

Social Welfare

Categories: Institutions

The popular name of the Social Welfare Department in the ghetto. Such a department had operated at the Łódź Jewish Religious Community before the war¹, comprising an important item in its budgets. During the war, when the Jewish population lost its economic and social position, the scope of the Social Welfare Department greatly expanded, covering virtually all areas of life. This also resulted from the fact that the Community had to take over all pre-war agendas of charitable organizations.

On October 15, 1939, one day after his appointment as the Eldest of the Jews in Łódź, M.Ch. Rumkowski launched the reorganization of the Department, paralyzed by wartime chaos, just like the entire official Community apparatus. Management of the Department was entrusted to the activist Samuel Faust, who was in Łódź at the time. Initially, Social Welfare activity consisted of the distribution of essential medicines and providing financial aid in the form of cash grants. However, the subsequent events and the extraordinary situation of the Jewish population, which continued to deteriorate, forced the Social Welfare Department, already operating without a budget and without the basic material resources, to take on duties that had never been the responsibility of the Community. Thus, for example, Social Welfare had to take over maintenance of the so-called rezerwistki ², home-bound cripples, and so-called cheap kitchens, which before the war had been financed with the Community's funds or through various social institutions. Because of widespread poverty on the streets, the Social Welfare Department started providing food for the hungry and needy. For this purpose, the Community took over two public kitchens, operated in Łódź before the war by two associations, Toymkhey Orkhim³ at 20 Zachodnia St. and Noyseyen Lekhem⁴ at 14 Solna St. The Community took over running these kitchens at its own expense. Then, following the "purging" of the provinces of Jews as well as a massive influx of refugees who had no means for survival, the Health Department organized special kitchens. They were located at Zakątna, Piotrkowska, Piłsudskiego, Nowomiejska and

other streets. Social Welfare was also in charge of organizing assistance for refugees from Łódź, both individuals and groups, the so-called voluntary migrants, who in the first half of December 1939 left at the expense of the Community (each “voluntary emigrant” received a place on a train and 50 zł in cash).

In January 1940, when the head of the Social Welfare Department S. Faust left Łódź, the leadership of Social Welfare passed into the hands of the Board, which consisted of Krasucki, Fridrich and Binsztok.

In March 1940, the Department moved into a crowded, dirty building inside the ghetto at 32 Młynarska St. By that time, almost the entire Jewish population had been resettled into the ghetto and could not use the kitchens in the city, and therefore began to besiege the offices of Social Welfare. The latter however, due to the lack of space, could not satisfy people’s needs.

Later the Social Welfare Department moved to 3 Krawiecka St. where it could finally start to operate as the inhabitants of the ghetto wished.

In the ghetto, the tasks of the Department included allocation of benefits and distribution of food products. In late April, Social Welfare opened the so-called “people’s kitchen” at 26 Zgierska St.

Social Welfare activities were divided into the so-called “open,” which included providing wide-ranging support; and “closed,” addressed to orphanages, homes for the disabled, homeless shelters, and hospitals.

Social Welfare was very popular in the ghetto, and more than 50%

of the population were its clients, which did not mean, however, that it evoked positive associations. It managed to meet people's expectations only to a very limited extent. Its management did not rise to the task. It lacked elementary organization, discipline and commitment. Social Welfare was like a ship without a rudder. Its officials approached individual cases at their sole discretion and on whim.

Such a state of affairs had to lead to corruption on a broad scale. In late September, the Chairman was forced to close the Department. On October 3, 1940, he dissolved it and later established the Benefits Department (vide Wydział Zasiłków).

Józef Zelkowicz

Footnotes

1 Welfare in the Łódź religious community was very well organized and had a larger share in the general budget of the Community than in Warsaw.

2 Rezerwistki (Pol.) – Female reservists, wives of the mobilized soldiers of the reserve, who were entitled to state benefits for the period when their spouses were in the army.

3 Toymkhey Orkhim - Supporting the guests (Yiddish).

4 Noyseyen Lekhem (Yiddish) – Feeding bread.

Resources

Encyclopedia, s. 153-154.

Tags

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