



Ghettos and the labour camps in Starachowice-Wierzbnik

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

The Jewish congregation in Starachowice-Wierzbnik

Source: UJM Starachowice



The marketplace, *Rynek*, in Wierzbnik.

The Jewish population in Starachowice-Wierzbnik was 3 000 people in 1939. Most of them lived in the old part of town, Wierzbnik. Just like in other *shtetls* in the area it was common for Jews to be tailors, shoemakers, tanners, bakers and butchers. Some also had small shops.

The mothers were homemakers but often took an active part in the family's trade. The children spent half a day in the county school and got religious education in the afternoon. The houses and flats had electricity, but no running water.

Source: Yac Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem



Students in a *tarbut* school.



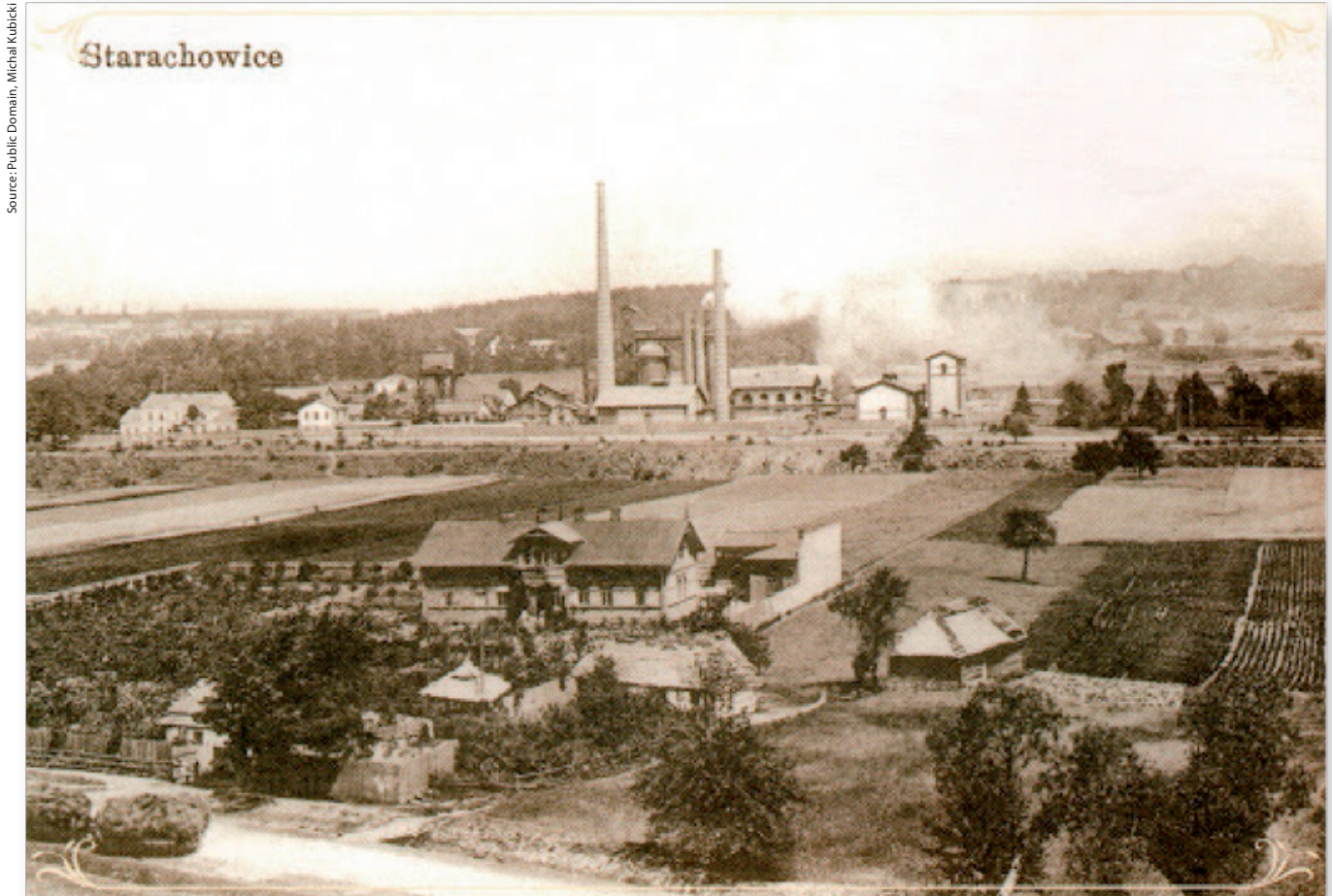
Boys in a religious school, so called *cheder*.

A small group of financially independent and not very traditionally religious Jews were progressive. They earned their living as businessmen and traders, invested in education for the children and founded a secular school, *tarbut*, as an alternative to the education in *cheder* that was more religious.

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As in other Polish towns, Jews in Starachowice-Wierzbnik were subjected to growing antisemitism from the mid-1930s, among other things boycotts were organized against Jewish stores.

Just as in nearby towns Bodzentyn and Kielce the Jews spoke Yiddish and the majority were orthodox. There were different political directions. Some Jews were also involved in Socialist union organizations.



Industries in Starachowice-Wierzbnik.

A number of industries had emerged in nearby area Starachowice. In the spring 1939 the area was linked to Wierzbnik, and the town changed its name to Starachowice-Wierzbnik. The ammunition factory that had been established after the First World War was later taken over by the German occupants. Nazi Germany approved that factories essential for the war industry used Jewish slave labour, if they could be kept isolated in special camps. In this way the ammunition factory in Starachowice played an important part for Jews who fled to the town in search of work, because the Jewish slave labourers here were exempt from being deported to extermination camps for several years.

The outbreak of the war and the German occupation

Source: Public Domain



German troops invading Poland in September 1939.

The town was invaded shortly after the outbreak of war on September 1, 1939. Immediately there were restrictions for Jews. One of the first measures was to ban all Jewish children from community schools. Soon a curfew was declared, banning Jews to go outdoors after 6 pm. Radios were confiscated. Jews were banned from using means of transport – for example bicycles and horse and carriage.

Source: Yad Vahem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem



The Jews were forced to wear an armband in the General Government.

The law demanding the wearing of a white armband with a star of David was introduced here as well as in all four districts of the General Government in occupied Poland.



Map of the General Government showing the towns of Bodzentyn, Kielce and Starachowice.

Many Jews were shocked by the German brutality and the humiliation they were subjected to. For example Jews were picked randomly to perform purposeless forced labour as sweeping the streets. The responsibility for keeping the order and acting as mediators fell upon the Jewish council.



SS-men in Starachowice-Wierzbnik, ca 1939-1942.

Jews were brought to Starachowice-Wierzbnik from surrounding villages and towns, and so were larger groups that had been deported from Lodz and Plock (Plotzk). When the ghetto was established in April 1941 the situation got more severe because of crowded living conditions and scarcity of food.

The ghetto was clearly cordoned off by signs, but there was no fence or wall. Non-Jews were allowed to trade in the area but Jews were not allowed to move outside the ghetto's borders. Jews that had close connections with non-Jewish Polish people could get some help selling and buying goods on the black market.

Ghettot and the labour camps in Starachowice-Wierzbnik

As in other occupied towns the Germans had confiscated all important factories. In Starachowice the steelworks and the ammunition factory were taken over by *Reichswerke Hermann Göring*, one of Nazi Germany's largest groups in iron, arms and engineering industry.

Jewish workers were sought after for the heavy work, and the Jewish council was ordered by the Germans to set up a list of able-bodied boys and men aged 12 to 60 years. Before the ghetto was set up everyone could go to work at the factories freely, but later on the workers always marched in groups.

Source: Archiwum Państwowe w Kielcach Oddział w Starachowicach, Zespół akt. Akte m starachowic, arch 45.

- 4 -

Name u.	Vername	Geburts- JAHR	Wohnort	Beruf
Herblum	Moszek	1916	Pilzudski 31	Schuster
Najmudel	Judka	1901	" 33	Mützenmacher
Grojs man	Aron Israel	1913	" 34	Schneider
Peferman	Lejzer	1909	" 34	Schuster
Kohen	Mejch	1900	" 34	Fuhrman
Kohen	Eli Majer	1922	" 34	Schäftelm.
Kohen	Icek Wolf	1918	" 34	Schuster
Feldpicer	Judka	1898	" 36	Fleischer
Feldpicer	Jankiel	1919	" 36	"
Feldpicer	Moszek	1921	" 36	"
Lewkowicz	Binem	1908	" 37	Einbinder
Cymerman	Lejzer	1906	" 37	Fleischer
Gelblatt	Szeel	1912	" 38	Schneider
Greber	Jankiel	1906	" 38	Blecher
Szw ajcer	Mordka	1897	" 38	Arbeiter
Feldpicer	Hers zek	1905	" 38	Fleischer
Szyf f	Mendel	1909	" 39	Mützenmacher
Kleinman	Josek	1903	" 42	Schneider
Szafir	Nuta	1912	" 42	Blecker
Ungier	Moszek	1921	" 46	Schlosser
Zelcer	Szmul Lejb	1895	" 46	Schneider
Zelcer	Chaim	1915	" 46	"
Erlischman	Szmul Ela	1914	" 46	Tischler
Erlischman	Fiszal	1917	" 46	o h n e
Kasstan	Moszek	1920	" 46	Schneider
Finkelsztajn	Pinkus	1898	" 46	Schuster
Cukierman	Josek	1900	" 48	Händler
Ungier	Abram	1900	" 48	Beamter
Jabkefski	Icek	1901	" 48	Schuster
Baum-	Berek	1903	" 48	Händler
Binsztek	Herszek	1912	" 48	Tischler
Binsztek	Szlama	1922	" 48	Schmidt
B insztek	Kiwa	1896	" 48	Schuster
Arbeitman	Aron	1923	" 50	Mützenmacher
Feldpicer	Josek	1902	" 50	Schuster
Zylberman	Mordka	1913	" 50	Frieiseur
Ajzeman	Szlama Lejb	1899	" 52	Uhrmacher
Maszkewicz	Mordka	1910	" 52	Händler
Markiewicz	Josek	1916	" 52	Schneider
Bins ztek	Chaim Szulim	1905	" 54	Schuster
Zylberman	Szmul	1898	" 62	Händler
Winograd	Lejbus	1898	" 68	Schneider
Winograd	Nusym	1903	" 68	Fuhrman
Winograd	Szmul	1896	" 68	"
Rozental	Moszek Mendel	1910	" 68	Schneider
Lagrzycki	Motel	1910	" 68	Händler
Kogut	Benjamin	1906	" 68	"
Wojcik	Zymler Jankiel	1910	" 68	"
Erlischman	Moszek	1905	" 68	Arbeiter
Tischler	Israel Wolf	1895	" 70	Tischler

The Germans demanded that the Jewish council should set up a list of all the able-bodied boys and men in Starachowice-Wierzbnik. On the list is noted name, age and profession.

Ghettot and the labour camps in Starachowice-Wierzbnik

Before the closing of the ghetto on October 27, 1942, all traffic in the area was stopped, and vehicles were not allowed to pass through it. The Jewish council was ordered to gather all Jews at the market place the next morning. Those who weren't fast enough were brought with brutal violence to the assembly point by the armed guards who had surrounded the ghetto. In several places, Jews who didn't come to the market place or were considered too weak to be transported, were murdered.



The railway station in Starachowice-Wierzbnik, where men, women and children were forced onboard trains to Treblinka in October 1942.

Jews who belonged to special work groups were ordered to stand in one group. Compared to other towns unusually many were chosen: 400 women and 1 200 men. The others – 4 000 people – were transported the same day to the extermination camp Treblinka.

The end for the Jewish slave labours in Starachowice-Wierzbnik

The same day that the ghetto was liquidated the chosen groups of forced labourers were brought to the sawmill *Tartak* and to barracks that had been prepared at the old shooting range in *Strzelnica* (shooting range in Polish), and at an area called *Majówka*. Both places were situated a few kilometres from the market place and a demanding march up the hill towards the forest on the outskirts of Starachowice.

Majówka, the camp that Max Safir was brought to, was surrounded by barbed wire. There was at least one tower where a guard kept watch over the prisoners, ready to shoot if someone tried to escape. The barracks at Strzelnica were later shut down and the prisoners were relocated to Majówka. From the camp prisoners marched to the ammunition factory and the steelworks to work in shifts. They were constantly watched by guards. Survivors witness that several of the guards were Ukrainians who had been hired by the Germans. During the work at the ammunition factory and the steelworks the prisoners were subjected to poisonous smoke and heat.



The steel works in Starachowice-Wierzbnik in the 1940s.

There were no exceptions made if someone got sick or was too weak to work. The prisoners were constantly in the German's power. Survivors remember one especially evil man, Willi Althoff, who was responsible for security. From the early months he did random executions of both sick and healthy prisoners. Later on he also made selections and mass executions. The bodies were buried in the forest but also next to the camps. At Majówka, that was situated on a ledge, guards forced prisoners who had tried to escape to run down the steep and shot them in the neck.

The members of the Jewish council had been allowed to bring their families to the camp in Strzelnica. The women and children had some protection, but were also subjected to the harsh conditions, and risked getting diseases like typhoid that claimed numerous lives.

Source: Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem. The Auschwitz Album



Photo of the arrival platform at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Further away to the left and the right, in the horizon, you can see gas chambers and the chimneys of crematorium II and III.

It was almost impossible for the prisoners in the barracks to take care of their personal hygiene. The toilets were a hole in the ground. There were no showers. The only clothes the prisoners had were the rags, filled with lice, that they had worn since the liquidation of the ghetto.

In the barracks slave labourers got one meal that was a soup. Eventually another meal of soup and bread was added at the ammunition factory, but it was not enough to feed the worn out prisoners. Many tried to get more food on the black market – a trade that was done with Polish people who could move more freely on the area. Max Safir worked in a storage room, sorting clothes that the Nazis had taken when ghettos were emptied. He could trade underwear for food with women who worked in the kitchen.

In the beginning of July 1944 the prisoners were brought from Majówka to another camp that was built near the ammunition factory. A lot of people realized that the camp would soon be closed, and were fearing the worst. Several attempted escapes were made, and in the chaos that broke out several of the children, women and men were shot to death by the guards. Those who survived were shortly thereafter put on freight wagons. The train departing to Auschwitz-Birkenau reached its destination on July 30, 1944.

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