

**After an Alibi: Hans Biebow and  
(the Rescue of Three Jewish Groups from the Lodz Ghetto (1944-1945**

**Michal UNGER**

**Bar-Ilan University (Israël)**

My Ph.D dissertation was a monograph about the Lodz ghetto. *Lodz: The last Ghetto in Poland*, is an adaption of my thesis, and was published last January in Israel by Yad Vashem.

During my extensive research, I interviewed many survivors from the Lodz ghetto. The testimonies of three groups, dealing with their fate after the liquidation of the Lodz ghetto in August 1944, attracted my attention. This is an extraordinary story and this is the topic of my present research.

The main protagonist of the research is a wealthy German coffee merchant from Bremen, Hans Biebow. He was the head of the German Ghetto Administration in Lodz ghetto from May 1940 to January 1945. He realized very quickly that Jewish forced labor was a potential "gold mine". He turned the ghetto into an important factor in the German war industry, and a source of personal profit not only for himself but for several high ranking German officials as well.

Due to the enormous profits that these Nazis gained from Jewish force labor, the Lodz ghetto was not liquidated along with the other ghettos, during the implementation of the Final Solution, and continued to operate until August 1944.

During the last period of the ghetto's existence, Biebow and his close associates – especially Erich Czarnulla and Franz Siefert, fearing that they would be forced to enlist to the army, and be sent to the front, planned a way to protect themselves and their interests.

The idea was to reallocate two important factories from the Lodz ghetto to Germany, along with part of their Jewish workers. The first one was a prefabricated housing factory that was run by a private German construction company, Kelterborn & Stenvers from Berlin. More than 600 Jews were allocated to this factory including women and 37 children. They left the ghetto in late October 1944, and eventually most of them reached the concentration camp in Königswusterhausen, a sub camp of Sachsenhausen, near Berlin. Most members of this group were liberated by the Red Army by the end of April 1945.

The second factory was a munitions plant managed also by a private company - Bernsdorf & Co. The group of Jews consisted of 500 people, including entire families. Most worked in the metal factory in the ghetto. This group left the ghetto in late August 1944 and arrived in Auschwitz, where its members remained together without going through selection. To the best of our knowledge, this is the *only* group that arrived in Auschwitz, which did not go through the selection process, and remained intact. Most of the members of this group were transported from Auschwitz to concentration camp Stutthof and in late November 1944 reached Dresden where Biebow and his associates set up a

munitions plant known as Bernsdorf & Co. Despite their suffering, mainly in Stutthof, most of its members survived and were liberated in Theresienstadt in May 1945.

These two big factories were connected to the Ministry of Armament headed by Albert Speer and were recognized as essential to the war effort.

There was a third group that remained in the ghetto after its liquidation to clean the area and pack up equipment that had been left behind, mainly in the factories. It consisted of approximately 1,000 Jews. This group, like the other two, consisted of workers and Jewish officials. These Jews were liberated by the incoming Soviet forces in January 1945.

We need to remember that this took place during the last period of the war – September 1944 – April, May 1945. The Red Army had already liberated a large part of Poland and was headed towards Germany. German defeat was imminent. Chaos was everywhere. Most German men were in the army and there was a severe shortage of manpower for the war industry. As a result the Germans used more than seven million foreign force labor and hundreds of thousands of prisoners from the concentration camps, including Jews.

These three groups that I am researching were part of this huge exploitation.

**In Conclusion** - The purpose of this study is twofold. At the specific level, it brings to light three groups of Jews, more than 2,000 persons in all, in which most of their members survived, in spite of the German policy in this last period to exterminate the remaining Jews in order not to leave any evidence. What was significant about these groups is how Hans Biebow, the main Nazi policymaker in regard to the Lodz ghetto, used them for the continued implementation of his policy of using Jews and Jewish forced labor for practical reasons. In the last stages of the war, he used these three groups first of all to protect from being sent into combat at the front. The main reason however was to furnish himself and his close associates with an alibi to avoid punishment for their war crimes. The paradox is evident: this Nazi war criminal, who participated in the annihilation of the Jews of the Lodz ghetto and other ghettos in the Warthegau, rescued a large group of Jews as the war wound down. Even then, he managed to persuade the SS to leave his groups intact. How could he have managed this? Biebow's ability to remove the groups from Auschwitz and Stutthof, shows how powerful his connections with the SS must have been.

The study explores also the problems and difficulties that arose in the rescue of Jews and shows how the fate of men, women, and children depended on the personal interests and initiatives of a corrupt German merchant and war criminal.

The study has far-reaching implications. It is through this extraordinary episode that we may observe the last stage of the heightened tension that existed between the SS ideology of total annihilation of the Jews, and the more practical policy of exploiting the Jews for the benefit of the Reich and for personal gain.