the Hebrew letters, codes, ‘artificial languages’ (e.g. Esperanto), and abbreviations was prohibited (Sakowska 1963, 99–100);

perspective adopted here makes it possible to speak about ‘mentality’ in regard to all communities and individuals within them.

however, the prohibitions were circumvented using codes that referred to linguistic codes or events that were comprehensible to the other party ('crypto-information') (Uryniewicz 2002, 123). Thus, residents of the Warsaw ghetto received letters from the province with coded messages concerning transports 'in an unknown direction' – namely to death³.

In the Underground Archive of the Warsaw ghetto (Ringelblum Archive), a large collection of letters sent from many parts of occupied Poland has been preserved. In those letters, ordinary people informed and warned their relatives in the Warsaw ghetto about the extermination of the Jews. The contents of the messages were not strongly coded and in some letters the messages were quite straightforward ('they are sending people to Chełmno and gassing them there so that nobody comes back from there') (Sakowska 1997, 124). In several letters, individual words conveying particularly important information were written in the Hebrew alphabet (Sakowska 1997, 126). Jakub Szulman, a rabbi from Grabów, wrote 'everyone – I hope this will not happen to you – there [in Chełmno] is killed, poisoned with gas, and buried in mass graves for 50–60 people. They keep bringing new victims' (Sakowska 1997, 4)⁴. Fela Mizierska from Krośniewice wrote that the only thing remaining after those who had left was 'just the *kaddish* [prayer for the dead]' (Sakowska 1997, 11)⁵, and M. Gross from Kalisz informed Broniek Lustig in Warsaw that his 'beloved Parents were sent to somewhere they will never return from' (Sakowska 1997, 27). An unidentified man residing in Chełm in the Lublin region wrote to his friend in Warsaw: 'We are no longer certain of the next second. Death walks in the streets' (Sakowska 1997, 87).

The recipients could not remain indifferent to such tragic and worrying news received from their relatives. The very fact that letters sent from towns and cities whose residents were deported 'into the unknown' were received by the underground 'Oyneg Shabbes' group, were copied, and ended up in the Ringelblum Archive is proof that the senders were trying to get help and to alarm others. The reports sent in letters would end up in oral circulation in the Warsaw

³ The situation in the Łódźghetto was different. More information can be found in Sitarek 2017.

⁴ Information about the role of Rabbi Szulman in the process of providing information about the Holocaust can be found in Sitarek 2017, 330 ff.

⁵ Mizierska asked to provide information about the fate of the deportees to a trader from Włocławek, Szmul Winter, and one of the directors of the Jewish Social Self-Help and, before the war, of the American Joint Distribution Committee, Icchak Borensztajn. Both collaborated with the 'OnegSzabat' group and probably it was thanks to them that the letter was copied in the 'OnegSzabat' and was preserved in the Ringelblum Archive.

ghetto and were one of the sources of the rumors about the Holocaust that were spread in the ghetto.

Also, fugitives from areas where ghettos had been liquidated continued to arrive in the Warsaw ghetto. Some of them certainly gave accounts about what they had seen and about the experiences of Jews in other parts of occupied Poland and the news they spread would be spread in the ghetto. The ghetto became home to a difficult to estimate number of fugitives from the Kresy (eastern regions of Poland) and of persons who after the outbreak of the war went to the regions of Poland that were occupied by the Soviets and who then in 1941, once the German-Soviet war started, decided to return to Warsaw (Preis 2015, 170). In the accounts preserved in the Ringelblum Archive, they reported about thousands of victims shot in Ponary (Żbikowski 2003, 456–457), talked about the first months of the German occupation of Lwów, and about the persecution of Jews (Żbikowski 2003, 685ff). Also, fugitives from the Warthegau, Polish territories incorporated during the war into the Third Reich, who came to Warsaw told about mass murders, transports, and the existence of the Chełmno extermination camp (Siek 2012, 57–64; 70–74). Szlama Ber Winer, nicknamed ‘Szlamek’, a fugitive from the Chełmno camp, spent some time in the Warsaw ghetto and provided an account of its functioning (Bańkowska and Epsztein 2013; Engelking, Skibińska, and Wiatr 2013). Moreover, there were accounts provided by persons who escaped from cities and towns in the General Government in which the deportations had been completed, which included Kraków, Tarnów, Lublin, Łomazy, Biała Podlaska, Hrubieszów, and Zamość (Bańkowska 2012), as well as a lot of others. At least some of the fugitives had to talk about their experiences not only to the people to whom they gave their accounts but also to persons they met in the ghetto and to their relatives. Stories told orally by the fugitives were most likely the most important source of rumors about the Holocaust. Samuel Puterman wrote in his diary that fugitives ‘tell amazing stories about old men and children being shot and then about gas chambers where they drive several hundred people in and release the gas’⁶.

Content of rumors

Jerzy Jurandot remembered that in the spring of 1942, when the Warsaw ghetto intensely followed the more and more nervous rumors about possible deportations, news about the killing of Jews would come from the east. Those

⁶ An archive of the United States Holocaust Museum (hereinafter referred to as USHMM), file no. 1992.213, Diary of Feliks (Samuel) Puterman.

that he recorded in his diary were very accurate: he wrote about 62,000 Jews murdered in Wilno, 40,000 in Lwów, and thousands in Lublin, Brześć, Słonim, and Białystok (Jurandot 2014, 124). Stanisław Sznajman also had heard about mass executions and about the fact that in many towns in the Kresy, children were taken away from families and locked up in sheds, which were then set on fire. 'In other settlements also in the Kresy, this was done to the entire Jewish population,' he noted⁷. Marek Stok remembered that the residents of the Warsaw ghetto were worried about the terrible news from Wilno but comforted themselves by saying that it was impossible for such a thing to happen in Warsaw⁸. Stanisław Gombiński, who had heard about the liquidation of the Jewish communities in Słonim, Równe, Baranowicze, Wilno, and Białystok, wrote that the rumors about the events in those locations were supplemented with the following critical comment: 'even if [this is true] – that is the Kresy, that is the East and not the General Government' (Gombiński 2010, 65). The accounts indicate that the distance from the eastern territories allowed the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto to mentally distance themselves from the news coming from there – similarly to their completely different war story (going from the Soviet occupation to the German occupation in the summer of 1941) and the resulting different status of those areas. However, what appears to be symptomatic is the fact that none of the aforementioned authors questioned the veracity of the information received from the Kresy and that the social processes of negotiation of the importance of those reports to the residents of the Warsaw ghetto focused not so much on their credibility as on the lack of analogy between the situation of Jews in Warsaw and in the Kresy⁹.

Information that circulated orally in the Warsaw ghetto included information about the extermination camp in Chełmno on the Ner River. Sometimes, due to the same name of the town, the camp was erroneously believed to be located in Chełmno or Chełmża in Pomerania¹⁰, but other information related to the camp was fairly accurate. Stefan Ernest remembered that in late February and early March 1942, there were rumors in the Warsaw ghetto about the fate of Jews from the towns integrated into the Third Reich but located close to Warsaw, e.g. Gąbin (approx. 100 km from Warsaw) and Gostynin (approx. 120 km from Warsaw).

⁷ Archive of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute (AJHI), Diaries, file no. 302/198, Diary of Stanisław Sznajman.

⁸ AJHI, Diaries, file no. 302/144, Diary of Marek Stok.

⁹ My understanding of 'negotiation' as the essence of the process of social communication and 'creation of meanings' is typical of the understanding of symbolic interactionism by Herbert Blumer. See: Blumer 1984, 71–87.

¹⁰ Yad Vashem Archive (hereinafter: YVA), Diaries and memoirs, file no. O.33/1984, Diary of Aron Szwarcbart.

Some were supposedly transported in an unknown direction and murdered by gassing in gas-tight barracks. The news received later concerned Jews from Kalisz, Konin, Mława, Ciechanów, and Płońsk (Ernest 2003, 133). Jan Przedborski wrote that in the ghetto people talked about Jews from the Warthegau who were brought to a forest near Koło and gassed there 'in a precisely organized manner'¹¹. Because in this case the news concerned towns located relatively close to Warsaw and were more precise, they caused greater fear. What helped ease the fright was the belief that due to the different administrative status of the territories integrated into the Third Reich and of the General Government, the fate of the Jewish residents of those two different territories would be different.

The residents of the Warsaw ghetto were very interested in news from other big cities. The few reports received from the Łódź ghetto, which was isolated from the world, were greatly anticipated¹². 'Wherever a fugitive from Łódź is met, the first question is: What's going on in Łódź? [...] This is mostly because everybody believed that Łódź would set the path for the Warsaw ghetto' (Epszstein and Person 2016, 101), wrote an anonymous author of notes from the Warsaw ghetto in the spring of 1942. News from Łódź was brought to Warsaw by a Gestapo agent from Łódź, Dawid Gertler, as well as by Jews coming to Warsaw illegally from the ghetto located in that city (Löw 2012, 146). They reported that 'the Jewish Łódź is doomed to extermination' (Epszstein and Person 2016, 101).

Certainly, the most common in the Warsaw ghetto were news about deportation from Lublin and other cities and towns in the General Government. These reports caused the greatest terror, among other reasons due to the fact that they concerned territories in the General Government, which was the administrative entity that also included Warsaw and, consequently, one could suspect that the fate of Jews living in those towns and cities would foreshadow the fate of the Warsaw ghetto. Moreover, Lublin, like Łódź, was a big city and the fate of its residents was a better reference for Warsaw. Marek Stok wrote:

Immediately after Easter we found out about the terrible destruction of all Jews in Lublin. It was the first large city in the General Government where the mythical 'Vernichtungskommando' committed a terrible massacre. The reports are chaotic, and we do not know well how this happened. There are a few fugitives from Lublin who miraculously managed to escape but they are so brokenhearted having

¹¹ AJHI, Diaries, file no. 302/172, Diary of Jan Przedborski.

¹² From the early 1942, the Łódź ghetto was subject to an information blackout and, consequently, no letters with coded messages about deportation to the Chełmno extermination camp that started in January 1942 could be delivered to Warsaw. See: Sitarek 2017, 334.

lost their families that they cannot give us an accurate account. The only thing we know that over 90% of the entire Jewish population of Lublin was transported out to their deaths¹³.

Józef Szper had heard exactly the same information as Stok did but he also remembered that, in the context of the Lublin deportation, the name 'Bełżec' was used – locals supposedly informed the Jews in Lublin that crematoria had been started up there and that the deported Jews had been murdered¹⁴. An unidentified woman residing in Ogradowa Street also had heard these rumors but she remembered that no one knew exactly what happened to the deportees. They were murdered using either gas or electricity¹⁵.

Ita Dimant, who in 1942 was in her early twenties and worked in the ghetto as a caretaker in kindergarten, wrote in her diary that 'fugitives from Lublin told stories that would make people's hair stand on end. One big murderous massacre, sealed cattle cars with people carried no one knows where, corpses in houses, corpses in the streets, mothers looking for their children, and children separated from their parents.' Such news instilled great fear in the entire family, concerned as they were about the fate of Ita's sister, Henia, who lived in Lublin with her husband and child; however, because the fate of the deportees was unknown, it was easier to push away the scary thoughts and hope that in time they would send a message. In the Warsaw ghetto, 'everyone had their daily fears and worries and for some reason no one believed [...] that the disaster could happen here, too' (Dimant 2001, 36).

'To believe or not to believe?' Reactions to rumors

The rumors coming from other cities about the murders and the transports resulted in several typical reactions. The first and most common reaction was fear, combined with disbelief in the accounts of the fugitives. Another common reaction was efforts to rationalize the situation and find an answer to the question of why something like this could not happen in Warsaw. This could be interpreted

¹³ AJHI, Diaries, file no. 302/144, Diary of Marek Stok. In the cited text, of note is the use by Stok of the verb 'know' with reference to the news brought by the fugitives from Lublin. Despite the doubts raised by the author about the accuracy picture painted by the fugitives, Stok had no doubts as to the veracity of the account he had heard.

¹⁴ AJHI, Accounts from the time of Holocaust, file no. 301/488, account of Józef Szper.

¹⁵ AJHI, Diaries, file no. 302/21, Diary of an unidentified person. In the opinion of Amos Goldberg, on a deeper level, the rumors about killing with electricity were due to the belief that Germans murdered Jews in a modern way and that the camps were 'death factories.' See: Goldberg 2016, 107.

as an effort to reduce the social tension caused by the rumors and to normalize what appeared to be completely irrational, if not impossible. The effort to interpret the incoming reports focused not on their content but rather on determination of the relationship between the news and one's own situation, and on instilling belief that executions and settlements were not a series of events that could eventually reach Warsaw – for various reasons. The energy of a majority of the inhabitants of the ghetto who heard the rumors about what was happening in other towns and cities focused on calming down and thinking about the present and their daily lives.

This is why reports about murders committed on Jews outside of Warsaw were received with a 'smile of disbelief,' even if the witnesses of the events appeared to be trustworthy¹⁶. On other occasions, dramatic accounts were interpreted as intentional exaggerations intended to induce compassion in the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto. In the opinion of Stefan Ernest, people in the Warsaw ghetto did not believe the rumors because their daily lives were already filled fears and worries (Ernest 2003, 134). Chaim Aron Kaplan felt obliged to record the terrifying rumors about the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto in his diary. '100 thousand Jews were loaded into rail cars and transported – where?' he wrote. He heard about someone who tried to call the Lublin *Judenrat* but was the operator did not connect the call because 'there is no such institution in Lublin anymore.' Kaplan, who had no doubts about the ability of the Nazis to commit the greatest atrocities, was still not sure whether he should 'believe or not believe?' (Kaplan 1999, 304–305). He was one of many people who 'could not comprehend' how thousands of people could be killed in such a cruel way¹⁷. As Józef Szper reported after the war: 'everyone was in great fear, but no one wanted to believe that millions of people would be murdered'¹⁸.

This attitude can be interpreted as a collective defensive reaction to fear raised by the accounts of the witnesses, before the 'seed of fear' sown by the rumors which, 'in the minds of Warsaw's Jews, took the form of an apocalyptic beast'¹⁹. The situation was similar with regard to the belief that 'they will not touch Warsaw' and to the search for evidence supporting this belief. The key argument was the belief that the Warsaw ghetto was a big and useful center²⁰ that was too necessary to the Germans for them to liquidate it (Gombiński 2010, 65). There was also a common belief that the Warsaw ghetto was simply too large to be

¹⁶ USHMM, file no. 1992.213, Diary of Feliks (Samuel) Puterman.

¹⁷ AJHI, Diaries, file no. 302/21, Diary of an unidentified person.

¹⁸ AJHI, Accounts from the time of Holocaust, file no. 301/488, Diary of Józef Szper.

¹⁹ USHMM, file no. 1992.213, Diary of Feliks (Samuel) Puterman.

²⁰ AJHI, Diaries, file no. 302/172, Diary of Jan Przedborski.

liquidated²¹. Also, Germans kept sending Jews deported from smaller towns to the Warsaw ghetto (Engelking and Leociak 2013, 341), which in the opinion of the ghetto residents would not make sense if larger deportation was in the plans²². Such rationalizations gave people the ability to shake off even the most panic-inducing rumors quickly²³.

These examples show how common it was to distance oneself from any news that was heard. Such reports caused great fears but because they did not fit into the vision of the world of the Warsaw ghetto inhabitants (they could not be assimilated into their 'mentality'), with time, when the first wave of fear subsided, the daily events overshadowed the reports and they were forced out. 'Mentality' is sometimes defined as integrated, pre-rational, unconscious knowledge that influences human behavior (Szpak 2012, 38; Szpak 2013, 11) – it appears that, in the case discussed here, the belief that it would be impossible to plan the complete extermination of a whole group of people was part of 'mentality'.

In the view of cultural historians, death and the attitudes toward it is one of the areas that has the greatest influence on the relationships between members of communities (Szpak 2013, 14). In the case analyzed here, on the one hand, reports about the Holocaust caused disorientation and fear and forced people to change their standard behavior. On the other hand, surprisingly, they did not result in spontaneous behavior and did not cause social disintegration. On the contrary, the community of the Warsaw ghetto became integrated in the process of negotiating the meaning of the rumors about the exterminations and then of their 'dilution'²⁴. Interestingly, such 'dilution' became a permanent cultural practice of the residents of the ghetto, which made it possible to keep the population peaceful and orderly and gave the people a sense of continuity of time and the experienced world, which could not be possible with the Holocaust being a part of it.

The essence of this phenomenon is illustrated excellently in the first paragraphs of the article titled 'In constant danger' that was published on the first page of the periodical *Jedies* published by the underground Zionist youth movement Dror soon after the news about the deportation in Lublin arrived:

²¹ AJHI, Diaries, file no. 302/144, Diary of Marek Stok.

²² USHMM, file no. 1992.213, Diary of Feliks (Samuel) Puterman.

²³ AJHI, Diaries, file no. 302/144, Diary of Marek Stok.

²⁴ The dynamics of the process of negotiation is best understood through the lens of symbolic interactionism by Herbert Blumer. However, it is harder to fit into the conceptual framework of another classic of this approach, Erving Goffman (2000), as the dramaturgic perspective he proposed focuses rather on playing social roles, usually associated with a behavior script, by actors.

The ghetto likes peace. After each terrifying shock a few days pass – two weeks in individual cases – and the ghetto goes back to ‘normal’ – to its activities and politics, to its daily struggle for a piece of bread and to its spiritual apathy’ (Laskowski and Matuszewski 2015, 206).

LETTERS FROM THE EAST

Another case I would like to look at is the rumors about letters received, supposedly, from the places where Jews from the Warsaw ghetto were sent starting in the summer of 1942. Since 22 July, trains with ‘deported’ persons were sent to the Treblinka extermination camp located several dozen kilometers away from Warsaw; however, the Germans wrote fake letters, made victims do it or spread rumors about them (as shown below, it is not clear whether such letters were actually received in the ghetto) in order to influence the atmosphere in the ghetto and to convince its inhabitants that the deportation was not equivalent to extermination and that the Jews were transported East to work (Epsztein and Person 2016, 423–443). Such rumors were supposed to confirm the official announcements about the deportations from Warsaw and to strengthen the belief of Warsaw’s Jews that nothing dangerous was taking place. As Leokadia Schmidt wrote in her diary, ‘the rest [of the deportees], this is what they said, were sent to work in work camps and in farms. Some people said that first letters had been received from the deportees from Białystok. According to those letters, they were doing well’²⁵. The residents of the gradually emptying ghetto received the news about the letters with joy because it allowed them to believe that those who had been deported had not vanished or were had not been murdered, but instead were alive and working²⁶.

Word about the letters was certainly spread mostly orally. In the opinion of Emanuel Ringelblum, ‘nobody has seen those letters,’ and information about them was spread by ‘Jewish Gestapo agents’ in order to cause confusion (Nalewajko-Kulikow 2018, 400). However, some authors of accounts from the ghetto claimed that they had read such letters themselves or knew people who had received them. Stanisław Adler remembered that he had read two letters with ‘stereotypical’ news that the authors felt well and asked for money (Adler 2018, 340). An unidentified author of a diary wrote that his acquaintance received, through a Polish railroad worker, a letter from Smoleńsk from his father who had been deported two weeks earlier²⁷. Supposedly letters were also received

²⁵ YVA, Diaries and memoirs, file no. O.33/1521, Diary of Leokadia Schmidt.

²⁶ AJHI, Diaries, file no. 302/21, Diary of an unidentified person.

²⁷ AJHI, Diaries, file no. 302/129, Diary of an unidentified person.

from Pińsk, Brześć, Kozienice, and the Lublin region²⁸. Someone else received a postcard from his or her deported mother. The recipients confirmed that they recognized the handwriting of their relatives and, consequently, in their opinion there could be no question of forgery (Gombiński 2010, 98).

Even though not a single fake letter from the East was preserved among archival materials I have researched, because of the large quantity of evidence concerning such letters, I believe that one could cautiously assume that at least several letters actually were received in the Warsaw ghetto and that they were sent by people who had been deported from there – before they were sent to the gas chambers in Treblinka. Most likely Edith Millman was right when she said years later that only a few fake letters needed to be received in Warsaw for rumors about them to spread widely in the ghetto. This allowed construction of rumors based on the experiences of specific, real persons: 'Mr. so and so received a card, everything [with the deportees] is all right'²⁹.

The letters served very specific purposes: they were to encourage those who were still in the ghetto to report for deportation, to assure them that there was no reason to worry, to alleviate their fears for their relatives, and to control the terrifying rumors and suspicions spread in the ghetto. The deportees 'wrote in the letters that they should not believe the rumors that people were transported to their deaths because they went to towns that were abandoned by the Soviet Union where they found bread and work,' reported Lucjan Gurman³⁰. Organization of the delivery of letters from deportees to the Warsaw ghetto also made it possible to address one of the main concerns associated with the deportations: the fear of losing contact with one's family. Joseph Tekulsky remembered that the deportees were told that they could write letters to their relatives in Warsaw and that they would be able to stay in touch³¹.

'THEY KNEW HOW TO PLAY THE STRINGS OF THE HUMAN SOUL...'
IMPORTANCE OF THE 'LETTERS FROM THE EAST'

The news about letters received from the deportees made it possible to continue to hope to meet relatives and to survive, even many weeks after the

²⁸ AJHI, Diaries, file no. 302/209, Memoirs of Adolf and Basia Berman.

²⁹ Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (hereinafter: VHA), code: 21310, account of Edith Millman [accessed on: 8 November 2018].

³⁰ AJHI, Accounts from the time of Holocaust, file no. 301/6146, account of Lucjan Gurman. Also, see: VHA, code: 30198, account of Majer Grosman [accessed on: 1 October 2018].

³¹ VHA, code: 10439, account of Joseph (Joe) Tekulsky [accessed on: 1 October 2018].

end of the first liquidation action in the Warsaw ghetto. On 22 December 1942, the reporter Perec Opoczyński wrote in his diary that from the letters received from the Soviet territories occupied by the Third Reich 'one could deduce that just in Bobrujsk there are about fifty thousand Jews from Warsaw.' This made great impression the inhabitants of the ghetto, who for a long time have not received any news that would indicate that their deported relatives were still alive. Interestingly, Opoczyński wrote that although numerous fugitives from extermination camps had reached Warsaw and told about their experiences and 'everyone knows what Treblinka is, the extermination that cannot be compared to anything,' a rumor that letters from those who survived had been received in the ghetto were sufficient for many people to regain hope that they would see their deported parents again. Opoczyński himself had no doubt that the letters arriving in the ghetto and the rumors about them that were spread were just a method used by 'Nazi propaganda' (Polit 2017, 336).

The rumors about letters received from the East were to play a similar role as the German announcements from the start of the deportations. These were persuasive messages that imposed on their recipients a certain vision of reality and a definition of the situation, were intended to cause a specific effect in the recipients, and created a 'closed context of awareness' as defined by Glaser and Strauss. In a 'closed context,' the efforts of the stronger party in an interaction are aimed to maintain it and one of the conditions for the success of such efforts is that the weaker party may not have any 'allies' that could reveal the true situation and permit the weaker party to learn its expected 'future biography' (Glaser and Strauss 2016, 33). The stronger party presents to the weaker party some 'reasonable', yet untrue, explanations of events that the weaker party experiences; the stronger party tries to focus the weaker party's attention on encouraging signals instead of the actual horror of the situation (Glaser and Strauss 2016, 36).

Paradoxically, in the situation described here, some Jews became strong believers in the message propagated by the Germans and were ready to defend it. Leokadia Schmidt mentioned that when the house committee, chaired by her husband, received a manifesto issued by the Jewish underground with information that deportation equals death and the letters from the east are 'fake,' one member of the committee considered it to be 'German provocation'³². In his ghetto chronicle, Emanuel Ringelblum wrote that by writing fake letters and spreading rumors about them among the Jews remaining in the ghetto, 'the SS officers turned out to be experts in human psychology.' He thought that even

³² YVA, file no. O.33/1521, Diary of Leokadia Schmidt.

when fugitives from Treblinka arrived at the ghetto at the end of the deportations and the Holocaust became common knowledge³³, there would still be thousands of people ready to believe that some of the deportees survived and 'unhappy mothers would still dream that the children who were taken away from them are somewhere far in Russia' (Nalewajko-Kulikow 2018, 423).

CONCLUSIONS. RUMORS, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE HOLOCAUST

Both the cases discussed here illustrate – from different perspectives – the complicated relationship between rumors and knowledge about the Holocaust. They magnify the psychological and social processes that accompanied the gaining of knowledge about the extermination of Jews and these settling into people's minds.

Rumors were beyond any doubt the most popular and the most common medium of conveying news in the Warsaw ghetto. These ways to convey information are extremely susceptible to deformation and infusion of social interpretations. Given the German monopoly on information, they were the only medium available to all inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto (Goldberg 2012), regardless of their social class, as opposed to just the well-informed 'elites' which, in this context, I define as persons who, due to their social links, positions held, or illegal activities, received information from more reliable sources.

I intentionally analyzed two dissimilar cases of rumors related to the Holocaust, which showed different dimensions of the rumors and the knowledge that was built on the basis of them. Information about extermination conducted in other locations contained in the rumors was true, while the status of the rumors about the letters 'from the East' is ambiguous – perhaps a few fake letters did arrive in the ghetto, but they contained untrue information about the fate of the deported Jews. However, no aspect of the structure of the information conveyed in the rumors could be used to determine their veracity. Both rumors contained references to personal observation and experiences of specific persons – in one case it was fugitives from ghettos that had been liquidated and in the other cases it was the addressees of fake letters who supposedly recognized the handwriting of their relatives. In the case of information conveyed in rumors, of key importance was the decision of whether it was credible – even though it must be emphasized that this decision was influenced by emotions, was spontaneous,

³³ Knowledge about Treblinka and the way the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto obtained it exceeds the scope of the present article. More information about the first accounts of the fugitives from the camp can be found in Engelking, Skibińska, and Wiatr 2013.

and was made as a part of the process of social negotiation. The rumors about extermination raised fear among the inhabitants of the ghetto about their own future, forced them to focus their energy on creating a rationalization that would explain that no such thing could happen in Warsaw and that the worrying reports did not concern them personally, and to push away the unacceptable thoughts. The rumors about the letters from the East evoked the hopes, desires, and fantasies of the inhabitants of the ghetto after the trauma caused by the 'deportations' in which most of them lost their children, parents, spouses, or friends.

Both cases in essence expose the same mechanism that governs 'acknowledgement.' An analysis of the cases discussed here leads to the conclusion that with regard to the news about the extermination of Jews and about the Holocaust, of key importance was the will of the recipients of the information to understand and accept it, especially that all reports, both true and false, were conveyed orally, which virtually made them unverifiable. This is why the 'rumors' about the letters received from the East, fabricated by the Germans, could suppress the 'knowledge' about the exterminations coming from the fugitives from the camps – which most inhabitants of the ghetto also considered to be 'rumors.'

When Emanuel Ringelblum wrote that 'it was known' what Treblinka was, he made a basic error: he and other members of the 'information elite' personally met the fugitives, read the accounts and the letters and, in this sense, they could say that they 'knew' about the Holocaust. From the point of view of ordinary people who one day heard rumors about fugitives returning from 'Tremblinka'³⁴ and on the next day heard about letters supposedly sent by people deported to the East, the decision as to whom to believe was a purely arbitrary gesture that reflected their hopes and desires. Certainly, it is easier to distance oneself from second-hand knowledge. In this sense, rumors can be considered as a subversive practice that allowed consideration of each available version of reality because it did not require presentation of the sources of the news or any proof.

It appears that it can be said that in the Warsaw ghetto people quite commonly 'knew' (or at least 'heard') about the fact that Jews were murdered in other towns and cities. Many people heard the news about the gassing in Chełmno, about the thousands of people deported 'into the unknown direction,' and the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto. The accounts from that time do not question the credibility of such information. On the other hand, this does not mean that there was knowledge about 'the Holocaust' defined as a German project aimed to exterminate all Jews in the occupied Poland. As Lucien Febvre wrote with reference

³⁴ This distorted version of the name Treblinka appears in many accounts from the Warsaw ghetto.

to people living in the sixteenth century and their world views, only those elements that fit and can be integrated therein can become an element of the human world view (Febvre 1947; Ricoeur 2006, 254; Hutton 1981, 241–242). The concept of the Holocaust, as it is understood today, certainly exceeded the perception capacity of the residents of the Warsaw ghetto and had to appear irrational to them. It appears that one of the unique characteristics of rumors about the Holocaust is that they contained news about events that the recipients considered to be 'incredible' and the 'magical' order was mixed in them with the 'rational' order and what was 'fantastic' was mixed with what was 'real' (Smith 2008, 271–272).

The vision of reality that Germans conveyed to the inhabitants of the ghetto in their announcements and in the rumors about the letters from deportees coincided with what many people wanted to believe in. An additional factor was the terrifying, improbable, and unacceptable nature of the news about the Holocaust. New rumors were spread all the time and the knowledge of the residents of the ghetto changed constantly. Many of them lived in the 'context of suspicion' and, filled with the worst fears, they asked about the fate of the deportees; however, transition into the 'open context of awareness' (Glaser and Strauss 2016) would require them to think about dying and to confront their fear of death, which is the most primeval and deeply ingrained fear in the human psyche. The mental and social energy of the residents of the Warsaw ghetto focused mostly on preserving hope and belief in their own survival. In this sense, their behavior appears to confirm Freud's belief that people cannot accept the thought about their own mortality and that they deeply believe themselves to be immortal (Freud 2009, 39).

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‘ALL THOSE RUMORS OCCUPY PEOPLE’S THOUGHTS...’. ON THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN RUMORS AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST
IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

SUMMARY

This article analyzes the relationship between rumors about the Holocaust and the process of the formation of knowledge about the Shoah among ordinary residents and public opinion in the Warsaw ghetto during World War II. Rumor is defined here as a specific medium, encumbered with a high risk of distortion, but still sometimes carrying true information. I analyzed war-time personal documents and testimonies of survivors. I focused in particular on rumors regarding the extermination of Jews in other towns and letters that were supposedly reaching the Warsaw ghetto from residents deported purportedly to the East, but who were actually murdered in the Treblinka death camp. To interpret this phenomenon, I used theoretical approaches from the social sciences (awareness context theory and symbolic interactionism theory). I stressed the impact of the existential experience of Shoah victims on their ability to accept the news of mass murder. Special attention was paid to the process of pushing aside thoughts about the possibility of one’s own death.

Keywords: rumor, knowledge, Holocaust, Warsaw ghetto, cultural history