



A group of Polish women and children in the Warsaw Ghetto

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G H E T T O S

*One of the first Nazi actions to isolate Jews was the establishment of ghettos, or special areas of residence. The concept of ghettos was not new. They had first been used in Italy in the 16th century to separate Jews from Christians. The following excerpt from **Smoke and Ashes** by Barbara Rogasky explains how the ghettos in areas under German control were set up.*

Reinhard Heydrich was the Chief of the Reich Security Main Office.¹ On September 20, 1939, he issued a directive called "The Jewish Question in Occupied Territory." It ordered the movement of all Jews in Poland, as well as those in other areas under German control, to special places set aside for them in the main cities of the General Government—the ghettos.

Jews were expelled² from their homes,

from towns and villages where their families had lived for generations. Carrying pitiful odds and ends of their past lives with them, they were marched or shipped in freight cars to the ghettos. Many died on the way from hunger, exhaustion or murder.

The first ghetto was set up in the city of Lodz, Poland. The order establishing it made it clear that this was only one step toward the Nazis' final goal. The order

continued

¹ Reich Security Main Office: office in charge of the police and all security operations of the Nazis

² expelled: driven out

came from SS Brigadier General Friedrich Uebelhoer.

"The creation of the ghetto is obviously only a temporary measure. When and by what means the ghetto, and the town of Lodz, will be cleansed of Jews I reserve to myself. Our final objective must be, in any case, to burn out this plague boil³ completely."

The "final objective" was only in the early planning stages. For the time being, the ghettos would hold the Jews until the Nazis were ready to go on with the next stage.

Ghettos were located in the oldest, most run-down sections of town. The buildings were in bad condition, often near collapse. Where running water and sanitary facilities existed, the overcrowding soon made them break down.

The crowding was so intense that each person had about seven feet to call his or her own—a space "as narrow as the grave."

The ghetto in Lodz was a little over 1.5 miles square—the size of about twenty city blocks. Approximately 150,000 Jews lived seven or eight to a room.

In the Vilna, Lithuania, ghetto, 25,000 people lived in seventy-two buildings on five streets. The crowding was so intense that each person had about seven feet to call his or her own—a space "as narrow as the grave."

The Warsaw ghetto took up approximately 1.6 square miles. It held anywhere from 400,000 to 600,000 Jews during its existence—more than the population of the entire state of Vermont. Eight to ten people lived in each room; that figure went up to fourteen when the area of the ghetto was reduced.

³ *plague boil*: a large, painful sore caused by a deadly disease

Most of the ghettos were enclosed. Some were surrounded by fences or barbed wire, as in Lodz, or by a wall, as in Warsaw—which the Jews had to pay a German firm to build. The ghetto wall in Cracow, Poland, was made of gravestones from the Jewish cemetery.

Jews were forbidden to leave the ghetto without a special permit, under penalty of death. Non-Jews without passes were not permitted to enter. The penalty might be carried out by shooting on the spot.

The supervision and final control of the ghettos lay with the Nazis. But at their order, twelve leading men were chosen from each ghetto to form a Jewish Council [Judenrat]. These men were made responsible for the day-to-day running of the ghetto. They were in charge of health, housing and public order. The councils ran hospitals, opened soup kitchens and distributed the food. In the large ghettos, they even set up a Jewish police force. They were, in other words, the government of those captured cities within cities. The Jewish Councils were also responsible for carrying out any and all Nazi orders at every step of the ghettos' existence.

Jews in the ghetto worked whenever they could. They repaired old uniforms and clothes, produced such things as wooden and leather shoes, mattresses, ammunition boxes, baskets and brooms. Their best customers were the Germans, particularly the army. They also produced most of what helped keep the ghetto functioning.

German-owned and SS businesses functioned both inside the ghetto and outside in "Aryan" Warsaw. They took their work force from the ghetto population. To have such a job meant a back-breaking ten- or twelve-hour day. The work permit that came with it entitled the laborers to a very small extra bit of money and a slightly larger food ration.