

# THE HOLOCAUST

## Conditions

Life in the ghettos was usually unbearable. Overcrowding was common. One apartment might have several families living in it. Plumbing broke down, and human waste was thrown in the streets along with the garbage. Contagious diseases spread rapidly in such cramped, unsanitary housing. People were always hungry. Germans deliberately tried to starve residents by allowing them to purchase only a small amount of bread, potatoes, and fat. Some residents had some money or valuables they could trade for food smuggled into the ghetto; others were forced to beg or steal to survive. During the long winters, heating fuel was scarce, and many people lacked adequate clothing. People weakened by hunger and exposure to the cold became easy victims of disease; tens of thousands died in the ghettos from illness, starvation, or cold. Some individuals killed themselves to escape their hopeless lives.

Every day children became orphaned, and many had to take care of even younger children. Orphans often lived on the streets, begging for bits of bread from others who had little or nothing to share. Many froze to death in the winter.

In order to survive, children had to be resourceful and make themselves useful. Small children in the Warsaw ghetto sometimes helped smuggle food to their families and friends by crawling through narrow openings in the ghetto wall. They did so at great risk, as smugglers who were caught were severely punished.

Many young people tried to continue their education by attending school classes organized by adults in many ghettos. Since such classes were usually held secretly, in defiance of the Nazis, pupils learned to hide books under their clothes when necessary, to avoid being caught.

Although suffering and death were all around them, children did not stop playing with toys. Some had beloved dolls or trucks they brought into the ghetto with them. Children also made toys, using whatever bits of cloth and wood they could find. In the Lodz ghetto, children turned the tops of empty cigarette boxes into playing cards.

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## Lodz Ghetto

**FEBRUARY 8, 1940**

### **LODZ JEWS ORDERED INTO GHETTO**

The Germans order the establishment of a ghetto in the northeastern section of Lodz. Over 160,000 Jews, more than a third of the entire population of Lodz, are forced into a small area of the city. The Jews of Lodz formed, after Warsaw, the second largest Jewish community in prewar Poland. The Lodz ghetto is separated from the rest of the city by barbed-wire fencing. The ghetto area is divided into three parts by the intersection of two major roads, which are excluded from the ghetto. Footbridges are constructed to connect the three segments of the ghetto. Streetcars for the non-Jewish population of Lodz traverse the ghetto but are not permitted to stop within it. Living conditions in the ghetto are horrible. Most of the area does not have running water or a sewer system. Hard labor, overcrowding, and starvation are the dominant features of life.

**JANUARY 16, 1942**

### **LODZ JEWS DEPORTED TO CHELMNO KILLING CENTER**

Deportations from the Lodz ghetto to the Chelmno killing center begin. German police will carry out roundups in the ghetto. Hundreds of Jews, mainly children, the elderly, and the sick, are killed on the spot during the deportations. By September 1942, over 70,000 Jews and about 5,000 Roma (Gypsies) will have been deported to Chelmno, where they are killed in mobile gas vans (trucks with hermetically sealed compartments that serve as gas chambers).

**JUNE 23, 1944**

### **GERMANS RESUME DEPORTATIONS FROM LODZ GHETTO**

Between September 1942 and May 1944, there are no major deportations from Lodz. The ghetto resembles a forced-labor camp. In the spring of 1944, the Nazis decide to destroy the Lodz ghetto. By then, Lodz is the last remaining ghetto in Poland, with a population of about 75,000 Jews. On June 23, 1944, the Germans resume deportations from Lodz. About 7,000 Jews are deported to Chelmno and killed. The deportations continue in July and August; most of the remaining ghetto population is deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. The Lodz ghetto is eliminated.

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## Warsaw Ghetto

The city of Warsaw, capital of Poland, flanks both banks of the Vistula River. A city of 1.3 million inhabitants, Warsaw was the capital of the resurrected Polish state in 1919. Before World War II, the city was a major center of Jewish life and culture in Poland. Warsaw's prewar Jewish population of more than 350,000 constituted about 30 percent of the city's total population. The Warsaw Jewish community was the largest in both Poland and Europe, and was the second largest in the world, second only to New York City.

Following the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, Warsaw suffered heavy air attacks and artillery bombardment. German troops entered Warsaw on September 29, shortly after its surrender.

Less than a week later, German officials ordered the establishment of a Jewish council (Judenrat) under the leadership of a Jewish engineer named Adam Czerniaków. As chairman of the Jewish council, Czerniaków had to administer the soon-to-be established ghetto and to implement German orders. On November 23, 1939, German civilian occupation authorities required Warsaw's Jews to identify themselves by wearing white armbands with a blue Star of David. The German authorities closed Jewish schools, confiscated Jewish-owned property, and conscripted Jewish men into forced labor and dissolved prewar Jewish organizations.

On October 12, 1940, the Germans decreed the establishment of a ghetto in Warsaw. The decree required all Jewish residents of Warsaw to move into a designated area, which German authorities sealed off from the rest of the city in November 1940. The ghetto was enclosed by a wall that was over 10 feet high, topped with barbed wire, and closely guarded to prevent movement between the ghetto and the rest of Warsaw. The population of the ghetto, increased by Jews compelled to move in from nearby towns, was estimated to be over 400,000 Jews. German authorities forced ghetto residents to live in an area of 1.3 square miles, with an average of 7.2 persons per room.

Food allotments rationed to the ghetto by the German civilian authorities were not sufficient to sustain life. In 1941 the average Jew in the ghetto subsisted on 1,125 calories a day. Czerniaków wrote in his diary entry for May 8, 1941: "Children starving to death." Between 1940 and mid-1942, 83,000 Jews died of starvation and disease. Widespread smuggling of food and medicines into the ghetto supplemented the miserable official allotments and kept the death rate from increasing still further.

From July 22 until September 12, 1942, German SS and police units, assisted by auxiliaries, carried out mass deportations from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka killing center. During this period, the Germans deported about 265,000 Jews from Warsaw to Treblinka; they killed approximately 35,000 Jews inside the ghetto during the operation.

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## Resistance & Uprisings

**JULY 28, 1942**

### **JEWISH FIGHTING ORGANIZATION ESTABLISHED**

In the midst of the first wave of deportations from Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp, the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB, Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa) is established. On July 22, 1942, the Germans begin massive deportations which last virtually without stop until September 12, 1942. During this time more than 250,000 Jews from the ghetto are deported or killed. The ZOB, formed by members of Jewish youth organizations, calls for the Jews of the ghetto to resist deportation. Reports of the massacres of Jews by mobile killing units and in extermination camps have already filtered into the ghetto. However, the ZOB is not yet ready to stage a revolt. After deportations end in September, the ZOB expands to incorporate members of underground political organizations and establishes contact with the Polish resistance forces who provide training, armaments and explosives. Mordecai Anielewicz is appointed commander.

**JANUARY 18-21, 1943**

### **GERMANS ENCOUNTER RESISTANCE**

The Germans renew deportations from the Warsaw ghetto. This time however, they encounter resistance from the ZOB (Jewish Fighting Organization; Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa). The early morning roundups take the ZOB organization by surprise, and individuals take to the streets to resist the Germans. Other Jews in the ghetto retreat into prepared hiding places. The Germans, expecting the expulsions to run smoothly, are surprised by the resistance. In act of retaliation they massacre 1,000 Jews in the main square on January 21, but suspend further deportations. The Germans were able to deport or kill 5,000-6,500 Jews. Encouraged by the results of resistance actions, the Jews in the ghetto plan and prepare a full-scale revolt. The fighting organization is unified, strategies are planned, underground bunkers and tunnels are built, and roof-top passages are constructed. The Jews of the Warsaw ghetto prepare to fight to the end.

**MAY 16, 1943**

### **GHETTO DESTROYED, UPRISING ENDS**

After a month of fighting, the Germans blow up the Great Synagogue in Warsaw, signaling the end of the uprising and the destruction of the ghetto. On April 19, 1943, the Germans under the command of SS General Juergen Stroop, began the final destruction of the ghetto and the deportation of the remaining Jews. The ghetto population, however, does not report for deportations. Instead, the ghetto fighting organizations have barricaded themselves inside buildings and bunkers, ready to resist the Germans. After three days, German forces begin burning the ghetto, building by building, to force Jews out of the hiding places. Resistance continues for weeks as the Germans reduce the ghetto to rubble. Although there are only about 50,000 Jews left in the ghetto after the January 1943 deportations, General Stroop reports after the destruction of the ghetto that 56,065 Jews have been captured; of those 7,000 deported to the Treblinka extermination camp, and the remainder sent to forced-labor camps and the Majdanek extermination camp. Some of the resistance fighters succeed in escaping from the ghetto and join partisan groups in the forests around Warsaw.