

The Ghettos

Creation of the Ghettos

At a top-secret meeting in Berlin on 21 September 1939, SS General Reinhard Heydrich, Chief of the Reich Security Main Office - responsible for repression - told the commanders of several SS operational groups in Poland that his 'ultimate aim' for Polish Jews must be kept 'strictly secret'. Meanwhile, he wanted large areas of western Poland to be 'cleared completely of Jews', and elsewhere Jews to be confined in special areas of cities and towns. For this, any Jews living outside the designated area would be forced to move into the confined area, which was to be called a 'ghetto'.

Ghettos had existed, as Jewish quarters of towns, hundreds of years earlier. Unlike their medieval predecessors, the new **ghettos** were to be surrounded by barbed wire, brick walls and armed guards. The **ghettos** were to be located - Heydrich explained - in cities on railway junctions or along a railway, 'so that future measures may be accomplished more easily.'

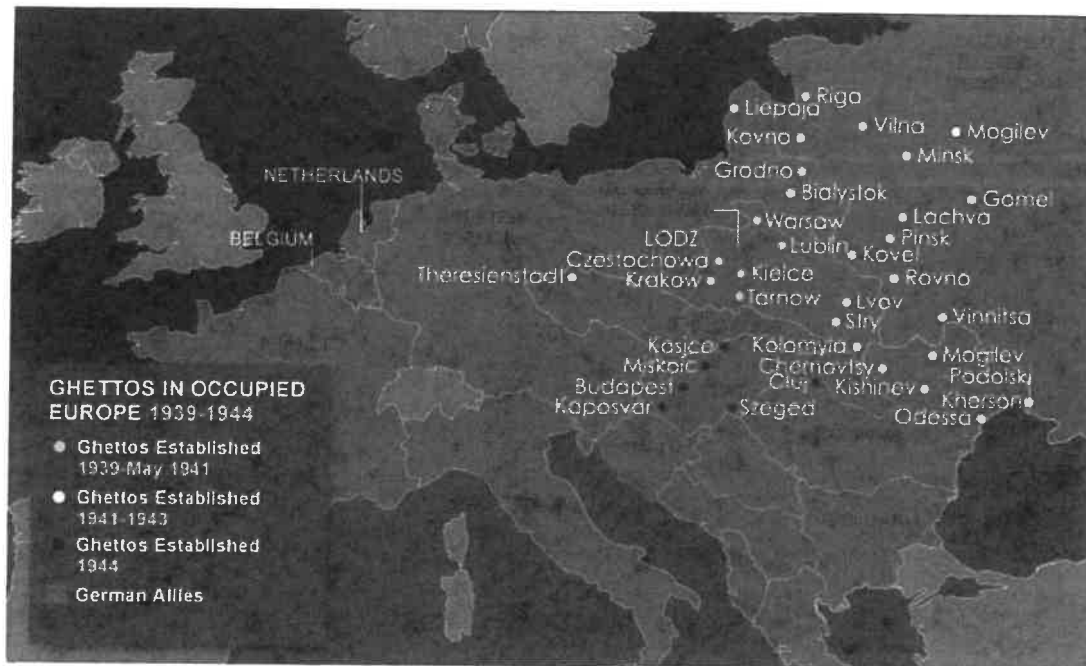
The first ghetto was set up in Piotrkow on 8 October 1939. Jews living throughout the town were forced to leave their homes and move into the ghetto area. It was desperately overcrowded. The Germans kept food and medical supplies to a minimum.

Other Ghettos were set up throughout the region. The two largest were Warsaw and Lodz. From fifteen towns and several hundred villages in Western Poland, the Germans expelled 40,000 Jews into Warsaw in the course of a few weeks. A further 38,000 were expelled from towns and villages elsewhere in Poland into the Lodz and other ghettos such as Krakow. Their livestock and farm implements were confiscated. It was - thus far - the largest forcible uprooting of the Nazi era. Those expelled from their homes lost their livelihoods, and almost all of their possessions, overnight. Jewish farmers, of whom there were many, were forced to leave their farms and move to designated towns into Jewish ghettos.

German soldiers check the papers of Jews moving into the Krakow ghetto. Yad Vashem archives.



Map of Ghettos in Europe 1939-1944



Eyewitness account of Ghetto life

"One day, an SS Obersturmführer showed up in Losice to serve as military governor or Kommandant. At first he walked in the market square and kicked or punched anyone who failed to doff his hat as he passed. Later, pedestrians got into the habit of ducking into side streets whenever they saw him approaching."

One night in December 1939, the Germans arrested six Jews and one Christian, led them to the outskirts of town, and murdered them. People said that somebody had informed the Germans that the victims' children had embraced Communism and left town with the Russians. The next day, a notice with the names of the murdered people was posted in the market square, announcing that they had been executed."

The Germans then established a Judenrat (Jewish council), independent of the Polish municipal authorities, to govern the Jewish population. The Judenrat conscripted Jews for public works, some necessary and others not. The Germans seized the opportunity to abuse and torture the frailer workers. Thousands of refugees and deportees from Western Poland packed the town, doubling its population. The municipal authorities dealt with the Poles and resettled them in nearby villages; Jewish refugees, in contrast, became wards of their own people. Housing density soon became unbearable. The newcomers had to share not only the dwellings but also kitchen utensils and food with the locals. Efforts began to procure food for those who were starving."

Source: Edi Weinstein, *Quenched Steel. The Story of an Escape From Treblinka*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2002, pp. 13-14.



Above, Young children starving, Warsaw Ghetto. Below, Young girl selling armbands.

Yad Vashem Archives.



Photographs of Life in the Ghettos



*Above: Young men from Warsaw ghetto are lined up for labour, Yad Vashem Archives.
Below: Street scenes of Teenagers in Warsaw Ghetto, 1941 Yad Vashem Archives. Below,
the boys sit on the curb, waiting outside the grocery store.*



Ghetto

"More and more people were robbed on the streets, especially for food. It happened to me once. I was coming home with a loaf of bread under my arm, when a young man ran up to me, grabbed the bread, bit off a big piece, and threw the rest back to me. Everything happened so fast that I did not have time to pick up the rest of the loaf; a group of small children grabbed it and ate it. I ran home, crying and shaking. <i>Liliana</i>	"My ears are filled with the deafening clamour of crowded streets and cries of people dying on the sidewalks. Even the quiet hours of the night are filled with the snoring and coughing of those who share the same apartment or, only too often, with the shots and screams coming from the streets. " <i>A girl from the Warsaw ghetto.</i>
Ghetto Theft I grab, I'm beaten for the bread, But whips and sticks can't hurt me. What's life to me, what's death to me? There's nothing left to scare me. Here come a couple down the street. It's night - - no one can see me. I jump, I grab, and then they scream. Too late; my teeth have bitten. I thank you, G-d, for every night That you have given man. For while they sleep, my day begins. A life of ghetto thieving. <i>Irene, Warsaw ghetto</i>	"The most fearful sight is that of freezing children, dumbly weeping in the street with barefeet, bare knees, and torn clothing. <i>Emanuel Ringelblum</i> "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. <i>David Wdowinsky</i>

8

Isolated from the surrounding population, subject to wanton violence, exposed to hunger and disease, the Jews struggled to preserve some vestiges of their humanity. In some places, the Germans allowed the establishment of educational institutions; in others, underground schools were formed. The larger ghettos boasted schools with Hebrew and Yiddish as the language of instruction, as well as religious schools and Talmud Torahs. High school-age children subjected to forced labour duty studied in evening classes and took vocational courses. The terrible congestion made it virtually impossible to find suitable classrooms. Frequently rooms that served as sleeping quarters at night served as classrooms during the day.

In addition to education, the ghettos engendered and promoted various forms of cultural activities. In some ghettos, theatre companies, choirs and orchestras were established. Performances by schoolchildren were organized to celebrate Jewish festivals such as Hanukkah, Purim, Tu b'Shvat and others. Libraries circulated books which had been assembled with great effort. Reading was a very popular pastime in the ghetto. The best specialists and scholars in various fields were recruited to give public lectures on assorted subjects and to teach courses for adults.



Poster from the Warsaw ghetto announcing a theatrical performance of a play entitled The Village Girl. This was a musical comedy, in Yiddish, held in the Eldorado Theatre.

Religious Life

Devout Jews in the ghetto continued to observe the Sabbath and Jewish holy days, study Torah, and provide religious education for their children. Jewish religious observance under ghetto conditions posed a formidable task. In many places the Germans outlawed public worship. Synagogues located within the ghetto were turned into dormitories for homeless refugees, making it well-nigh impossible to hold religious services in them. Food shortages and hunger in the ghetto made observance of Kashrut (dietary laws) nearly impossible. However, some exceptionally devout Jews preferred to starve rather than eat the forbidden food. For their part, the Nazis did not honour the Sabbath or other Jewish festivals and ghetto residents were required to do forced labour on those days. Some of the cruellest actions against the Jews were carried out by the Germans especially on Jewish holidays.

Political Parties and Youth Movements

Nearly all Jewish political parties and youth movements active before the war continued their activities secretly in the ghettos. Zionist youth movements operated their own educational networks and trained their members for life in the Land of Israel. The German occupation failed to extinguish all hopes of making aliyah. In general, each party and youth movement looked after its members by rendering welfare assistance, finding jobs and combating hunger. They also set up an extensive underground press network which supplied information about developments on the war fronts, world news and reports about events outside the ghetto walls. The main source of information was radio broadcasts received on radio sets operating secretly, and at great risk, within the ghetto. The underground press also supplied information about developments within the ghetto, printed comments about these events, and often sharply criticized the actions of the Judenrate (Jewish Councils). It also served as an educational-political instrument for the expression of the views of its publishers. Its main task, however, was to boost the morale of ghetto residents by encouraging them to carry on their struggle for survival.

Medical Services

Medical services in the ghetto were overwhelmed by the task of combating disease and epidemics. A lack of medicines, isolation wards and hospital rooms were part of the ghetto reality. Superhuman efforts by doctors and nurses in preventative medicine, in maintaining a minimum standard of cleanliness, and in combating the diseases themselves, could not stop the spread of epidemics. Furthermore, the existence of contagious diseases in the ghetto, even the existence of hospital wards, had to be concealed from the Germans. The Nazis did not hesitate to execute patients, allegedly to prevent the spread of disease outside the ghetto. At a later stage, the Germans prohibited childbirth in the ghetto. Offenders were threatened with death. For this reason, infants- whose numbers were in any case very limited due to the appalling conditions of ghetto life- were delivered secretly by Jewish doctors and nurses.

From: Arad, Y. (editor) The Pictorial History of the Holocaust. Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1990.

LODZ JUDENRAT

He was known among the Jews as "the king". His credo throughout the ghetto period was "calm and work." By calm he meant obedience to the Germans. By work he meant making the ghetto indispensable to the German war machine. Obedience and work would keep the Jews alive until the end of the war. The slogan made sense in the early period of the ghetto.

Rumkowski's rule can be divided into two periods. In the early part of the war he acted forcefully, efficiently, and speedily to establish a well-run ghetto empire -workshops, police, courts of justice, jails, and schools. To visit the various departments, he travelled in a horse-drawn carriage given to him by the Germans. He surprised workers in the public kitchens as they doled out soup to the starving population and checked out the food shops. He spoke ironically about the Warsaw Judenrat with whom he had visited. In Warsaw, he said, chaos reigned, and children were dying in the streets while food was plentiful in elegant cafes and restaurants. In actual fact, starvation in Lodz was even worse than in Warsaw. Nevertheless, he seems to have viewed himself as the saviour who would rescue the Jews of Lodz.

Some ghetto inhabitants, including members of Rumkowski's administration agreed with his strategy of remaining inconspicuous, obeying orders promptly, and refraining from anti-Nazi activity. Others, however, frequently rebelled. When a "work slow" movement began in the workshops, Rumkowski spread rumours among the workers to either calm down or threaten them with reprisals, as occasion demanded. Order was maintained by all and every means. To silence his opponents, he used unemployment, starvation, and finally deportation. Anyone who raised a doubt regarding the wisdom of Rumkowski's decisions laid himself open to the old man's revenge.

The situation changed, however, in mid-1942. Rumours regarding the fate of Jews in other parts of Poland began reaching them. Toward the end of 1942, he knew that Jews were being murdered. To rescue the remaining 60,000 to 70,000 Jews in the ghetto he continued to obey Nazi orders and help deport Jews. To save some, as he hoped, he decided to sacrifice others and he determined who should die and who should live.

Rumkowski's strategy was almost successful. The Lodz ghetto was the last one in existence in Poland. It had survived because, as Rumkowski had theorized, it was producing clothes and other articles that the German economy needed. But in July 1944 the Soviet army, advancing rapidly through Poland, stopped about 75 miles from Lodz. In August, the Nazis sent Rumkowski and most of the ghetto inhabitants to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. When the Soviets overran the German army and covered the distance to Lodz in three days in January 1945, they found 870 survivors. Had the Soviets continued their July 1944 offensive for another 75 miles, they might have liberated 69,000 Jews. Would Rumkowski have been vindicated at a post-war trial for saving their lives, or would he have been condemned as the murderer of tens of thousands of others?

WARSAW JUDENRAT

Adam Czerniakow, the leader of the Warsaw Judenrat, had been a member of the prewar Jewish community council. Nominated by the Polish regime during the last days of the siege, he was confirmed by the Germans and told to nominate a Judenrat council. An engineer by profession, who headed an organization of Jewish artisans and craftsmen before the war, Czerniakow was torn between identification with the Jewish lower middle class and his love of things Polish. The Warsaw ghetto was established by the Nazis in mid November 1940. In May 1941 Czerniakow was authorized to act as mayor of a separate municipality by Heinz Auerswald, the Nazi ghetto commissar. An Ordnungsdienst (lit., order service, the Jewish ghetto police) was organized, which numbered about 2,000 and was recruited by Jozef Szerynski, a professional policeman and a convert to Christianity. When the Nazis drew this force into their orbit, corruption in the Jewish administration became rampant.

From his and other diaries and documents, Czerniakow emerges a man who tried to do his utmost to alleviate the suffering of ghetto inhabitants, but failed. Although his attempts to

11

cajole the Nazis into concessions testify to his personal courage, he presided over a largely corrupt and inefficient administration. He described the situation in his diary:

May 5, 1942-Disturbing rumours about deportations persist in the city.

July 18, 1942-In the morning with Leikin to Brandt and Mende. A day full of foreboding. Rumours that the deportations will start on Monday evening (All?!) I asked the Kommissar whether he knew anything about it. He replied that he did not and that he did not believe the rumors.

July 22, 1940 [sic]-In the morning at 7.30 at the Community. The borders of the Small Ghetto surrounded by a special unit in addition to the regular one.

Sturmbannfuhrer Hofle and associates came at 10 o'clock. We disconnected the telephone. Children were moved from the playground opposite the Community building.

We were told that all the Jews irrespective of sex and age with certain exceptions will be deported to the East. By 4 pm today a contingent of 6,000 people must be provided. And this (at the minimum) will be the daily quota.

The next day, July 23, was the second day of the mass deportation of Warsaw Jews (300,000) to their deaths in Treblinka. An eyewitness testimony reports:

On July 23, they took away the car from Czerniakow, the last symbol of his authority. On that same day, at 7 o'clock in the evening, a small car pulled up in front of the Judenrat and from it emerged two hitherto unknown Gestapo officers. They demanded that the Judenrat head be brought to them immediately. Two (Jewish) policemen hastened to Czerniakow's home. Upon receiving the message, Czerniakow took a rickshaw (man-drawn vehicle on two wheels)-for the first and last time in his life and arrived at the Judenrat building. The conversation with the two Gestapo men was very short this time-it took no more than a few minutes. The Germans drove away. After they had gone, Czerniakow rang, and his aide came to his study. He asked her to bring him a glass of water. His wish was immediately fulfilled. His secretary later said that Czerniakow was white as a sheet and as he took the glass of water from her with trembling hands he made a weak attempt to smile. "Thanks," he said. That was the last thing he said. Ten minutes later, the Judenrat cashier who was in the building heard a telephone ringing. The sound came from Czerniakow's office. Surprised that Czerniakow did not answer, the man cautiously opened the door of the study and saw Czerniakow dead in his chair.

On the table stood a tiny bottle with cyanide, half a glass of water and two brief letters. One of them was a parting letter to his wife, in which he asked her to forgive him for leaving her. He explained that he could not do otherwise. The other note said: "They are demanding ten thousand for tomorrow, after that seven thousand," and then two illegible words. His sudden death left a deep impression on everyone and was a telling demonstration of the loneliness of the situation.



Rare picture of Czerniakow

Children in the Ghettos

The hundreds of thousands of Jews who were forced by Hitler into ghettos in Poland needed food, clothing and medicine in order to live. The rations of these that were provided by the Germans were not life-sustaining. Some Jews were able to live a bit longer thanks to the smuggling of precious items - mainly food - from the outside world into the ghetto. (It is important to note that in some ghettos, smuggling was virtually impossible.) Where it was possible, it was a highly risky activity.



Many of the smugglers were children, sometimes as young as five years old, who were small enough to squeeze through holes in the ghetto wall or wriggle under barbed-wire fences.



Photos of Children from Warsaw Ghetto from Yad Vashem Archives.

The Little Smuggler

Over the wall, through holes, and past the guard,
Through the wires, ruins and fences,
Plucky, hungry, and determined
I sneak through, dart like a cat.

At noon, at night, at dawn,
In snowstorm, cold or heat,
A hundred times I risk my life,
And put my head on the line.

Under my arm a gunny sack,
Tatters on my back,
On nimble young fee
With endless fear in my heart.

But one must endure it all,
One must bear it all,
So that tomorrow morning
The fine folk can eat their fill.

Over the wall, through holes and bricks.
At night, at dawn, at noon,
Plucky, hungry, artful,
I move silently like a shadow.

And if the hand of destiny
Should seize me in the game.
That's a common trick of life.
You, mother, do not wait up for me.

I will return no more to you,
My voice will not be heard from afar.
The dust of the street will bury
The lost fate of a child.
And only one request
Will stiffen my lips:
Who, mother mine, who
Will bring you bread tomorrow?

Henryka Lazawert wrote the poem and was killed in the Treblinka death camp in 1942.

Questions

1. What were the dangers that the little smuggler faced in order to obtain bread?
2. What did s/he worry about? Was s/he afraid of dying?
3. Who is taking care of whom?
4. This poem focuses on 3 groups of people. Identify these three groups. Describe the role each one has in the poem.

Janusz Korczak

The eminent educator Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit) ran an orphanage. He was Poland's most famous children's advocate, a Jewish physician who wrote under the pseudonym Korczak. During the years between World War I and II, he moved easily between the liberal circle of Polish society that was gradually opening to Jews and those in the Jewish community who wanted to play a wider role in Polish life. Korczak's children's books, in which the central figure was the benevolent King Matt, a heroic boy-king who sought to bring reforms to his people, brought him renown, as did his weekly radio program. He developed a popular and respected children's newspaper, written by young people, which appeared as an insert in a Polish newspaper. But the centre of Korczak's life was the orphanage he directed, in which he put his educational methods to the test.

When the ghetto was formed in 1940, the orphanage had to be relocated into crowded quarters at 33 Chlodna Street, which were ample by ghetto standards. Korczak moved the group of children as though they were in a theatrical troupe "in a kind of parade." It was a prelude of things to come. For the next two years, the old doctor, as he was known, used all his connections, energy and ability to help orphans survive in dignity; to feed the, clothe the, sustain and educate them. Korczak resisted overtures from friends to escape the ghetto and seek safety on the Aryan side. He would not leave without his children.

On August 6, 1942, the Nazis struck against the children's institutions in the ghetto. Korczak may have suspected that deportation meant death. He lined his children up in rows of four. The orphans were clutching flasks of water and their favourite books and toys. One hundred and ninety-two children and ten adults were counted off by the Nazis. Korczak stood at the head of his wards, a child holding each hand. One child carried the flag of King Matt, with the Star of David set against a white field on the other side.



They marched through his ghetto to the Umschlagplatz, where they joined thousands of people waiting in the boiling August sun. There was no shade, shelter, water, or sanitary facilities. There were none of the cries or screams usually heard when people were forced to board the trains. The orphans walked quietly in their rows of four. One eyewitness recalls: "This was no march to the train cars, but rather a mute protest against the murderous regime...a process the likes of which no human eye had ever witnessed."

Korczak was with his children to the end. All were gassed at Treblinka.

Berenbaum M. *The World Must Know: the History of the Holocaust As Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1993.

Janusz Korczak Memorials

Jerusalem, Yad Vashem



Warsaw



Ghetto Diaries

Many personal diaries were kept during the days of the ghettos. It can be reasonably assumed that the majority of these writings have been destroyed or never found.

Luckily, some have been salvaged, read and published for the world to know what the Jewish people had to endure during those terrible times.

These diaries draw us into a landscape of savage oppression. They help us gain a vivid sense of the fate and impending doom of a community. The resentment, anger, dismay, sporadic hope and seemingly indescribable conditions of ghetto life are captured in the moving words of their writers.

It is from these diaries that we gain access to those who were trapped, whether they knew it as yet or not, in a scheme which would destroy nearly all the Jews of Europe.

They help us imagine what we can never know.

Here are some short extracts from diaries written during the days of the ghettos, with a brief background about the diarists:

Diary of a Chaim A. Kaplan

Kaplan wrote his diary in the Warsaw ghetto. It was written in a number of exercise books. These were smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto into the hands of a Gentile living in a nearby village *before* the ghetto's liquidation in April 1943. This Gentile subsequently emigrated and went to U.S.A where eventually he passed the exercise books onto a professor of Jewish History. They had been written in a Hebrew. Kaplan did not survive the War.

Diary extract March 7, 1940:

"Our desolate and miserable lives go on without the spark of hope to which our people have always been accustomed. The days when the oppressed Jewish masses would console themselves with nonsensical political rumours are passed. Reality shows that our redemption is still far from us. Those who understand the military and political situation well are going about like mourners. There is no ground for hope that the decisive action will come this spring....our terrible distress will last a long time."

Felix Nussbaum, Self Portrait 1943. Yad Vashem Archives.



Diary of Dawid (in Polish the letter 'w' is pronounced as a 'v') Sierakowiak

This diary, about life in Lodz, began on June 28 1939, just before Sierakowiak's 15th birthday. It breaks off on April 15, 1943. He died on April 18 on (it is thought) tuberculosis.

Diary extract September 6, 1939 (very beginning of the War):

"A neighbour, Grodzinski, is sitting there with his crying wife, telling us to leave (Lodz). Where? Go where? Why? Nobody knows. To flee, flee farther and farther and farther, trek, wade, cry, forget....just run away as far as possible from the danger...father loses his head; he doesn't know what to do. Other Jewish neighbours come for a meeting....Father rushes to my uncle, and my uncle to father, but each time the decision is the same; not to flee, to stay put."

Diary extract September 6, 1942:

His mother is very sick in hospital:

"Rumours spread that the Germans are now accompanying the medical commissions, and that they decide who will be taken and who will not (it is) doubted that Mum can be saved.....(she) is unrecognisable, which make her slender chances even less. At time such shudders and heart palpitations come over me and that is seems to me I'm going insane or delirious. Even so, I'm unable to turn my consciousness away from Mum....the hour of her deportation is coming closer, and there's no help from anywhere. Although there some thunderstorms and lightning, and it even rained in the evening, it didn't bring any relief to our torment. That's because even the greatest rainfall can't wash away a completely broken heart, and nothing will fill up the eternal emptiness in the soul, brain, mind and heart that is created by the loss of one's most beloved person."

Diary of Oskar Singer

Originally from Prague, Singer was deported to the Lodz ghetto in October 1941. He was a writer and journalist before the War. It is thought that he survived until sometime in 1944.

Diary extract July 27 1942:

"....human beings have not known death like this. In a very brief span of time, life has veered off its usual course, and death has changed its face. This has taken place with a speed not even the wildest imagination could have predicted....The surviving world will have only the barest idea of what it was like here. Repeatedly, one hears the muted question: 'Will there be anyone able to tell the world how we lived and died here.'

Adelson, A. (editor) The diary of David Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Lodz Ghetto. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996.

Adelson, A. and Lapides, R. Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community Under Siege. Viking Penguin, New York. 1989.

Katsh A. (editor) Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan. Collier Books, New York, 1973.

Judenrate- Jewish Councils

Establishment of the Judenrate

During the Shoah Jewish communal leaders faced the terrifying task of having to make life and death decisions.

Upon invading Poland in September 1939, the Nazis ordered Jewish communal leaders in each city and town to establish a Jewish council. This council was called a **JUDENRAT**. Communities with up to 10,000 inhabitants were to have a council of twelve members, large communities were to have twenty four members.

These councils replaced the pre-War communal organisations called *Kehillot*.

Many members of the **JUDENRAT** reached their positions in the usual ways: family prestige, wealth, Jewish learning, political activity, social service and dedication to the community through financial generosity and good works. Overall these were decent and well-meaning people who believed that they could be responsible for the welfare of their communities in the face of an uncertain future. Most regarded communal service as an obligation and responsibility.

Those who agreed to serve on the **JUDENRAT** usually did so with serious misgivings. Was it wise to follow German orders and form a council? If we reject our responsibilities whom will the Germans appoint instead? In some cities and towns there were insufficient numbers of people who were prepared to serve on the **JUDENRAT**. In such circumstances the Germans themselves made random appointments.

No one could be sure exactly as to how the **JUDENRAT** would function. Most Jews - at the beginning at least - believed that the **JUDENRAT** would be the representative body between the Jewish community and the Nazis. The **JUDENRAT** would be able to negotiate, bargain and plead for the needs of their community. Other Jews were much more uncertain and fearful of the role that the **JUDENRAT** would play. They suspected that the **JUDENRAT** might well become the instrument through which the Nazis would carry out persecutions and oppressions.

The worst fears about participating in the **JUDENRAT** came true. From the start, every order the Germans issued was enforced with unending terror. Within days, or at most weeks, hundreds of **JUDENRAT** members were taken hostage, arrested, sent to camps, shot or hanged. Hundreds more fled for their lives. Commonly the Germans would accuse **JUDENRAT** members of not following orders or of delaying tactics. They frequently blackmailed communities for enormous sums of money, threatening to kill **JUDENRAT** members if the money was not raised. Such threats were carried out.

It became clear that the **JUDENRAT** had no choice but to obey Nazi orders.'

Frances Prince

Judenrate Leaders: Choiceless choices

The Moral Dilemmas Faced by Judenrat Leaders: A comparison of Decisions Made by Judenrat Leaders.

Judenrat leaders, on a daily basis, were responsible for providing the impossible - food, shelter, heat, medicine and work for a starving ghetto population.

They had to care for the young and sustain the elderly.

Their resources were meagre.

Their authority was derived from their German masters.

They presided, whether they knew it or not - and some did know - over doomed communities.

However, in every ghetto the defining moment that tested the courage and character of the Judenrat leaders came when they were asked to provide lists of those to be deported. Once all tactics of bribery, delay, argumentation and pleading were exhausted, a decision had to be made.

Different Judenrat leaders dealt with this excruciating dilemma in different ways.

Many consulted the rabbinical authorities in their communities who agonised as they poured over traditional Jewish texts as to how to tackle such a situation. Different rabbis gave different responses. Sometimes the Judenrat leaders adhered to the rulings of the rabbis. Sometimes they did not.

In **Vilna**, the rabbis advised the Judenrat Chairman, Jacob Gens, not to participate in the deportation of even a few of the Jews in Vilna, even if the rest of the community could be saved. Despite the objections of the rabbis, Gens proceeded with the deportation.

Dr Joseph Parnas, the Jewish Council Chairman in Lvov, refused to deliver several thousand Jews for deportation. He was shot. In many other ghettos, Judenrat members who refused to surrender their people were shot.

In **Bereza Kartuska**, the entire Judenrat committed suicide rather than participate in the deportation.

JUDENRAT: THE JEWISH COUNCILS

MORE CHOICELESS CHOICES

Case One:

In **Vilna**, there were 60,000 Jews before the War.

They represented a wide spectrum of ideologies including Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Bundists, Zionists, Communist and non-religious Jews.

But they all saw themselves primarily as Jews.

In June 1941 the mass murder began.

The leader of the Judenrat in the Vilna ghetto was a man called Gens. There was opposition to his leadership and it grew as time went on. Underground organisations were formed. **Yitzhak Wittenberg**, who was a Communist, was elected to lead the underground within the ghetto. He wanted there to be an uprising in the Vilna ghetto.

The Nazis found out about **Wittenberg** from a non-Jewish Lithuanian man who they tortured. The Nazis went to Gens and demanded that he hand over **Wittenberg** to them, or they would destroy the entire ghetto!

Gens asked the underground leaders to come to a meeting at 2.00am. Nazis and Lithuanians were there waiting.....

They got **Wittenberg** and tried to take him out of the ghetto....

Rushka Korzak (an Underground leader) organised 200 people to attach the entourage on their way out.

They succeeded in getting him away and hiding him within the ghetto.

Gens all those remaining in the ghetto (about 20,000) and ordered them to find **Wittenberg** immediately or "we all get killed."

Jews argued amongst themselves, attacking each other.

Dilemma - do you hand over a Jew?

Underground leadership went to **Wittenberg** - "what do we do?"

Wittenberg turned to his Communist friends and it was decided that he should turn himself over to the Nazis. He gave his gun to **Abba Kovner** (an Underground leader who became one of Israel's foremost poets after the War). **Wittenberg** walked alone towards the Nazis.....he swallowed cyanide before the Nazis got to him.

Case Two:

In the **Minsk** ghetto the head of the Judenrat was named Mishkin. He fought against the Nazis from day one. The leader of the underground was named **Smolyar**. He smuggled out 7,500 Jews to fight the Nazis.

The Nazis went to Mishkin demanding that he hand over Smolyar or else....Mishkin got a body, disfigured the face, placed false ID in the clothing, and presented this as the dead **Smolyar**. The Nazis believed it and **Smolyar** survived the War, and eventually made his way to Israel, settling in Haifa.

..... what if the Nazis hadn't been fooled?

Chaim Rumkowski and Adam Czerniakow

The two Judenrat leaders who can be contrasted for their vastly different approaches to this agonizing dilemma are Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski and Adam Czerniakow.

They were the Judenrat leaders of the two largest ghettos in Poland. Rumkowski was the chairman of the Lodz ghetto. Czerniakow was the chairman of the Warsaw ghetto.

Rumkowski co-operated with the demands of the Nazis, stating that it was his duty "to preserve the Jews who remain. The part that can be saved is much larger than the part that must be given away." He told his critics, "You may judge me as you wish." He urged the Jews of the Lodz to get on the trains in an orderly fashion. Those who came voluntarily could bring luggage. Those who did not, were rounded up by the Jewish police.



Chaim Rumkowski with other members of Lodz ghetto Judenrate, Yad Vashem archives.

Czerniakow, when ordered to liquidate the Warsaw ghetto, swallowed a cyanide pill, committing suicide, leaving the deportation order unsigned.



Lodz Ghetto: Rumkowski's address at time of call for deportation
September 4, 1942.

... The ghetto has been struck a hard blow. They demand what is most dear to it - children and old people. I was not privileged to have a child or my own and therefore devoted my best years to children. I lived and breathed together with children. I never imagined that my own hands would be forced to make this sacrifice on the altar. In my old age I am forced to stretch out my hands and to beg: "Brothers and sisters, give them to me! - Fathers and mothers, give me your children...." (Bitter weeping shakes the assembled public)...Yesterday, in the course of the day, I was given the order to send away more than 20,000 Jews from the ghetto, and if I did not - "we will do it ourselves." The question arose: "Should we have accepted this and carried it out ourselves, or left it to others?" But as we were guided not by the thought: "how many will be lost?" but "how many can be saved?" we arrived at the conclusion - those closest to me at work, that is, and myself - that however difficult it was going to be, we must take upon ourselves the carrying out of this decree. I must carry out this difficult and bloody operation, I must cut off limbs in order to save the body! I must take away children, and if I do not, others too will be taken, God forbid (terrible wailing).

I cannot give you comfort today. Nor did I come to calm you today, but to reveal all your pain and all your sorrow. I have come like a robber, to take from you what is dearest to your heart. I tried everything I knew to get the bitter sentence cancelled. When it could not be cancelled, I tried to lessen the sentence. Only yesterday I ordered the registration of nine-year old children. I wanted to save at least one year - children from nine to ten. But they would not yield. I succeeded in one thing - to save the children over ten. Let that be our consolation in our great sorrow.

There are many people in this ghetto who suffer from tuberculosis, whose days or perhaps weeks are numbered. I do not know, perhaps this is a satanic plan, and perhaps not, but I cannot stop myself from proposing it: "Give me these sick people, and perhaps it will be possible to save the healthy in their place." I know how precious each one of the sick is in his home, and particularly among Jews. But at a time of such decrees one must weigh up and measure who should be saved, who can be saved, who may be saved.

Common sense requires us to know that those must be saved who can be saved and who have a chance of being saved and not those whom there is no chance to save in any case....

J.Trunk, Lodzher Geto ("Lodz Gett"), New York, 1962, pp. 311-312.

Arad, Y., Gutman Y., Margalio, A (editors) Documents on the Holocaust. Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1981.

Warsaw: Extracts from The Diary of Adam Czerniakow

Sunday, 15 June 1941–Litzmannstadt Ghetto–Lodz

The sadist-moron Rumkowski is doing horrible things. He fired two teachers, Communists, from their jobs. The overt reason: They organized resistance among teachers against the installation as commissioner –Superior Principal- Mrs. Weichselfisz. The probable reason: alleged communist activities in the school....

Monday, 18 August 1941–Litzmannstadt Ghetto –Lodz

Our grades were read to us. I got the best grade in the class: all As and Bs. But what good are they when I'm still hungry and keep feeling so terribly exhausted?...

Tuesday, 30 September 1941–Litzmannstadt Ghetto–Lodz

A transport of deportees from Lubranciec near Wloclawek and from Brzesc Kujawski arrived at our former school building. They look great, have luggage, and say they used to live well. What's interesting is that they know practically nothing about the conditions in this place, and show a considerable degree of optimism. They are in good humour and even make jokes. They are mostly women of various ages. All their men in their prime or boys are in work camps. Lubraniec residents wear a triangle patch on their backs, while others big Magen Davids on their left breast. You can see that we have been marked in various ways. They say they have brought a lot of food with them, but the Jewish police stole it from them. In any case, they've been treated like cattle. Of course the sick, children, and old people have been driven to hospitals, orphanages, and homes for the aged, but the rest are lying in empty houses on straw mats provided by the administration or on their own bedding. They complain about food and drink, yet if everybody in the ghetto had meals like the ones they've been given to eat, there wouldn't be so many fresh graves in the cemetery and such horrible-looking people. I talked to them for over an hour and came to the conclusion that these people have won two years of the war and haven't experienced the worst yet.

Wednesday, 18 March 1942–Litzmannstadt Ghetto–Lodz

Our bread ration has been reduced, and vegetables don't arrive anymore. Hunger is ever more terrifying. The less there is to eat, the more the people talk about covered tables and reminisce about the good old days before the war. At work the only topic of conversation is: food we had before the war.

April 29 1942, Lodz Ghetto

It's really bad at home and we are eating our May ration of food and it's April. I have no strength for studying ...my time is passing, my youth is passing.... Only the devil knows what will be...

22 July 1942, Litzmannstadt Ghetto–Lodz

In the morning at 7:30 at the Community. The borders of the Small Ghetto surrounded by a special unit in addition to the regular one.

Sturmbannfuhrer Hofle, and associates came at 10 o'clock. We disconnected the telephone. Children were moved from the playground opposite the Community building.

We were told that all Jews irrespective of sex and age, with certain exceptions will be deported to the East. By 4pm today a contingent of 6,000 people must be provided. And this at the minimum will be the daily quota.

We were ordered to vacate a building at 103 Zelazna Street for the German personnel who will be carrying out the deportation. Sturmbannfuhrer Hofle in charge of the deportation asked me into his office and informed me that for the time being my wife was free, but if the deportation were impeded in any way, she would be the first one to be shot as a hostage.

23 July 1942, Litzmannstadt Ghetto–Lodz

In the morning at the Community. Worthoff from the deportation staff came and we discussed several problems. He exempted the vocational school students from deportation. The husbands of working women as well.

He told me to take up the matter of orphans with Hofle. The same with reference to craftsmen. When I asked for the number of days per week in which the operation would be carried on, the answer was 7 days a week.

Throughout the town a great rush to start new workshops. A sewing machine can save a life. It is 3 o'clock. So far 4,000 are ready to go. The orders are that there must be 9,000 by 4 o'clock.

Some officials came to the post office and issued instructions that all incoming letters and parcels be diverted to the Pawiak prison.

Later the same day, Czerniakow decided to take his own life, by swallowing a potassium cyanide pill. Before swallowing the pill he wrote two letters, one to his wife, one to the Jewish Council saying:

*"They are demanding that I kill the children of my people with my own hands.
There is nothing for me to do but die".*

Dawid died 4 months later on 8 August 1943. The diary was discovered by a Polish gentile, Wacław Szkuclarek, who originally lived in one of the apartments that was evacuated to create the ghetto. Szkuclarek only returned to his home after the Russians liberated the city five years later. It was then, as he prepared to light the iron stove with some paper trash, that he came across the pile of notebooks lying nearby. Szkuclarek told officials documenting the history of Nazi crimes in Lodz. "Someone must have been using them to keep the fire burning because many pages were torn out. They contained stories, poems and other notes."

<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ghettos/acdiary.html>

183

The Jewish Councils

The stories of Adam Czerniakow and Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski exemplify the agonising situation of the German-appointed Jewish Council leaders in the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe. Their daily responsibility was to provide the impossible; adequate food and shelter, heat, medicine, and work to a starving ghetto population. They had to care for the young and sustain the elderly. How could they make life bearable in the conditions of the ghetto? The resources at their disposal were meager; their authority was derived from their German masters. They presided, whether they knew it or not - and some did know - over doomed communities.

In every ghetto, the defining moments that tested the courage and character of the Judenrat leaders came when they were asked to provide lists of those to be deported. Once all tactics of bribery, delay, stonewalling, argumentation, and pleading were exhausted, a decision had to be made.

Judenrat leaders found themselves in a quandary. The time-tested strategies for dealing with the enemy were not working. The wisdom of Jewish tradition offered little guidance to this most agonising question facing Jewish Council leaders. Rabbis who were asked what Jewish teaching mandated turned to a precedent in the Talmud. If idolaters tell Jews: "Give us one of yours and we shall kill him; otherwise we shall kill one of you," all should be killed and not a single soul should be delivered for death. But if the enemy should specify the name of the person to be delivered, there are two different opinions as to what should be done. Some Talmudic authorities permitted the community to deliver a designated person. Maimonides, the great twelfth-century philosopher and legal scholar, would not permit the handing over of even a specified individual unless that person was guilty of a capital crime.

Rabbi Abraham Dubner Cahana-Shapiro was approached at 11:00 P.M. on October 25, 1941, by the deeply divided Jewish Council of Kovno, which asked him whether it could issue a German decree ordering all ghetto inmates, without exception, to report to Demotratu Square at 6:00 A.M. on October 28, 1942, or whether it should refuse to publish the decree in order not to become an accomplice to destruction. The frightened rabbi begged for time to study the question. He spent all night poring over sacred books, searching for wisdom in traditional texts. Approached at six in the morning, he pleaded for just a few more hours. At 11:00 A.M. he responded: communal leaders had to summon the courage, take the responsibility, and save as many lives as possible.

Relying on the same texts and the same inherited wisdom, the Vilna rabbinate ruled the Judenrat chairman Jacob Gens must not participate in the deportation of a few, even if the rest of the community were to be saved. Gens proceeded with the deportation despite the rabbinic objections. He was not alone.

In Lodz, Rumkowski cooperated, reasoning that his duty was "to preserve the Jews who remain. The part that can be saved is much larger than the part that must be given away." He told his critics: "You may judge me as you wish." Faced with similar choices, Moshe Merin, of Sosnowiec in Upper Silesia, also complied.

You other Judenrat leaders would not deliver their people to certain death. Dr. Joseph Parnas, the first Jewish Council president in Lvov, refused to deliver several thousand Jews for deportation. He was shot. Leaders of the council of Bolgoraj, in the Lublin District, were also shot when they refused to surrender their people.

In Warsaw, Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum understood that the circumstances of the beleaguered community had no precedent. He called not for Kiddush Hashem, "the sanctification of God's name," or martyrdom, but for Kiddush Hahashem, the sanctification of life.

"In the past our enemies demanded our soul and the Jew sacrificed his body in sanctifying God's name," Nissenbaum said. "Now the enemy demands the body of the Jew. That makes it imperative for the Jew to defend it and protect it."

When the order was finally given to liquidate the entire ghetto, Judenrat leaders faced an even more agonising decision. Czerniakow swallowed a cyanide pill, leaving the deportation order unsigned. He did not call for resistance. Rumkowski urged the Jews of Lodz to get on the trains in an orderly fashion. Those who came voluntarily could bring luggage, while those who did not were rounded up by the Jewish police.

On October 14, 1942, the entire Judenrat of Bereza Kartuska committed suicide rather than participate in the deportation. The leader of the Jewish Council at Nieswiez Magalit marched to his death rather than turn Jews over to the Nazis saying:

Brothers, I know you had not trust in me, you thought I was going to betray you. In this my last minute, I am with you - I and my family. We are the first ones to go to our death.