

THE GHETTOS

Invasion of Poland

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In September 1939, the Germans invaded Poland. Poland lost its independence, and its citizens were subjected to severe oppression. Schools were closed, all political activity was banned, and many members of the Polish elite, intellectuals, political leaders, and clerics, were sent to concentration camps or murdered immediately. Jews were subjected to violence, humiliation, dispossession, and arbitrary kidnappings for forced labor by German soldiers who abused Jews in the streets, paying special attention to religious Jews. Many thousands of Poles and Jews were murdered in the first months of the occupation, not yet as a policy of systematic mass murder, but an expression of the brutal nature of the occupying forces.

On September 21, 1939, just after the German conquest of Poland, Reinhard Heydrich, Nazi head of the Sipo (security police) and SD (security service) issued an order to the commanders in occupied Poland. The first, immediate stage called for several practical measures, including deporting Jews from western and central Poland and concentrating them in the vicinity of railroad junctions and forming *Judenrate* (councils of elders or Jewish councils) that would be responsible for these actions.

Establishment of Ghettos

Guided by ideological principles and striving to establish a “New Order” in Europe based mainly on racial doctrine, Nazi Germany separated Jews from the rest of the population by establishing ghettos. A ghetto was a section of the city in which Jews were confined and restricted to live behind walls, fences, or barbed wire. The Germans wanted to isolate Jews and completely disconnect them from the world around them, from Jews in other places, and from everyday life. This gave



Jews rounded up for forced labor, Przemysl, Poland, October 1939. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (5323)

them great control over the Jews. Soon after the ghettos began to be established, the Nazis tried to remove the Jews from their midst through population transfer. At first they sought to drive Jews into Soviet territory, but when that strategy proved unworkable, the Nazis developed a plan to send the Jews to the island of Madagascar. This plan also proved

SECRET

Berlin: September 21, 1939
To: Chiefs of all Einsatzgruppen of the
Security Police
Subject: Jewish question in the occupied territory

I refer to the conference held in Berlin today....
For the time being, the first step toward the final goal
is the concentration of the Jews from the countryside
into the larger cities. This is to be carried out with all
speed....

In each Jewish community a council of Jewish Elders
is to be set up.... The councils of Elders are to be
informed of the dates and deadlines.... They are then
to be made personally responsible for the departure of
the Jews from the countryside.... For general reasons
of security, the concentration of Jews in the cities will
probably necessitate orders altogether barring Jews
from certain sections of the cities, or, for example,
forbidding them to leave the ghetto....

impractical. Only later, once the Nazis began to implement a policy of systematic mass murder of Jews through deportation to extermination camps, were the Jews who had been concentrated in the ghettos deported and murdered. A minority of Jews was also deported from the ghettos to a myriad of labor camps to be exploited as slave labor. As such, ghettos were a means to an end and not an end in and of themselves.

Ghettos were set up almost exclusively in Eastern Europe for two main reasons. First, in many Eastern European cities, as opposed to Western Europe, there already was a large Jewish district and so confining all Jews to those districts made the process of establishing ghettos more practical. Second, because of perceived cultural and “racial” differences (Western Europeans were seen by the Nazis as being on a higher racial level); the Nazis refrained from antagonizing Western Europeans and did not concentrate Jews in ghettos in Western Europe.

Relatively little time was generally allotted for moving into the ghettos. Jewish families who in some cases had lived in their homes for decades had to gather their belongings and find shelter in a defined area that was extremely crowded. Motor vehicles were not available, and even horse-drawn carts were rare; therefore, many people moved their belongings in baby carriages or on their backs. Jews had to painfully decide what to take with them to the ghetto although they had no information about how long they would have to stay or what life would be like there.

In the ghettos, the *Judenrate* were held fully responsible for compliance with German policy. Members of the *Judenrate* were exposed to German abuse and many were murdered for not obeying German orders. The *Judenrate* were required to act as municipal authorities and to provide a full range of services that Jewish communities had not provided in the past. The *Judenrate* were not only responsible for re-establishing systems of education, culture, and religious services in the ghettos and maintaining health and welfare institutions; they also had to arrange for garbage removal and postal

services. Of course, the German authorities did not allocate resources for these purposes, and this put the *Judenrate* in an extremely difficult situation. They had to provide community services to a needy population without any infrastructure or financial resources. Therefore, members of the *Judenrate* were constantly forced to contend with moral dilemmas and make crucial decisions in unprecedented situations. As restrictions, shortages, hunger, and diseases worsened in the ghettos, the dilemmas of the members of the *Judenrate* became increasingly more extreme. The most difficult dilemma came when the German authorities demanded that the *Judenrate* supply lists of Jews to be deported from the ghettos, often to death camps.

Conditions in the Ghettos

Conditions in the ghettos were influenced by many factors, among them whether the ghetto was hermetically sealed or was open to some extent; the size of the ghetto and its location, since ghettos in the countryside often had access to more food; and the personality of the Nazis who were in charge of the ghetto. In many ghettos, a large number of Jews died of starvation or various epidemics that raged due to the harsh conditions. Lack of medication presented a constant dilemma in the ghettos.



Two Starving Women on a Rickshaw, Warsaw Ghetto, Poland, September 19, 1941. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (2536/85)

Doctors faced with shortages of medication had to decide which patients to treat.

In the shadow of chaos and terror, many Jews attempted to retain their humanity and operate relief organizations just as they had done before World War II broke out. Despite the deteriorating conditions and extreme deprivation, a refugee aid network was established in many places. For example, children gathered in special kitchens, where, in addition to receiving food, they were kept busy with educational activities. Frequently, relief center staff recruited unemployed but highly educated people to work with youth in the ghetto. In most cases, the relief centers had to figure out how best to distribute their limited resources, which raised many moral dilemmas.

Commonly the Jewish family unit underwent a major change during the ghetto period. The prewar situation, in which the father of the family had been the main breadwinner, was altered unrecognizably because the father could no longer work in the ghetto, or was absent because he had been killed or sent to a labor camp. As a result, the women and children had to share in the financial burden. In ghettos where it was still possible to sneak through the barriers and reach the world outside, many small children became smugglers, clandestinely bringing back food for their families. Smuggling was very dangerous: a Jew found outside the ghetto walls was generally killed immediately. Starving parents, therefore, confronted an awful dilemma.

Life in the Ghettos

Education was outlawed by the Germans in many of the ghettos; schools were closed and learning was punishable by death. Despite this prohibition, in some ghettos an underground educational system was set up by the Jews, though many young people had to help support the family and could not afford to sit in class. In addition to the underground educational system, some *Judenrate* set up vocational school systems in ghettos where this was permitted. The idea was to enlarge the ghetto labor force and to give youth a practical means of earning a living during the war.

Cultural activity took place within some ghettos and the extent varied from ghetto to ghetto. Some of the activities were secret, held at the initiative of underground organizations; they included literary evenings, gatherings to mark the anniversary of a Jewish artist, and concerts. Jewish authors, directors, and poets produced works in the ghettos, and there were secret libraries. Some of the cultural activities were based on works written before the war (in the Theresienstadt ghetto, for instance, works by Shakespeare, Moliere, and Chekhov were presented, while theaters in Warsaw staged Yiddish classics by S. An-ski, Sholem Asch, and Sholem Aleichem, among other things); others drew on the situation in the ghetto. The cultural activities helped people temporarily forget the worries of ghetto life and were a source of encouragement. However, there was also criticism; some people argued that these events were inappropriate in a place where so many people were dying every day.

Ultimately, once the Germans developed a plan for the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question,” they embarked on a process of closing down and liquidating the ghettos, deporting most of the Jews who remained alive. The vast majority of Jews deported from the ghettos were murdered in the extermination camps; only a small percentage were taken to concentration and forced labor camps in the late stages of the war. By the end of the war when Europe was liberated, except in Budapest, not a single ghetto, neither in its entirety, nor in part, remained.



The Library, Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (2977/471)