



FIGHTING FOR DIGNITY: JEWISH RESISTANCE IN KRAKÓW

Ghettos

The term 'ghetto' was first used in Venice in 1516. It was a separate quarter of the city where Jews were allowed to live. Later, in many other countries of Europe, Jews were closed into separate quarters, maintaining only economic ties with the surrounding societies.

During World War II, the Germans established approximately 1,200 ghettos in Central and Eastern Europe. On 21 September 1939, Reinhard Heydrich, Chief of the Reich Security Main office, called for the centralisation of Polish Jews into separate areas of cities and used the term *ghetto*. Sometimes ghettos were also referred to as *Jewish Residential Districts*.



Entrance to the Lodz Ghetto: the sign reads 'Jewish residential district, entry forbidden'

People started to talk about the ghetto. I had no idea what it meant. I had never even heard the word. After a few weeks it became clear.

Liliana, age 13, Poland

The purpose of establishing the ghettos was to separate the Jews from the rest of the population. From the Nazis point of view, concentrating the Jews into one place provided an efficient way of segregating them from the rest of society. In this way, the Nazis could easily control the lives of the ghetto inhabitants.

The ghettos comprised a number of dwellings and streets usually in poor and run-down areas of a city, often located near railway lines which facilitated the transport of the inhabitants 'somewhere else' without disrupting the rest of the city.

The Nazis forced the Jews to move from their city homes or from surrounding towns and villages into the newly-formed ghettos from which they were not allowed to leave. Jews who left the ghettos without permission were often shot. Most ghettos were locked during deportations.

Each ghetto was unique in how and when it was set up, governed, isolated or sealed off from the rest of the city. In large cities such as Lodz and Warsaw, pedestrian bridges were built so that the Jews could cross from one side of the ghetto to the other without setting foot on the main street or tramlines that ran underneath! The Lodz ghetto was separated by a wooden fence and barbed wire; the Warsaw and Kraków ghettos were surrounded by brick walls.



Building Kraków ghetto wall Yad Vashem

The ghettos represented places of degradation, hardship and unimaginable suffering. The Nazis forced thousands of Jews to live in cramped areas that could not possibly accommodate the huge numbers being forced into them, often without either running water or a connection to the sewage system. As a result, starvation and disease were rampant wreaking a huge death toll. It is estimated that between one million and one and a half million Jews died in the ghettos of Nazi occupied Europe.

The inhabitants in the ghettos struggled to survive and many tried to escape the harsh conditions. Although there are several heroic stories of resistance, most of the ghetto populations were deported directly to the death camps, and just a few to the forced labour or concentration camps. Thousands of Roma and Sinti were also incarcerated in the ghettos along with the Jews, and ultimately met the same fate.

I feel as if I am in a box. There is no air to breathe. Wherever you go you encounter a gate that hems you in... I feel that I have been robbed, my freedom is being robbed from me, my home, and the familiar Vilna streets I love so much. I have been cut off from all that is dear and precious to me.

Yitskhok, age 15, Vilna, Lithuania

Soon after the Nazis began to carry out the *Final Solution*, they began to eliminate the ghettos. The first were liquidated in Spring 1942. The Lodz ghetto, established in May 1940 and in existence the longest, was the last to be destroyed in the summer of 1944.

Almost all of the Jews in Eastern Europe had been forced to leave their homes for the ghettos. In parts of the Soviet Union occupied by the Germans, ghettos were usually set up *after* mass killings of the Jews. The ghettos served as 'holding areas' where the remaining Jews were incarcerated before being shot or sent to death camps. By the end of the war, not one Eastern European ghetto was left in existence.

As they did in the concentration and forced-labour camps, the Nazis subjected the inhabitants of the ghettos to similar brutality, shootings, beatings and starvation. They created conditions that were so harsh they could claim the residents died of 'natural causes'. By 1943, the severe conditions in any of these places of incarceration, were very similar and it was not easy to differentiate between them.

Seizures for forced labour don't stop. They are almost always accompanied by beatings and sadistic acts... Every day here is worse...decree follows decree and life becomes harder and harder.

David Sierkowiak, Lodz ghetto

For the inhabitants of the ghettos, who came from all walks of life, it soon became clear that the ghetto served as a place to destroy them physically and psychologically and that their ultimate fate would be death. The illusion that the temporary nature of the ghetto as a place to reside before being sent for 'resettlement in the east' was soon dispelled as the residents realised the euphemism for murder.

How Ghettos Were Run

Judenraete

Daily life in the ghettos was administered by Nazi-appointed Jewish Councils called *Judenraete* which had to oversee the instructions of the Nazis including organising the deportations of Jews to the killing centres. There are many stories about the impossible choices and dilemmas faced by leaders of the *Judenraete*. Each ghetto was governed uniquely and the Jews were forced to run services and institutions for themselves for which they had little experience: police forces, housing, healthcare, work-allocation and food distribution. The Germans ordered Jews residing in ghettos to wear labels or badges (usually a white armband with a blue Star of David) and they exploited the ghetto inhabitants for slave labour. As long as the ghetto inhabitants were of use to the Reich, they lived; if they were not useful, they died. Sometimes a ghetto was divided into two separate areas: one for the workers and one for the rest of the population. Despite the inhuman conditions and the fight for survival, a focused effort was made in the ghettos to sanctify life and respond to the public's needs and even drama and musical concerts were performed regularly.



Adam Czerniakow

Adam Czerniaków, head of the Judenrat in the Warsaw Ghetto, could not live with the strain on being forced to make 'impossible' decisions concerning the distribution of medicines, food and ultimately submitting lists of Jews 'suitable' for deportation to the death camps. He committed suicide.

Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, head of the Lodz Judenrat, thought he could save the young, healthy Jews (and himself) by complying with the Nazi orders. He handed over the elderly, the infirm and very young children. He reasoned that his duty was to preserve the Jews who remained. *The part that can be saved is much larger than the part that must be given away. You may judge me as you wish.* In the end, nothing saved Rumkowski or the Jews of the Lodz ghetto.



Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski

Children

Children in the ghettos did not receive food rations. It was not uncommon to see them begging for food or frozen to death. Corpses of Jews who had starved to death became common sights in the ghetto streets. Many children worked as slaves. Children also became smugglers, squeezing through holes in the walls or fences or even through sewers, to bring food into the ghetto.

Children of the Ghetto – a cursed generation that played with corpses and death, that knew no laughter and no joy – children who were born into darkness and terror and fright, children who saw no sun.

David Wdowin



No one saw me take this picture. I took it from the inside of a building, looking down into the street. I shook with anger to see children harnessed to carts like animals. Here, people are slaves. I'm determined to make copies of this photo. I will give prints to my friends and I will hide the negative. One day the world will find out the truth of how these innocent boys suffered.

My Secret Camera

Photographs by Mendel Grossman, Lodz ghetto

Text by Frank Dabba Smith.

Starvation in the Ghettos



Selling bread illegally in the Kovno ghetto. This man was shot a few days after the photograph was taken. Yad Vashem

Starvation was one of the main causes of death in the ghettos. Jews in the Warsaw ghetto were allowed 181 calories per day and there

was no provision for food for children in the ghettos. Kovno, Lodz and Warsaw ghettos relied on work for the German factories. The inhabitants who had work permits received food rations that enabled them to survive. Smuggling in of food was common.

Education

Religious education was an essential part of Jewish culture. Religious instruction as well as adherence to religious services and rituals was undertaken at considerable risk by the ghetto inhabitants and yet, these activities flourished. In the Terezin ghetto, all forms of education was encouraged by teachers and instructors who worked with the young people of the ghetto, trying to maintain a semblance of normality in their daily lives.

Resistance



Lighting of the seventh Chanuka candle

Yad Vashem

Although Jewish schools and education were forbidden in the ghettos, the Jewish residents managed to run clandestine religious schools and to observe Jewish festivals and religious rituals; youth movements flourished. This form of maintaining Jewish cultural heritage under such difficult circumstances is often considered 'passive resistance'. In some ghettos, members of the Jewish Resistance movements staged armed uprisings of which the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is the most well known. There were other revolts in Kraków, Vilna, Bialystok, Czestochowa and several smaller ghettos.

Kraków



Entrance to Kraków ghetto

Before World War II, there were approximately 250,000 people living in Krakow. 60-65,000 were Jews, mostly living in the Jewish quarter, or Kazimierz district, of the city. Both religious and secular Jews lived side by side. Young people could attend either public Polish schools or religious Jewish schools, Scouting and Zionist organisations were popular.

The Germans entered Poland on 1 September 1939 and captured Kraków five days later. Persecution of Kraków's Jews began immediately, Jewish bank accounts, property and businesses were seized. Synagogues and Jewish schools were closed and forced labour, beatings and humiliations were commonplace.

On 3 March 1941 the Germans established the ghetto. Within 17 days, Jews had to leave their homes and move to the poor, run-down area that comprised the ghetto which had been walled off from the rest of the city. From 20 March, there were around 18,000 Jews in the ghetto at any one time; any caught outside the ghetto walls without permission were usually punished by death.

Similar to other ghettos established in the Reich, the ghetto in Kraków was densely overcrowded and there was very poor sanitation, consequently thousands died from starvation and disease. The Kraków ghetto served as a temporary place of incarceration for Jews who were being sent to the killing centres at Belzec and Auschwitz-Birkenau. During the deportations in June and October 1942, thousands of Jews were packed into railway cars and transported to their deaths. Everyone in the ghetto lost a family member during these deportations. The ghetto was liquidated in March 1943. Several thousand Jews were transferred to the recently opened Plaszów labour camp which remained in operation until January 1945 and where up to 30,000 prisoners were held captive. Poles, Gypsies, Soviet POWs as well as Jews from Poland, Hungary and other countries in Europe, passed through the Plaszów camp.

Kraków was liberated on 19 January 1945. Over ninety percent of Kraków's Jews were murdered.

Find out more about ghettos on: www.ushmm.org

Read: *Beyond These Walls: Escaping the Warsaw Ghetto* by Janina Bauman, Virago 2007, *Encyclopedia of the Ghettos*, Yad Vashem

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