

# THE HOLOCAUST IN POLAND

Polish Jewry was devastated during the Holocaust. In the space of six years, 95% or more of Poland's Jewish population was murdered and centuries of Jewish history and culture were razed.

World War II began when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Between then and the time Warsaw surrendered on September 27, the German military had murdered approximately 20,000 Jews and bombed approximately 50,000 Jewish-owned factories, workshops and stores in more than 120 Jewish communities.

With its conquest, Poland was divided into three parts. Western and north central Poland (the districts of Pomerania, Brandenburg, Saxony, Upper and Lower Silesia and Danzig), with their ethnic German populations, were annexed to the German Reich and became part of Greater Germany. Their Jewish and Polish ethnic inhabitants were deported eastward into the central region, while the German ethnic inhabitants of the Baltic areas were moved in to replace them. South central Poland (the largest district, which included the cities of Lublin, Krakow, and Warsaw) became a German colony called the General Government (Generalgouvernement) under Governor-General Hans Frank. Eastern Poland (with a Jewish population of about 1 million) was occupied by the Soviet Union, in keeping with the German-Soviet Treaty of Non-Aggression that had been signed on August 23, 1939, a week before the war started.

Within months of the occupation, the Nazis began to target the Jews. Several hundred synagogues were destroyed and restrictions were placed on Polish Jews. All Jewish stores were forced to display a Star of David. Upon doing so, they were raided and forced to pay large sums of money to the Germans. Jews were not allowed to own bank accounts and there were limits on the amount of cash they could store in their homes. Jews were not allowed in to work in textiles and leather.

By orders of the Wehrmacht (the German Army), Jews and Poles of Jewish age at the time of the invasion were arrested and subsequently murdered. On October 26, 1939 Hans Frank introduced compulsory labor for Jews aged 14 to 60. On November 23, 1939 the wearing of the Jewish star is made compulsory throughout occupied Poland for all Jews over the age of ten.

## **THE GHETTOS**

In order to separate the Jews from the rest of society, the Nazis deported Jews from the Polish countryside and concentrated them in the towns and cities of the General Government in areas accessible to railroad transport.

The first ghetto was established in October 1939 in Piotrków Trybunalski. Within a year, by late fall of 1940, the Nazis had established hundreds of ghettos in Poland. The largest ones were in Warsaw, Lodz, Kraków, Lublin, Lwow and Radom. Within another year, after their June 1941 invasion of the Polish territories that had been annexed by Soviet Union at the outbreak of the war, the Nazis established hundreds of ghettos in the former Soviet territories, too. The ghettos in Bialystok, Czestochowa, Kovno, Minsk, and Vilna were the largest of these.

The Nazis forced all Jews and all the people they defined as Jews to move into the ghettos, leaving behind their homes, jobs, and most of their possessions and property. Most people were given very little time to pack up and move into the ghettos - for example, the Jews of Warsaw were given 10 days (October 12- October 31, 1940). In smaller communities, they were often given even less time -- 2 days or even a few hours.

The Nazis also restricted how much people could take with them. Sometimes this was limited to how much they could pack into a wagon, wheelbarrow, or carriage. Sometimes this was limited to how much each individual could carry in a couple of suitcases or knapsacks, thus, most people entering the ghettos were very poor.

In the bigger cities, the Nazis surrounded the ghettos with walls of brick, cement, barbed wire or wood and kept all entrances and exits locked and guarded and executed anyone caught trying to leave.

Each ghetto had a Jewish community council called a Judenrat. Its members were chosen by the Nazis and its job was to oversee daily operations and activities. Many ghettos also had Jewish police forces, which were used to enforce Nazi regulations.

Conditions in all the ghettos were so brutal that daily life became a constant struggle with death. First among these was overcrowding. The large ghettos were extremely overcrowded. For example, by 1941, in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Nazis confined more than 400,000 people in an area of about 100 square blocks – or an average of 7 persons per room.

Lack of food was a constant problem. In most Polish ghettos, the Nazis allowed only 184 calories per person per day. If people wanted more food, they had to buy it illegally on the “black market.” Such food was very expensive, because it had to be smuggled into the ghettos secretly at great risk, since smuggling was punishable by death. Most Jews had no money with which to buy extra food, and so they went hungry or starved to death. In the larger ghettos, like Warsaw and Lodz, 15% to 20% of the inhabitants starved to death in the first eighteen months.

Contagious diseases, such as typhus and hepatitis, raged virtually unchecked through the ghettos. The overcrowding, especially in the big ghettos, strained sanitary facilities and plumbing. People could not keep themselves or their clothes clean because soap was almost unobtainable and hot water was limited. Nor could they protect themselves from the harsh winters because heating fuel was scarce and worn out clothes and shoes could not be replaced.

The Nazis considered every Jew over the age of ten a raw resource to be used and used up. They forced some people to perform backbreaking manual labor. Others worked long hard hours in ghetto workshops and factories. For this they received nothing more than starvation rations. Still, for a little while, a work permit represented a lifeline when the Nazis began to break up the ghettos and deport people to the death camps. Children had to grow up very quickly. They, too, could be drafted into forced labor details in ghetto workshops and factories or assigned to local duties, like cleaning the streets. Often, especially after older able-bodied people were taken away, children became the sole support of their families.

Terror was a fact of daily life in the ghettos. The Nazis had absolute power of life and death over ghetto inhabitants. They could do whatever they chose to anyone they chose whenever they chose, without having to account for their deeds. People leaving their families in the morning were never sure that they would return to them in the evening.

However, despite the brutality, hardships, and terror, people in the ghettos struggled desperately not just to stay alive but to live. They performed concerts and plays. They organized secret schools and religious observances. They joined political groups and maintained secret presses and radios. They organized soup kitchens, hospitals, and orphanages. They recorded their experiences in poems, diaries, journals, photographs, and art - all of which were forbidden. Some even celebrated marriages.

This concentration of the Jewish population would eventually make it easier for the Nazis to deport them to the death camps. By 1942, all Polish Jews were either confined to ghettos or hiding. That summer, the Nazis began liquidating the ghettos and within 18 months almost all of them had been emptied. Most of the Jews taken out of the ghettos were either murdered in brutal massacres or taken in cattle cars to one of the six death camps in Poland (Chelmno, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Majdanek) where most of them were killed in gas chambers. Only a very small number were "selected" for concentration camps and slave labor camps.

### **THE "FINAL SOLUTION"**

On January 20, 1942, senior officials of the German government met to coordinate various branches of the military and civilian administrative machinery of the Reich into a system for implementing the mass murder of all of European Jewry. They called this "the final solution of the Jewish question."

This meeting, chaired by Reinhard Heydrich and called the Wannsee Conference, made mass-murder an official policy of the state and laid the organizational groundwork for the full-scale, comprehensive murder operation, which began immediately after the conference adjourned.

By the spring of 1942, the Nazis had established six death camps in Poland: Chelmno (also called Kulmhof), Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The sites were chosen because they were located in semi-rural areas but were close to railway lines so that the victims could be transported easily. The Germans shipped thousands of Jews to them each day. Within a few hours of their arrival, the Jews had been stripped of their possessions and valuables, gassed to death, and their bodies burned in specially designed crematoriums. The gas used was either carbon monoxide (engine exhaust) piped into gas vans or through stationary engines into gas chambers or Zyklon B, a form of crystalline prussic acid that was also used as an insecticide in some camps.

Chelmno, Sobibor, Belzec, and Treblinka were established almost entirely for the purpose of killing Polish Jewry. Almost all the victims in these four camps were Jews; a few were Roma (Gypsies). Very few individuals survived these four camps, where most victims were gassed immediately upon arrival.

Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek were also concentration camp and slave labor camps. Auschwitz-Birkenau became the killing center where the largest numbers of European Jews and Roma were killed. Majdanek also had numerous Soviet POWs.

In the last months of the war, as the German armies retreated westward in the face of the Soviet advance, the Nazis dragged thousands of starving and sick prisoners from the eastern camps on death marches for hundreds of miles or packed them into cattle cars without food and water on trips that lasted several days or even weeks. By the time these victims reached their final destination - the concentration and slave labor camps in Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia - most of them were dead. Those who survived the trip found that conditions in the western camps were not only extremely brutal but also chaotic, as there was no food, insufficient enclosed shelters, and typhus and other contagious diseases reached epidemic proportions.

Soviet soldiers, moving westward across the Soviet Union and Poland between July 1944 and January 1945, were the first to liberate major Nazi camps like Majdanek and Auschwitz. At Majdanek in July 1944 they found only a handful of Soviet prisoners of war, a few Poles, and almost no Jews. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, in January 1947, they found only 7,650 sick and exhausted prisoners. The others (some 58,000) had been forced westward on death marches.