

To Rescue of Children

The Otwock CENTOS During the Second World War

Sebastian Rakowski

Abstract

The article presents the history of the Treatment and Educational Facility in Otwock, which operated in the years 1928–1942. It was established on the initiative of CENTOS, the Union of Societies for the Care of Jewish Orphans of the Republic of Poland – a Jewish organization which ran orphanages, provided emergency assistance and treatment, and even organized summer and winter camps for neglected children. The Facility, commonly referred to as the “Otwock CENTOS”, was the first – and, until the outbreak of the war, the only – establishment in Poland dedicated to the care of Jewish children with mental disorders and intellectual disabilities. CENTOS employed modern educational methods based on an individual approach, incorporating elements of Janusz Korczak’s pedagogical system. On the morning of 1 September 1939, a German bomber dropped its deadly payload on the CENTOS buildings, killing ten children and wounding forty other people. After the ghetto was established in Otwock, the Facility found itself in the “sanatorium district”. Despite extremely difficult conditions, the Facility survived until the liquidation of the ghetto thanks to the dedication and commitment of the teaching and administrative staff. During the liquidation, the majority of children were sent to the Treblinka death camp along with the residents of Otwock. According to several accounts, some children were executed by shooting and buried on the site. This group was accompanied by the teachers up to the very end. So far, it has been impossible to determine whether any children who stayed at the Facility during the occupation managed to survive the war.

In 1928, on a vast wooded property situated on the outskirts of Otwock, a Treatment and Educational Facility was established at the initiative of the Union of Societies for the Care of Jewish Orphans of the Republic of Poland. The facility, commonly known as the Otwock CENTOS, was the first – and, until the outbreak of war, the only – institution dedicated to caring for Jewish children with mental illness and intellectual disabilities. It was located near “Zofiówka”, a well-known Jewish psychiatric hospital with which it cooperated closely. Over the following years, CENTOS earned recognition and respect among educators and child psychologists alike.¹

During the occupation, an orphanage for refugee children was created alongside the main institution, housing around 50 orphans expelled from Germany in 1938 as part of the *Polenaktion* (Tomaszewski, 1998). In addition, CENTOS financed a facility for mentally ill children at the “Zofiówka” psychiatric hospital.

After the establishment of the Otwock ghetto, CENTOS found itself within the section of the ghetto known as the “Sanatorium District” together with the nearby “Zofiówka” and the former “Brijus” Anti-Tuberculosis Sanatorium. Thanks to the dedication and commitment of the pedagogical and administrative staff, the institution managed to survive in spite of extremely harsh material conditions and meager supplies until the day of the ghetto’s liquidation. During the liquidation operation, most of the children from CENTOS were likely deported together with Otwock’s Jewish inhabitants to the Treblinka II extermination camp. According to some accounts, a portion of them was shot on the spot and buried nearby. Their caregivers reportedly remained with them until the end.

Despite thorough research and exhaustive archival inquiry, it has not been possible to locate any surviving accounts written by a former charge at CENTOS. Given the nature of the institution and the disabilities of its patients, it is possible that none of them survived the war. Nor have any testimonies from the staff members who cared for the children during the occupation been found. For these reasons, scattered and often fragmentary references concerning the institution’s activities have been employed to reconstruct the history of the facility. Information about CENTOS before the outbreak of the war can be found primarily in press articles and the reports on the institute published within them. Much material was drawn from the memoirs of Zofia Szymańska-Rosenblum, the first director and chief physician. During the occupation, however, she

1 More about the functioning of the CENTOS Treatment and Educational Facility in Otwock in the pre-war period can be found in: Rakowski, 2023. This is a commemorative publication released on the 81st anniversary of the extermination of the Jews of Otwock, including at the CENTOS facilities.

worked at the Warsaw headquarters of CENTOS and therefore knew little about the wartime fate of the Otwock branch. For the part of the article dealing with the wartime years, isolated and dispersed sources, drawn chiefly from surviving administrative records, had to be used. A considerable amount of information is contained in correspondence between the Otwock Jewish Council and the Jewish Social Self-Help organization. Additional valuable data come from the files of the Otwock Municipal Board, to which the institution addressed various requests. Another important source consists of documents preserved in the Ringelblum Archive and references found in Ringelblum's own diary. The institution was also mentioned in the *Gazeta Żydowska* (Jewish Gazette), published under German supervision. As noted above, far fewer insights have been provided by personal testimonies.

Until now, the history of Otwock's CENTOS institutions has not been the subject of any independent scholarly study. This article is therefore the first comprehensive treatment of the topic. It does not, however, exhaust the subject: the story of CENTOS in Otwock undoubtedly merits broader and more in-depth research.

The Establishment and Operation of CENTOS up to 1939

In 1927, the Board of the Central Association for the Care of Orphans decided to create a new institution. This was not to be another ordinary orphanage for Jewish children. The goal was to establish a facility that, in addition to providing care and education, would also serve a therapeutic function.² At that time, around 133 educational institutions in Poland were under the supervision of CENTOS, housing approximately 15,000 young charges with varying degrees of intellectual disability (historically classified as mental retardation, imbecility, and idiocy). These children, referred to at the time as "abnormal", "hindered the educational work of ordinary institutions and themselves derived no benefit from it" (Rosenblum, 1934, nos. 1-2). For that reason, the CENTOS leadership decided to gather them into a single specialized center. The chosen location was Otwock, then a well-known anti-tuberculosis health resort. Later in 1927, the CENTOS board took over and renovated the buildings at 4 Gliniecka Street, which had previously housed the Educational Home for Children and Orphans of the Jewish People's Education League. These structures had not originally been built with an orphanage in mind; they were ordinary residential and summer houses. The main building for the children consisted

² In 1926, a facility for blind and deaf Jewish children was established in Bojanowo (Łapot, 2010).

of two wooden houses connected by an annex. Nearby, in a separate building, stood the school affiliated with the institution, while other buildings housed workshops and staff apartments. In total, the entire facility comprised six structures. The site was chosen deliberately. Otwock was renowned not only for its sanatoria and anti-tuberculosis health resorts but also for its psychiatric hospital, “Zofiówka,” located just a few hundred meters from CENTOS. Founded in 1908 and operated since its inception by the Society for the Care of Jewish Mentally and Nervously Ill, “Zofiówka” provided professional consultation and medical support to the educators and pupils of the newly created treatment and educational facility.

The Otwock CENTOS began operations on 12 March 1928, with the official opening held on 29 June of the same year (Berger, 1938). The ceremony was attended by representatives of various Jewish organizations, associations, and institutions from across Poland (Uroczyste otwarcie zakładu..., 1928). The director was Dr. Zofia Rosenblum, who served in that role for several years and continued as chief physician of the facility until the outbreak of the Second World War.³

At the outset, it was decided that the institution would not admit profoundly delayed children who were unfit for schooling. Nor would it accept severely psychopathic but intelligent children, as they would feel miserable among those with intellectual disabilities. The institution was also not intended for morally neglected children who required different pedagogical approaches. It was further determined that the facility would primarily accept children from the hinterland, who had no opportunity for development due to a lack of specialist schools in their areas. Trained staff members were dispatched to various orphanages, even in the remote territories of the so-called Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic, to diagnose potential candidates and refer them to the Otwock center. In this way, 157 children were initially selected, of whom the first 37 were admitted. Their IQ scores ranged between 45 and 75 (Rosenblum, 1934, nos. 1–2).

Despite these criteria, experience soon showed that the children who arrived exhibited a wide variety of disorders. Some displayed psychopathic traits; others had antisocial tendencies. Each required an individualized approach. The economic hardships resulting from the global financial crisis forced the management to open, between 1929 and 1931, a special

3 Dr. Zofia Rosenblum-Szymańska (1888–1978) was a pediatrician, neuropsychiatrist, and child psychologist. In 1918, she founded Poland’s first educational clinic in Warsaw, which she ran from 1923 to 1939. She organized the CENTOS center in Otwock, where she worked until the outbreak of the war. She collaborated with Janusz Korczak. After the Second World War, she continued working with mentally disabled children. She devoted the final years of her professional career to the children of the treatment facility in Józefów near Otwock, just a few kilometers from the site of the pre-war CENTOS facility. Her memoirs were published in 1979, after her death, under the name Zofia Szymańska, the name she used after the war (Szymańska, 1979).

ward for fifteen severely disabled children from affluent families, whose fees helped finance the institution.

Ultimately, CENTOS accepted individuals with intellectual disabilities and mental disorders.⁴ It housed both boys and girls, ranging in age from 8 to as much as 20. The length of stay ranged from one to three years. In 1933, the institution housed 71 children; by the end of 1935, this number had risen to 110 (*O pomoc dla dziecka żydowskiego...*, 1935), and on the eve of the war, it had reached 200 (*Po zakończeniu roku szkolnego...*, 1939).

Most of the residents lived in the main dormitory building, which contained rooms for four to six children, along with two larger rooms accommodating twelve each. The children were divided into groups according to age and temperament. Boys were housed on the ground floor, girls on the upper floor. The residents were allowed to decorate their rooms as they wished with flowers, paper cutouts, and drawings. A separate pavilion housed a dormitory for fifteen children suffering from glandular tuberculosis.

In 1933, the staff of the Otwock CENTOS consisted of a director, a psychopathologist, a hygienist, a steward, four teachers who also served as educators, three vocational instructors, and technical personnel: a cook, a kitchen assistant, a caretaker, a caretaker's assistant, a maid, and a laundress. Relations between the children and the staff were warm and cordial, giving the institution the character of a large family. Upon arrival, each new child was assigned to an appropriate group and paired with a mentor – another resident from the same group. This arrangement had profoundly positive therapeutic and pedagogical effects for both children involved.

As previously mentioned, the Otwock CENTOS was the first – and, until the outbreak of the war, the only – Jewish institution of its kind (*Po zakończeniu roku szkolnego...*, 1939). It therefore had to admit children with a wide range of intellectual and psychological disabilities and could not specialize in a single field, unlike institutions in Western Europe at the time, where psychopathic, oligophrenic, morally neglected, or epileptic children were placed in separate facilities (Rosenblum, 1934, nos. 1–2). The Otwock institution aimed to prepare its pupils via specialized education and workshop training for independent life in society, both socially and economically. It included a kindergarten for developmentally delayed children and a school, initially with three grades, where pupils were taught, among other subjects, reading and writing in both Polish and Yiddish. At the beginning, when nearly all of the children came from small towns in the eastern borderlands, the language of instruction was

4 Children who were “mentally retarded, with an IQ of no less than 45, school-age psychopaths (mentally retarded), morally impaired children, whose social behavior was certainly the result of mental retardation” were admitted (quoted from: Rosenblum, 1934, nos. 1–2).

Yiddish. Over time, however, the proportion of children from Warsaw who spoke Polish increased, and by 1931 Polish had become the primary language of instruction. The school was registered with the regional education authority and followed the curriculum for special education. By 1938, it had expanded to five grades, teaching according to the program of the State Institute of Special Pedagogy (Berger, 1938). The kindergarten for profoundly delayed children operated according to the Montessori system; the kindergarten for “psychopathic and mentally delayed” children applied primarily Fröbel’s methods; and the school used the Decroly method (Rosenblum, 1934, no. 3). The educational and pedagogical results were sufficiently encouraging that, by 1933, eight pupils from CENTOS successfully attended the regular Jewish public school in Otwock.⁵

In the institution’s workshops, pupils learned simple trades under the professional supervision of certified master craftsmen. The first workshops to open were in shoemaking, basket weaving, and linen work. These met the internal needs of the institution, while surplus goods were sold externally. Over time, training expanded to include, among others, box making, bookbinding, and carpentry. Workshop activity also served therapeutic purposes, reinforcing the educational process by fostering dexterity, coordination, skill, and discipline (Rosenblum, 1934, nos. 1–2). According to Dr. Abraham Berger, by 1938, the workshops had become “the foundation of pedagogical therapy” (Berger, 1938).

Since the goal of the institution was to prepare the children for independent life and to adapt them to participation in society, the pupils were responsible for all tasks connected with the social and economic functioning of the institution: cleaning, doing laundry, helping in the kitchen, and serving meals. Staff members did not assist the children in maintaining order in the dormitories, dining room, or bathrooms; cleanliness and order were the children’s exclusive responsibility, intended to foster self-reliance and instill a sense of social duty. Older girls were also required to complete a compulsory course in household management where they learned not only cleaning and cooking but also how to manage money. To that end, they accompanied staff members on grocery shopping trips, helping to select ingredients for nutritious, varied, and appetizing meals. They were also sent for practical training to families in Otwock, where they assisted in household duties and received small wages for their work (Szymańska, 1979, p. 124).

An interesting and original tradition at the institution was the “Days of Self-Reliance”, initiated by the children themselves. On those days, the management staff handed over control of the facility to the pupils for

⁵ At that time, there were two primary schools for Christian children and two for Jewish children in Otwock.

an entire day. The older children took charge of organizational matters: “they assigned various duties to other children, including supervision and care of the younger charges, arranging walks, entertainment, and activities in the workshop and school” (Rosenblum, 1934, no. 3). During one such “Day of Self-Reliance”, the home was visited by a group of children from Dr. Janusz Korczak’s Warsaw Orphanage. The pupils of the Otwock CENTOS welcomed their guests and showed them around the institution. The boys organized a volleyball match, while the girls prepared lunch. The event testified to the success of the institution’s efforts to foster independence among its charges. The management also attempted to introduce elements of self-government – a popular pedagogical practice in Korczak’s institutions as well – but given the specific nature of the Otwock center, only some aspects of it could be implemented. For instance, CENTOS had its own informal court, called the Circle of Peers. All the children took part in its sessions. The director of the institution acted as chairperson, but only if elected by the pupils. The establishment of the court led to a noticeable decline in petty thefts, which had previously occurred. Corporal punishment was never used. Other forms of punishment or coercion were also avoided, aside from persuasion and appealing to the opinion of the group. In exceptional cases, the penalty consisted of exclusion from the group and temporary isolation (Rosenblum, 1934, no. 3).

Another important educational principle to which the institution attached great significance was maintaining contact between the children and their families. This was difficult, as most of the pupils came from orphanages where they had been left anonymously. Nevertheless, the educators made every effort to extract as much information as possible from the children in order to locate their relatives. In several cases, they succeeded in finding the families of some of the children (Rosenblum, 1934, no. 3).

The Second World War

On the morning of 1 September 1939, a German bomber – most likely fleeing pursuit – dropped its deadly payload on several buildings in Otwock, including those of the CENTOS institution. This first encounter with war left a profoundly distressing impression on the town’s inhabitants, and especially on the children of the facility. The bombing killed ten children and injured another forty people. Among the wounded was CENTOS director, the well-known poet and educator Kalman Lis (Kałman-Ber Łys).⁶ He suf-

6 His name commonly appears as Kalman Lis, but some sources give it as Kałman/Kalmen Łys. He himself signed his name as Kałmen Łys. He was the director of the Otwock CENTOS since at least March 1935 (*Opieka nad upośledzonymi...*, 1935).

ferred severe leg injuries and was taken to a hospital in Warsaw. The doctors saved his life, but he remained permanently disabled. Emanuel Ringelblum recorded in his diary that Lis had described the bombing in a harrowing letter. Unfortunately, the letter itself did not survive (Ringelblum, 1983, p. 573). There does exist, however, a deeply moving account attributed to Melchior Wańkiewicz, who was in Otwock at the time as a war correspondent. The following is an excerpt:

And that orphanage? Wide eyes looked at me with mute despair. "Come." I followed my mournful guide. He bent over a small hollow, gesturing silently toward something I could not discern. After a moment, I saw it was the charred corpse of a boy. His bone protruded, having torn through the skin of his arm. The chest lay open, ribs jutting out like those of a quartered calf. Inside, the flesh glistened pink and half-cooked. Ten paces farther stood the shelter, housed in a broad old wooden building. A powerful bomb had fallen there. We entered a surviving corridor. The wall was streaked red with blood. A teacher, terror frozen in his eyes, recounted how [...] he had run outside, seen the small corpses, and the surviving children hiding in the bushes. The last child was crawling toward the shrubs, dragging themselves with their hands, dragging their crushed legs.

After that raid, two German planes were shot down outside Otwock. One burned to the ground – only the pilot's legs, still in elegant officer's boots, survived the fire, along with a hand adorned with manicured fingers and a fine diamond ring. Let him know, in the next world, how true his aim was: ten children killed, twenty-five wounded. The pilot of the second plane was captured alive. I proposed that he be made to walk, in full uniform with all his medals, behind ten small coffins to the cemetery. He had dropped his bombs on a peaceful summer resort, with no military targets, at nine twenty in the morning, on Friday, the first of September – the first day of the war (Wańkiewicz, 1939).

News of the CENTOS bombing spread rapidly throughout Otwock, and only a few hours later Dr. Janusz Korczak personally informed all those gathered at the headquarters of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw about the tragedy.⁷ The child victims of the air raid were

7 After 25 January 1940, see N.N., *Wspomnienia z pierwszych miesięcy okupacji w Warszawie (09.1939–01.1940 r.)* (Epstein, Person, 2016, p. 2).

soon buried, and their graves became a grim omen of the intentions that the Third German Reich harbored toward the Jews – an insight later noted by Perec Opoczyński, the Jewish writer and poet known for his poignant reports from the Warsaw Ghetto.⁸

Five days after the bombing, several of the CENTOS educators who were fit to bear arms responded to Col. Roman Umiastowski's radio appeal and set out eastward, where they were to be enlisted into the army. As Dr. Zofia Rosenblum-Szymańska later recalled, they took some of the older children with them. The younger ones remained behind, cared for by a mostly female staff, among whom "Rega Kowalska took the lead" (Szymańska, 1979, p. 141). In time, these staffing shortages were replenished. The institution became a place of employment for members of the Jewish intelligentsia who had lost all means of livelihood first due to the war and later because of the ghetto. Among those who joined the staff was the prominent Jewish playwright Jakub Preger, then residing in Otwock. Another educator was Albert Wajndling (Weinding), a well-known reciter with a beautiful voice (Orensztajn, 1948, pp. 17–18; Otwock, 1941, p. 5). The director, Kalman Lis, was not only a teacher and educator but also an acclaimed writer. Within the ghetto, he founded the Committee for the Promotion of Jewish Literature, which brought together local artists and cultural figures, organized cultural events, and sought thereby to preserve at least a semblance of normalcy under utterly abnormal circumstances.

When the Germans occupied Otwock in mid-September 1939, the town found itself directly behind the front lines of their forces tightening the encirclement around Warsaw. The supply situation was dire, as evidenced by the dozens of surviving petitions from individuals and institutions, including hospitals and sanatoria, requesting passes that would allow them to travel to nearby villages to purchase food. Among these petitioners was also CENTOS in Otwock. This documentation reveals that on 24 September 1939, the institution housed 210 people, including both children and staff (Application to the Municipal Board in Otwock for the issuance of four passes..., 1939, p. 445).

As early as November 1938, the institution had begun to receive, sporadically at first, children who had been deported from Germany at the end of October that year as part of the Polenaktion (*Akcja pomocy...*, 1938; *Ofiary na „Centos” w Otwocku*, 1939). These were orphans and half-orphans of Polish descent or citizenship whom the Germans had expelled across the Polish border. The CENTOS headquarters took them from temporary camps, the largest being in Zbąszyń, and placed them in its various institutions. The young refugees staying at the Otwock center were

8 Perec Opoczyński, reportage *Dzieci na bruku* (Polit, 2017, p. 437).

scheduled to leave on 6 August for Gdynia, from where they were to sail to England (Tomaszewski, 1998, p. 223). This operation was made possible through the efforts of the Committee for Aid to Jewish Refugees from Germany and the Joint Committee for the Relief of Polish Jews in England, which had obtained permission from the British authorities to accept one hundred children (Przewiezienie dzieci..., 1939; Dzieci wyjeżdżają za morze, 1939). It is not known whether all of the children left the Otwock CENTOS and embarked on this journey; some may have remained behind. When the refugee camp in Zbąszyń began to be liquidated on an emergency basis in late August, the CENTOS headquarters agreed to take in 235 children and distribute them among its institutions across the country. The entire operation was to be completed within twenty-four hours, on 25 August 1939 (Kronika Żydowska. Obóz w Zbąszyniu..., 1939). It is possible that some of these children were placed in the Otwock facility. However, certain sources indicate that they may have arrived there only during the first weeks of the German occupation.⁹

For all of these children, a shelter for refugee children – independent from the existing institution – was established, also referred to as the Children’s Shelter in Otwock. It was located across the road at 5 Gliniecka Street, in rented buildings on a property owned by the Dębowicz family who were merchants and manufacturers from Łódź. Surviving accounts indicate that these children were referred to as “German” both because of their experiences and because many of them spoke German better than Polish or Yiddish, while some spoke only German. Nine staff members cared for them. The shelter’s director was Chaim Ossowiecki,¹⁰ and its head physician was Dr. Miriam Szmuszkiewicz (List of employees at the CENTOS refugee children’s home, 1941, p. 23).

After being discharged from the hospital, Kalman Lis returned to his work at the institution. Emanuel Ringelblum recorded that during the occupation Lis would sometimes travel to the CENTOS headquarters in Warsaw to seek financial assistance, trying at all costs to prevent his young charges from starving (Ringelblum, 1983, p. 573). In July 1940, the center housed 202 children under the care of 33 staff members.¹¹ Due to the destruction caused by the bombing of 1 September 1939, there was

9 *Działalność centrali Jointu w Polsce podczas 13 wojennych miesięcy (wrzesień 1939 – październik 1940 r.)* (Bańkowska, Piotrowska, 2017, p. 387).

10 Letter from CENTOS to the Jewish Council in Otwock dated 1 July 1941 (Correspondence between the Presidium of the Jewish Social Self-Help organization and the Jewish Council and Delegation of the Jewish Social Self-Help organization in Otwock, n.d., p. 7).

11 *Memoriał kierowników internatów w sprawie ciężkiego położenia sierocińców CENTOS w obecnej chwili [skierowany] do AJDC i ŻSS z 8.07.1940 r.* (Bańkowska, Piotrowska, 2017, pp. 942–944).

a shortage of space in the facility. This problem was solved by incorporating several neighboring villas located on Świerkowa Street.

In addition to the Treatment and Educational Facility that had been in operation since 1928 and the newly established refugee shelter, CENTOS also initiated a Children's Ward at the "Zofiówka" Hospital for the Jewish Mentally and Nervously Ill (Bańkowska, Piotrowska, 2017, pp. 942–944). It is unclear whether this ward had existed before the war, but it is known that it was expanded to accommodate 70 patients between September 1939 and March 1940.¹² In July 1940, 65 "defective and mentally handicapped" children resided there. Little is known about how the ward functioned. In July 1940, Adam Czerniaków, head of the Warsaw Judenrat (Jewish Council), mentioned the patients in his diary following a visit to "Zofiówka". The ward was still being referenced in October 1940 (Bańkowska, Piotrowska, 2017, p. 388).

At the beginning of July 1940, the situation of all CENTOS institutions had become desperate. There was a severe shortage of both money and food. In an effort to save the facilities – and above all their charges – their directors convened a meeting, which resulted in a memorandum addressed to the Jewish Social Self-Help organization and the American Joint Distribution Committee. The document described the functioning of the children's homes, highlighting the catastrophic lack of financial resources that made even minimal operations impossible. The shortage of funds meant that the institutions could not purchase rationed allocations of bread, flour, sugar, soap, coal, and other essentials. In some cases, the most basic supplies were bought with money contributed by the children themselves, who gave up their meager savings for this purpose. The memorandum also reported that the institutions could not afford necessary medicines and that the children were in danger of developing vitamin deficiencies, as there were no funds for vegetables or fruit. The staff's situation was also dire: most employees had not received wages since April 1940, even though they had families to support. The memorandum, signed on behalf of twelve directors of CENTOS institutions in Warsaw, Otwock, Miedzeszyn, and Zagrzeb, concluded with an urgent appeal for immediate financial assistance (Bańkowska, Piotrowska, 2017, pp. 942–944).

Although the Otwock CENTOS institutions were directly subordinate to the Warsaw headquarters and operated outside the organizational structure of the Otwock Jewish Council, the latter nevertheless made efforts, in light of the desperate situation, to provide financial and material support. In the same way, the Otwock Jewish Council assisted the Joint Distribution Committee kitchen and the Jewish Health Protection Society

12 *Sprawozdanie ŻS od 09.1939 do 03.1940 r. i sprawozdanie z działalności poszczególnych wydziałów ŻS za 04.1940 r.* (Bańkowska, Piotrowska, 2017, p. 335)

kitchen in Otwock, both of which had been deprived of help from their central offices.¹³

It is likely that this period is the one recalled by Zofia Rosenblum-Szymańska, who worked at the Warsaw CENTOS headquarters during the occupation. Many years after the war, she remembered that on several occasions it was possible to obtain special passes allowing food deliveries to the Otwock institution, which had been cut off from regular supplies. She described one such delivery, in which she personally took part:

Mrs. Ringelblum was working tirelessly, pulling out from various hidden corners provisions set aside for a so-called “rainy day”. The cart was already loaded, yet more and more was still being added. After all, it was food for at least two hundred people, and there was no knowing when the German authorities would grant another permit for transport (Szymańska, 1979, pp. 141–142).

The events she described took place before the establishment and closure of the Otwock ghetto, as indicated by her account of the struggle to procure food for the institution. Some of the older boys were sent to nearby villages with money to buy provisions. They were gone for a long time and returned only after dark. It turned out that they had managed to purchase two sacks of groats and rye, which were then confiscated by a German patrol. The resourceful boys did not give up; they complained to a local commander, explaining that the food was for an orphanage. The German ordered that the sacks be returned and asked for the institution’s address. The next day, to everyone’s astonishment, several pairs of shoes and a few dozen kilograms of meat were delivered to the facility (p. 142). Rosenblum-Szymańska spent that day with her former charges. She recalled that they sat in a clearing in the forest as in the old days, talking... about food:

Our bellies growled from hunger, and we dreamed aloud of what it would be like after the war. For dinner, we’d have a big cutlet every other day, just like before. Włodek demanded sausage for breakfast; Cyla preferred eggs. Everyone unanimously protested against sorrel soup – it was struck from the menu forever. Three times a week there would be good chicken broth with pasta like the ones Mrs. Sara used to make. Lejka bristled: “Oh, really – don’t you know

¹³ Letter from the Jewish Council in Otwock to the Jewish Social Self-Help organization in Kraków dated 27 August 1940 (Correspondence between the Presidium of the Jewish Social Self-Help organization and the “Zofiówka” psychiatric hospital..., 1940, p. 1).

how much work it takes to knead pasta for so many people?”
Everyone shouted her down. Tough! Pasta was a must (p. 142).

Those dreams never came true, and Zofia Szymańska never saw her former pupils again.

In October 1940, the Otwock CENTOS institutions together housed about 300 children (Bańkowska, Piotrowska, 2017, p. 388). Among them were 50 deportees from Germany living in the shelter, and 70 patients of the CENTOS-supported ward for “defective and mentally handicapped” children at “Zofiówka”.¹⁴ The remainder resided in the CENTOS Treatment and Educational Facility.

The Otwock ghetto was established in December 1940 (Announcement by the Kreishauptmann..., 1940, p. 79). It consisted of a “residential” and a separate “sanatorium” section. The latter owed its name to several medical facilities located within its boundaries. The largest of these was the “Zofiówka” Hospital for the Jewish Mentally and Nervously Ill. Another was the Anti-Tuberculosis Sanatorium operated before the war by the “Brijus” Jewish society. Alongside these were the CENTOS institutions, which were likewise incorporated into the Sanatorium District. At first, the ghetto remained open, and people could move in and out with relative freedom. This ended in mid-January 1941, when the ghetto was closed under the pretext of a worsening epidemic situation. Within a few months, this led to a drastic deterioration in the living conditions of the entire Jewish community of Otwock, but it affected most severely the medical and social welfare institutions. The Otwock CENTOS facilities were no exception. Reports written by the medical and educational staff in early May 1941 bear witness to the tragic condition of their patients. Medical reports showed that over the course of several months, the children’s overall condition had worsened dramatically. The meager amount and low nutritional value of the food led to the development of numerous illnesses, including vitamin deficiencies. The physician examining the children recorded that 60% had suffered severe weight loss, and another 20% a lesser degree, all due to hunger:

I could describe several of these children as “living skeletons”.
For example, Gajtmach,¹⁵ who is 168 cm tall and weighs 34 kg (instead of the normal 52 kg). Bedsores on the buttocks, heart failure. Despite thorough examination, no other cause

14 30.05.1940, Warszawa. *ŻSS-KK. Okólnik nr 1. Sprawozdanie ŻS od 09.1939 do 03.1940 r. i sprawozdanie z działalności poszczególnych wydziałów ŻS za 04.1940 r.* (Bańkowska, Piotrowska, 2017, p. 335).

15 Likely a reference to Jankiel Gajtmach, 17, who died in June 1941 (Kronika zmarłych w czerwcu, 1941, p. 2).

could be found except starvation. Kazuszewicz, height 144 cm, weight 28.5 kg (instead of the normal 37 kg), and so on.

Further in the report, the doctor wrote:

70% of the children suffer from skin diseases, of which 20% have severe abscesses on various parts of the body (face, genitals, buttocks, groin), which resist all treatment. In 50% of the children, skin diseases are caused by scabies, and in part by vitamin deficiency (boils, rashes, etc.). The lack of soap, underwear, and the possibility of bathing in the facility results in a severe and persistent course of these illnesses.

If the shortage of soap, water, and underwear continues, the institution will face an outbreak of lice infestation. Under these conditions, the children's health is in grave danger. Immediate aid is essential in the form of: ending the starvation, and providing soap, underwear, fuel, medicine, and medical supplies.¹⁶

The educators themselves confirmed the doctor's observations. Their own report, which also served as a plea for help, ended with a moving description of the situation faced by the children:

Despite the utmost efforts of the management and administration of the institution, despite the goodwill of the Jewish population – especially the Otwock Judenrat, despite the admirable endurance of both the children and ourselves, it is absolutely impossible to continue living in this way.

For as long as we received larger food rations, the institution was able to operate at an acceptable level. Now, however, our material situation has become catastrophic. We are compelled to ask for immediate and substantial financial assistance; otherwise, we face a calamity beyond our ability to prevent: pedagogical problems beyond human endurance, sickness, and death... (pp. 10–11).

Their grim predictions came true the following month. According to the *Gazeta Żydowska*, two of the institution's pupils died in June 1941: seventeen-year-old Jankiel Gajstman (mentioned in the medical report) and fourteen-year-old Rubin Flidermaum (*Kronika zmarłych w czerwcu, 1941, p. 2*).

16

Excerpt from a report by a doctor at the orphanage in Otwock dated 6 May 1941 (*Correspondence between the Committee for Poor Jews..., 1940–1941, pp. 10–11*).

The daughters of the property's owner, Dębowicz, lived with their families in the building at 5 Gliniecka Street, where the refugee children's shelter was located. One of the women named Fruma survived the occupation and later described her wartime experiences. Unfortunately, she almost entirely omitted the subject of the children with whom she shared the house. Not once did she mention what the institution's doctor and teachers wrote about in their reports – the hunger, disease, and death that filled the place. The Dębowicz family was well-off. Before the war, they had lived in Łódź, where the head of the family owned a handkerchief factory, while in Otwock they possessed a property used as a summer residence. During their time in the ghetto, they never experienced hunger.

After the war, Fruma Lewkowitz wrote to her brother about her time in the house on Gliniecka Street:

The most beautiful period of my life and my most beautiful memories are from that small, single room, when I did everything myself, ran my own household, cooked, and baked bread with my own hands. I no longer had a spacious apartment or two servants, as I had in the normal days back in Łódź. And yet I was so happy, so happy! I sensed instinctively that my happiness would not last long. I remember dreaming that I could somehow stop time from running, and that is why I remember every single day so vividly (Letter from Fruma Lewkowitz..., 1946).

As this shows, two utterly different realities existed side by side during the occupation. On the ground floor of the same building, there was a struggle for survival, while upstairs, a woman experienced the happiest moments of her life. Do Fruma's memories reflect the indifference of the wealthy Jews, as is often mentioned in survivor accounts? Or perhaps her later tragic experiences – the liquidation of the ghetto, round-ups, gendarmerie, life in hiding, the camps, and the deaths of her father, husband, and her only child – transformed the months she had spent in the Otwock ghetto with her loved ones into the most beautiful time in her memory, a vision not even the tragedy of the CENTOS children could shatter?

At the beginning of December 1941, all of the Otwock CENTOS institutions housed 285 children in total (Person, 2014, p. 148), meaning that their number had declined only slightly over the course of the year. We know that new children arrived during this period, while others were discharged. The greatest loss of patients occurred in "Zofiówka"; in October 1940, there had been 70 children there (Bańkowska, Piotrowska, 2017, p. 335), but by December 1941, only 40 remained (Person, 2014, p. 148).

No known testimonies describe the operation of the institution during the occupation. The few and often fragmentary references that

exist make it impossible to reconstruct the daily life of the young patients in the Otwock CENTOS facilities. What we do know is that the children suffered from cold, hunger, and illness – and that they did not face these horrors alone. Their educators, teachers, and caregivers stayed by their side, working with devotion and sacrifice to save the orphans. They succeeded in doing so until 19 August 1942 – the day the Otwock ghetto was exterminated.

The Extermination of the Institutions

The liquidation of the CENTOS institutions took place on 19 August 1942, during the campaign to deport residents of the Otwock ghetto. According to surviving testimonies, it was carried out with the same brutality as the liquidation of the ghetto itself. On that day, the Germans deported about 8,000 Jewish residents of the city to the Treblinka II extermination camp. Up to 1,000 people were killed that same day in chaotic massacres perpetrated by Ukrainian guards, German gendarmes, and the SS. Over the following five weeks, several thousand more were murdered in mass executions that continued after the deportations ended.

On the day of the ghetto's liquidation, some of the children from the CENTOS facilities were taken to the Otwock Umschlagplatz. This is confirmed by an account from Calek Perechodnik, a Jewish policeman who recalled being reproached by one of the children, who told him it was shameful to deport orphans (Perechodnik, 2004, p. 61). Emanuel Ringelblum wrote in his chronicle that all of the institution's charges were shot on site (Ringelblum, 1983, p. 573). This version of events is echoed in the testimony of Fruma Lewkowicz, the daughter of the property owner whose villa had housed the refugee children from Zbąszyń. According to her:

A great pit was dug in the villa's garden. Everyone was ordered to go down into it and everyone – the children, Tola, Ossowiecki, Ossowiecka – were all killed. They are buried in that pit, in that graveyard next to the villa. They were shot on the spot. That's what the caretaker told us (Account of Fruma (Frانيا) Lewkowicz..., n.d.).

If this account is true, their bodies most likely are still resting in a mass grave near the site.

It is probable, however, that most of the children were driven to the Otwock Umschlagplatz, while those who were sickly, weak, or severely mentally disabled were executed on the spot. Some children did manage to escape, hiding in nearby forests or abandoned buildings. This is supported by the testimony of Stanisław Nissenszal, who after

the liquidation of the ghetto commanded a group of about twenty Jewish policemen guarding the grounds of “Zofiówka” and “Brijus”. After the war, he testified that he had sheltered children from CENTOS who had fled during the liquidation (Testimony of Stanisław Nissenszal..., 1947).

A Polish witness, Edmund Wierciński, who lived near CENTOS, also saw children hiding in the area:

Over several days, the children’s hiding places were seen in the nearby woods. They were small pits dug in the warm sand and covered with acacia branches. From time to time, little black heads and frightened faces would peek out. It seemed as if great tortoises were stretching their necks from beneath green shells. Some passersby would toss food onto the branches, and at night the pit dwellers would creep to the nearby wells for water (Wierciński, 2005, pp. 50–56).

The children were most likely captured during subsequent roundups conducted regularly by the Germans with the assistance of the Jewish ghetto police and the Blue Police, and were killed in mass executions that continued for five weeks after the deportation. All those who had escaped transport and were later caught were murdered.

As late as April 1943, a Jewish boy from the CENTOS orphanage was hiding nearby beneath the veranda of the Zawadka family’s house (Account of Goldin Zalman..., 1949; Investigation files concerning the genocide..., n.d., pp. 1264–1272; Criminal case files against Jan Trajda, Teofil Walicki, and Jan Wróbel, n.d.). He may have been a boy named Feder, who that same spring or summer was shot by a gendarme in nearby Śródborów. The boy was said to have slept in the ruins of the CENTOS buildings, spending his days wandering through Śródborów. He often played football with the local boys. The townspeople knew him and occasionally gave him food. He was betrayed by another boy, fifteen-year-old Zbigniew Derma, who received five zlotys from the gendarme for turning him in. The boys who had played football with Feder were forced to bury his body. Three years later, Derma joined the Citizens’ Militia. In 1950, he was tried for his wartime act and sentenced to five years in prison (Case files against Zbigniew Derma, n.d.).

No post-war testimony has been found from any of the nearly 300 children who were in the Otwock CENTOS during the occupation. Perhaps none of them survived the war. Similarly, little is known about the fate of the institution’s staff. From the previously cited account of Fruma Lewkowicz, we learn that Chaim Ossowiecki, the orphanage director, was shot together with his wife and their wards. The director of the CENTOS Treatment and Educational Facility, Kalman Lis, chose to save himself. According to Emanuel Ringelblum’s notes, Lis went into hiding on the “Aryan” side, staying with Christian acquaintances, whom he paid

generously for shelter. One of them reportedly injured him, and he was eventually captured by the gendarmerie (Ringelblum, 1983, pp. 450, 573). He was likely executed in one of the mass shootings that took place in Otwock after the liquidation of the ghetto. The previously-mentioned prominent Jewish playwright Jakub Preger was either deported or killed locally (p. 450).

In early 1944, the buildings at 5 Gliniecka Street, where the CENTOS orphanage had operated during the war, once again echoed with children's voices. The premises now housed a Health Home of the Educational Institute of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, run by Catholic nuns, sheltering around 100 orphans. The surviving structures of the former orphanage, spared by the 1 September 1939 bombing, were converted into residential dwellings. Today, only two buildings remain from the original architectural complex. In the place where the main pavilion once stood, there is now a large hollow slowly filling with refuse. Almost all those who once remembered the children's laughter that echoed from the Otwock CENTOS are gone. Now the site is completely forgotten – no memorial commemorates the fate of the children or their devoted caregivers who perished there.

(transl. by Ian Stephenson)

Bibliography

Archival sources:

Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance (Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej, AIPN)

Case files against Zbigniew Derma (n.d.). AIPN, file no. GK/317/257.

Criminal case files against Jan Trajda, Teofil Walicki and Jan Wróbel (n.d.). AIPN, file no. GK/209/3.

Investigation files concerning the genocide of 2,000 Jewish citizens by the German occupation authorities in Otwock in August 1942 (n.d.). AIPN, file no. S75/08/Zn.

Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute (Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego, AŻiH)

Account of Goldin Zalman from 3 July 1949, prepared on the basis of information provided by Franciszka Zawadka and others (1949). AŻiH, file no. 301/4326 (transl. by Adam Bielecki for the purposes of the investigation file concerning the genocide of 2,000 Jewish citizens in Otwock in August 1942 by the German occupation authorities. AIPN, file no. S 75/08/Zn).

Correspondence between the Committee for Poor Jews, the "Brijus" Association, the "Zofiówka" facility, and the Health Protection Society in Otwock with the AJDC in Warsaw, 8 September 1940 – 21 October 1941 (1940–1941). AŻiH, file no. 210/534A.

Correspondence between the Presidium of the Jewish Social Self-Help organization and the Jewish Council and Delegation of the Jewish Social Self-Help organization in Otwock (n.d.). AŻiH, file no. 211/771.

Correspondence between the Presidium of the Jewish Social Self-Help organization and the "Zofiówka" psychiatric hospital in Otwock, 30 August 1940 – 31 December 1940 (1940). AŻiH, file no. 211/769.

Letter from Fruma Lewkowicz née Dębowicz primo voto Torończyk dated 7 February 1946 (1946). AŻiH, file no. 301/7003.

- Testimony of Stanisław Nissenszal from 18 March 1947 (1947). AŻiH, Acts in the case of Stanisław Nissenszal, file no. 313/87.
- Archives of the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem (AIYV)
Account of Fruma (Frania) Lewkowicz née Dębowicz *primo voto* Torończyk (n.d.). AIYV, file no. O3/3469.
- State Archives in Warsaw, Otwock branch (Archiwum Państwowe w Warszawie Oddział w Otwocku, APW in Otwock)
Announcement by the Kreishauptmann concerning the creation of a Jewish residential district in Otwock, dated 4 November 1940 (1940). APW in Otwock, Acts of the City of Otwock, file no. 1057, p. 79.
- Application to the Municipal Board in Otwock for the issuance of four passes, dated 24 September 1939 (1939). APW in Otwock, Acts of the City of Otwock, file no. 738, p. 445.
- List of employees at the CENTOS Children's Shelter, dated 3 July 1941 (1941). APW in Otwock, Acts of the City of Otwock, file no. 1066, p. 23.
- List of employees at the CENTOS refugee children's home, dated 3 July 1941 (1941). APW in Otwock, Acts of the City of Otwock, file no. 1066, p. 23.

Publications:

- Akcja pomocy uchodźcom z Niemiec (1938). *5-ta Rano*, 25 listopada.
- Bańkowska, A., Ferenc-Piotrowska, M. (2017). *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 27: *Żydowska Samopomoc Społeczna w Warszawie (1939-1943)*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Berger, A. (1938). Dzieśięciolecie zakładu „Centos” w Otwocku. *Przegląd Społeczny*, no. 4, pp. 49-51.
- Dzieci wyjeżdżają za morze (1939). *Nasz Przegląd*, 2 sierpnia.
- Epstein, T., Person, K. (2016). *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 33: *Getto warszawskie*, part I. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Kronika zmarłych w czerwcu (1941). *Gazeta Żydowska*, 18 lipca, no. 60.
- Kronika Żydowska. Obóz w Zbąszyniu zlikwidowany zostanie w ciągu 24-ch godzin (1939). *Nasz Przegląd*, 25 sierpnia.
- Łapot, M. (2010). Działalność Zakładu dla Żydowskich Dzieci Czterozmysłowych w Bojanowie Wielkopolskim (1926-1939). *Prace Naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie. Pedagogika*, vol. 19, pp. 335-346.
- O pomoc dla dziecka żydowskiego. Konferencja prasowa w „Centos” (1935). *Nasz Przegląd*, 17 grudnia.
- Ofiary na „Centos” w Otwocku (1939). *Nasz Przegląd*, 13 sierpnia.
- Opieka nad upośledzonymi i bezdomnymi dziećmi. Zakład wychowawczo-leczniczy „Centos” w Otwocku (1935). *5-ta Rano*, 22 marca.
- Orensztajn, B. (1948). Churbn. Otwock, Karczew, Falenica. Bamberg.
- Otwock (1941). *Gazeta Żydowska*, no. 117, 28 listopada.
- Perechodnik, C. (2004). *Spowiedź. Dzieje rodziny żydowskiej podczas okupacji hitlerowskiej w Polsce* (ed. D. Engel). Warszawa: Ośrodek „Karta”.
- Person, K. (2014) (ed.). *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 14: *Kolekcja Hersza Wassera*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Po zakończeniu roku szkolnego. Sytuacja w szkolnictwie specjalnym dla dzieci anomalnych (1939). *Nasz Przegląd*, 24 lipca.
- Polit, M. (ed.) (2017). *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 31: *Pisma Pereca Opoczyńskiego*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Przewiezienie dzieci uchodźców z Niemiec ze Zbąszynia do Anglii (1939). *Kurjer Warszawski*, 28 lipca.
- Rakowski, S. (2023). *Szkoła samodzielności. Historia Zakładu Leczniczo-Wychowawczego Centos w Otwocku 1928-1942*. Otwock: HiStory.
- Ringelblum, E. (1983). *Kronika getta warszawskiego, wrzesień 1939 - styczeń 1943* (ed. A. Eisenbach, T. Brustin-Berenstein, T. Szarota, transl. by A. Rutkowski, M. Friedman). Warszawa: „Czytelnik”.
- Rosenblum, Z. (1934). Sprawozdanie z 5-letniej działalności Zakładu Leczniczo-Wychowawczego „Centos” w Otwocku. *Przegląd Społeczny*, nos. 1-4.
- Szymańska, Z. (1979). *Byłam tylko lekarzem...* Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX.

- Tomaszewski, J. (1998). *Preludium Zagłady. Wygnanie Żydów polskich z Niemiec w 1938 r.* Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Uroczyste otwarcie zakładu dla nierozwiniętych dzieci żydowskich w Otwocku (1928). *Nasz Przegląd*, 1 lipca.
- Wańkiewicz, M. (1939). Tragedia pierwszego dnia. *Gazeta Samorządowa*, vol. 3, no. 9 (25).
- Wierciński, E. (2005). Gałązka akacji. *Midrasz*, no. 9, wrzesień, pp. 50–56 (initially published in "Twórczość" in January 1947).

Annex

Employees at the CENTOS refugee children's home in Otwock, dated 3 July 1941¹⁷

Frisch Estera
 Krauzler Posel
 Lampelc Maks
 Lifszyc Tauba
 Marienberg Estera
 Morgenstern Rachel
 Ossowiecki Chaim
 Szmuszkowicz Miriam, Dr.
 Weindling Albert

Employees at the CENTOS Treatment and Educational Facility in Otwock, dated 3 July 1941¹⁸

Adler Mina
 Epsztejn Roza
 Freidenberg Helena
 Fuks Izaak
 Garbar Szarlotta
 Goldsztajn
 Gotlib Zofia
 Hiller Rywka
 Horensztajn Musia
 Horensztajn Sonia
 Kokoszko Michał, Dr.
 Kowalska Rachela
 Lerer
 Lifszyc Izrael
 Łys Kałman-Ber
 Markowicz Bajla
 Mucha

¹⁷ List of employees at the CENTOS refugee children's home..., 1941, p. 23.

¹⁸ List of employees at the CENTOS Children's Shelter..., 1941, p. 23.

Piskorz Stanisław
Popis Jan
Preger Jakub
Rechtman Sara
Rezunienko Maria
Rotsztajn Lea
Słabuszewski Józef
Sydrańska Mala
Sydrański
Szejnin Rachela
Szerba Sonia
Szternowa Ida
Szusterman Luba
Taszkowska Regina
Tenfeld Fejga
Tugenthaft Maks