



Life in the Ghetto of Lodz

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A "special area" for Jews

Three weeks after the invasion of Poland Reinhard Heydrich, leader of the security service in Nazi Germany, instructed the so called Einsatzgruppen that the Jews should be concentrated in special areas and that this was necessary in order to accomplish the "final goal", i.e. to get rid of all the Jews.

Therefore Artur Greiser and Friedrich Uebelhoer, Nazi leaders for Wartheland, where Jakob was born, acted according to this intent when they started planning for a special living area for Jews in Lodz.

The planning of the ghetto started in December 1939. The authorities sent a message to the Jewish Community instructing them on how the resettlement should be carried out. The assigned area included the Old City, where many Jews already lived, and part of the district Baluty in the outskirts of the city, representing a total area of 4.13 square kilometers. Both areas were poor and run-down. Most of the houses did not have running water or sewage.

To isolate the area and keep the non-Jewish population out large signs were posted at the entrances, warning people of epidemics and illnesses in the Jewish settlement area. Two streets crossing the area, Zgierska Street and Limanowskiego Street, were not included in the ghetto. The tram railway continued to operate as usual, but of course the Jews could not use the tram. On each side of the tracks barbed wire was put up. Later on bridges were build over the streets so that Jews could pass from one area to the other.

Relocation to the ghetto

In February 1940 Jews living outside the designated living area were ordered to leave their apartments. The German authorities had planned for the resettlement to take one day. But the move was chaotic and the resettlement was difficult. Christian Poles and Germans living in the area didn't want to leave their apartments and people moving in had no idea where to go. As a warning and to speed up the resettlement, the German authorities arrested several hundred Jewish and Polish families that did not follow the orders. The Nazi Police Commander also let people know that Jews living or hiding outside the boundaries of the ghetto would be severely punished. And this turned out to be the case. Several hundred Jews who were found outside the ghetto were shot by the SS or the police.



Arthur Greiser, leader of the Wartheland region.

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People moving into the ghetto.

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The organising of the ghetto

After three months, on the 1st of May 1940, the German authorities were satisfied that the resettlement was completed and that the ghetto could be closed and fenced in with barbed wire. At this time 164 000 men, women and children were squeezed into an area of four square kilometers. Outside the fence German soldiers kept guard. Inside the fence the Jewish Police were supposed to keep order. No one was allowed to go out and only Germans were allowed in. Sometimes people had to live 15-20 persons in one single room.

Lodz ghetto or Ghetto Litzmanstadt as it was formally named, was the first ghetto erected in one of the big cities. The German administration was run by a ghetto management under a German civilian servant, Hans Biebow.

The internal administration of the ghetto was left to Chaim Rumkowski, whom the Germans had appointed to head the ghetto. Rumkowski and the Council of Elders had to report directly to Hans Biebow and Rumkowski was personally responsible for the smooth running of the ghetto.

The difficult housing conditions, lack of water, the cold in the winter or the terrible heat in the summer were difficult to cope with, but the worst problem was the hunger. It very soon became obvious that large groups were starving. They simply did not have any money to buy food. It was especially hard for the people who had no job or anyone that could provide for them.

A special currency was introduced in the ghetto, so called Ghetto Marks or "Rumkies" as they were called (after Rumkowski). The Ghetto Mark was worthless outside the ghetto boundaries. Salaries for the people who worked were paid in Rumkies and food had to be bought by Rumkies.



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The ghetto was sealed off from the outside world.



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Bridge across Zgierska Street in Lodz ghetto.



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Ghetto Marks, so called Rumkies.

To try to ease the situation Rumkowski suggested that the Jewish population in the ghetto should produce goods for the German market and in exchange get paid in food and money.

As the shortage of labor in Germany was a constant problem, with more and more men taken to the front, Rumkowski's idea was accepted. The German ghetto administration agreed to deliver raw materials so that the inhabitants of the ghetto could produce goods to be sent to Germany.

During autumn 1940 hundreds of small industries were put up in every possible space. As there was plenty of unskilled labor big working places were organised with several hundred people working at conveyor belts. The conditions were deplorable. There was no ventilation, often no water or heating arrangements. Another problem was the lack of machinery, everything useful had been taken away from the Jews in the beginning of the occupation. The factory organisers rarely got any help from the German administration and in order to solve this problem they started assembling machinery from old scrap material that they could find.

Everything was used. People repaired old junk and altered well worn old clothes that could be used again. From these old things carpets, quilts and blankets were made, but also shoes and new clothes. Nothing could be used or sold in the ghetto, everything had to be sent to Germany. The largest orders came from the German Army, but also private firms placed orders to the ghetto industries to make use of the cheap labor. Enormous amounts of goods were produced in the ghetto. Rumkowski and the ghetto leaders were proud of this accomplishment, but the workers soon lost their faith in the arrangement. They did not believe hard work would bring better living conditions.

Rationing

In December 1940 strict rationing of food was introduced as the food allotment for the ghetto was greatly reduced. At the same time many more workers were used in the factories as more people had ghetto marks to buy food. Even so, there was never enough food in the ghetto.

Very often the food deliveries to the ghetto were cancelled or very irregular, and the food was rotten. Very seldom you could find meat or margarine. Several times people went out into the streets chanting "give us bread, give us bread – we are dying of hunger". As the ghetto in Lodz was completely sealed off it was not possible to smuggle food into the ghetto. It was also not possible to get out of the ghetto to try to buy food outside the fence. Everyone who tried to get out was shot. There was also no possibility to trade as everything was rationed and no one had any money or valuables left. On average people had to manage on half of the minimum nourishment that is required for the body to function.



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Shoe manufacturing.



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Dispensation of food rations.

The extermination camp of Chelmno

During the more than four years that the ghetto was functioning the living conditions varied. Hunger and lack of clean water made many people sick with diarrhea or other stomach illnesses. In the overcrowded and small apartments lice spread typhus. The extreme working conditions, the constant fear and insecurity also broke people down. When somebody got ill the lack of medicine often meant that there was no treatment and people who became ill died within short periods of time. Old people, children and youngsters were most vulnerable. Boys were often selected for very hard work in the ghetto factories or in the work camps around Lodz.



Gas van in Chelmno.

During autumn 1941 almost 20 000 Jews were deported into the ghetto from Germany, Luxemburg, Tjeckoslovakia and Austria. According to official statistics there were almost 164 000 Jews registered in the ghetto on the 1st of December 1941. Almost the same number of people as when the ghetto was closed off the 1st of May 1940, but from the original population thousands of Jews had been killed by SS or died from hunger and had been taken ill.

At the same time the Germans tried to find the best way to kill large groups of people and in the beginning of December the first extermination camp was ready in Chelmno nad Nerem (Chelmno by the river Ner), approximately 60 kilometers northwest of Lodz. Within a couple of weeks several small villages in the vicinity of Lodz were emptied and the people were taken to Chelmno and murdered by gas in converted trucks. While the trucks drove to already prepared mass graves in the nearby forest, the people were killed by the gas.

Deportation of Roma

In November 1941 a group of Roma people from the border area between Austria and Hungary arrived at the ghetto. There were approximately 5 000 people, more than half of them children. The German authorities placed them in a building on Brzezinska street, the street where Jakob lived. They were kept isolated behind double rows of barbed wire and with deep ditches around the building. The windows were sealed and there was one single entrance to the quarter.

There was no running water and no toilets. The conditions were terrible and it was hard to get food. Very soon a typhus epidemic broke out and in a few weeks hundreds of people died. A short time after they arrived at the ghetto the group was again placed on lorries and taken away.



Roma and Sinti in the internment camp Lackenbach in Austria. In 1941 a group of people were transferred from the camp to the Lodz ghetto.

© „Zigeunerlager Lackenbach“ Eröffnung des Lagers 1940. Archiv Leopold Banny

Arnold Mostowicz, one of the Jewish doctors working in the ghetto writes in his memoirs a report from the Gypsy Camp as the German authorities called the camp.

One night, trucks arrived in front of the Gypsy camp; all Gypsies, the healthy and the ill, were loaded on them and taken away. The Germans did not even make any secret about the fate which befell the inhabitants of the camp. As a matter of fact, who were they to hide the truth from? From other sub-humans, destined for the same fate? All the Gypsies were murdered... Some of them were shot, and some were gassed in trucks with the exhaust pipes installed inside. This had already been tested on the Jews deported from the ghetto. The tenement houses where the camp was located returned to the ghetto, i.e. behind the single barbed-wire fences.

Later, they were thoroughly disinfected, and several dozen Jewish families, before they were gassed at Chelmno or Auschwitz, could move into the fresh flats. As it was later figured out in the Health Department, the decision on the liquidation of the Gypsy camp was influenced by the increased number of typhus cases in Lodz. Aryan Lodz, to make it clear. It is hard to find out how much of this is true.

Arnold Mostowicz, *The Report on the Gypsy Matter, The Yellow Star and the Red Cross* p. 32 (2005)

In the end of 1941 persistent rumors started that a big resettlement was imminent. Noone knew exactly what was happening. Rumkowski reported that he had received an order to put together lists of names of people that could be moved somewhere else. According to the Nazi administration, the reason for this resettlement was the impossibility of feeding such a large group of people, and therefore the population in the ghetto had to be reduced by half.

Rumkowski appointed a so called "resettlement committee" that was supposed to choose the ten thousand people that had to be moved.

Yisroel Tabaksblat gives the following report on how the discussion went at the meeting where it was to be decided who would be sent away:

Some thought that old folks and children should be sent, in order that the young and healthy and those able to work and support the ghetto should remain in the ghetto. Other construed the matter differently. They did not entirely believe the assurances about arrangements in the countryside (it seemed too good to apply for Jews). Instead, they believed there would be transportation far away... and that the old and sick would not survive.

Therefore, it would be more reasonable the young, who more easily could take care of themselves (noone could dreamed that those sent away would be annihilated). It was decided that no distinction would be made between young and old, but instead to send entire families, so that they could be together and help eachother along the way.

Yisroel Tabaksblat,
Kurbn lodzh, Destruction of Lodz (1946)

Registration of the children

On the 16th of January 1942 the first transport left Lodz ghetto. Noone knew where the transport was headed and noone suspected that the transport would be sent to the extermination Camp at Chelmno. It was decided that one thousand people would be sent each day. They were allowed to sell their remaining possessions or offered to put them into storage until the family would return. They could also change their worthless ghetto marks for ten Reichsmark, money that was deposited in a personal account. Every person could take twelve and a half kilograms of luggage on the transport.

Everything was to be done in an orderly way. The Jewish police were told to escort the Jews to the Radegast station, from where the journey would begin. At the station German policemen took charge.

Panic broke out in the ghetto. People tried to avoid the transports in every possible way. But the efforts were futile. Strict orders were given that if anyone tried to hide somebody they would be severely punished. The deportations continued for 14 days, after that followed a short break for a couple of weeks. In the end of February the deportations started again, and continued until the beginning of April. Then, at the same time as the Jewish Passover Holiday, Pesach, began, the transports suddenly stopped and everyone was relieved. However, after a very short time new orders were given – all Jews from Germany, Vienna, Prague and Luxemburg were to be “resettled”. New transports left to Chelmno almost every day until the middle of May. By then almost 60 000 people had been sent away.

In June the same year all children under the age of ten were registered, convincing many that the next transport would include the children of the ghetto. Desperate efforts were made to find jobs for as many children as possible. But when the hospitals were emptied and the patients sent away, people understood that a new deportation was imminent. No one knew where the people were taken and the atmosphere grew more tense. Everyone was restless and confused. It soon became obvious that the Nazi administration had decided to reduce the population of the ghetto by another 20 000 people.

On the 4th of September 1942 a meeting was announced at the Firemen's Square. At the meeting Rumkowski and other leaders in the ghetto were going to inform the people about the recent developments. Thousands of people came to listen. The ghetto leaders very bluntly told the gathering that new orders had been given and that all children under ten years of age were to be sent away. The deportation would begin the next day.



Children deportation in 1942.

Deportations continue

One week later the deportations were finished, the curfew was lifted, food was distributed and the Nazi ghetto chief Hans Biebow ordered everyone to go back to work. During the action 15 859 children, old and sick people had been selected for transport and more than 600 people had been shot. Almost every family had lost a child or an old relative. The shock and the loss affected people for a long time.

The ghetto now became an enormous slave labor camp. Those who could work were left. They were ordered to work even harder.

During the spring of 1944 the Germans felt increasing pressure. The Soviet army pushed further and further to the west, and the allied forces landed in Normandy on the French coast. Different Nazi delegations visited the ghetto and in order to calculate how profitable it was. Very soon Rumkowski was again ordered to make lists, and when a curfew was imposed the ghetto inhabitants were reminded of the days in September when they had to send away their children and old relatives. This time it was much harder to get people to register for a transport. The Nazis tried to lure people out of their hiding places by promising food, and there were people so famished that they just gave in and handed themselves over.

Then, in the middle of June 1944, a telegram arrived from the highest SS-leadership. The SS-chief Heinrich Himmler let the Nazi governor, Arthur Greiser, know that the ghetto of Lodz would be closed. The Chief of the Gestapo, Dr. Otto Bradfisch, ordered Rumkowski to select groups of five hundred, who would be sent to Germany to clean up after the bombings of the allied forces. All kinds of promises were made to get people to volunteer. Families were promised the possibility to travel together and bring their children if they could work. They would be permitted to write letters to their relatives and get their food ration without queuing. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday a thousand people were supposed to be sent away. They were allowed to bring 15 kilos of luggage, including a pillow and a blanket, as well as food for two-three days.



People awaiting deportation.

In order to make people really believe that the transport was heading for Germany, the Nazi ghetto leader, Hans Biebow, decided that everyone could sell the items they could not bring with them and get paid in German currency, “to be able to use the money upon arrival in the German cities” as he put it.

To gather a thousand people for each transport proved very difficult. Very soon they simply searched the houses and took whoever they found to fill up the quota.

One month later, in the middle of July, all deportations were suddenly stopped. People who had already been gathered were released. Rumkowski travelled around the ghetto and announced the happy news. Everyone was cheering and kissing each other, hoping that no more deportations would take place.

But the joy was short lived. Only a few days later several disturbing events happened. A very thorough registration of all the remaining Jews in the ghetto was conducted. The German firms that had supplied special machinery to the ghetto factories demanded that the machinery should be sent back to Germany. Through the newspaper Litzmanstadter Zeitung, that was smuggled into the ghetto, and via a radio that had been concealed from the Germans during the time in the ghetto, it was known that the Red Army had advanced towards the west and that Warsaw had already been taken by the Soviet forces. It was even possible to hear the allied planes fly over Lodz.

Then an order came that people had to sign up for the transport. Not even promises about food could make the starving people come to the collecting points. The Nazi leader Biebow visited the factories and tried to get the workers to volunteer. He promised that “not a hair will be touched on your head. I will accompany you. During four and a half year we have been together in the ghetto and I have not harmed you.” But nothing helped, people were not fooled by the sweet words. The trains remained almost empty.

The Germans then decided to close area by area, the ghetto became smaller and smaller. The ghetto inhabitants tried to hide in every possible way. They looked for food everywhere and ate everything they could find, while they waited for the Soviet army to liberate them and the war to be over. The Nazi leadership decided to conduct systematic raids in order to force the people onto the waiting trains. Day after day trains left for Auschwitz-Birkenau and in the end of August more than seventy thousand people had been sent away and the ghetto was practically empty. Only two small groups of less than 1 500 people each were left. One group was to be sent to a labor camp in Germany, the other got the task of cleaning the ghetto. Rumkowski and his family left the ghetto on one of the last transports to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the whole family was killed.



Gestapo poster from the 17th of August 1944, ordering the evacuation of certain areas of the ghetto.

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