



Warsaw

Capital of Poland and site of the largest ghetto in Europe during World War II. An important Jewish center, 375,000 Jews lived in Warsaw just before the war (constituting almost 30 percent of the city's total population).

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Within a few days the Polish government fled Warsaw, and on September 28, the capital capitulated to the Nazis. In late October, Warsaw became a district center of the new *Generalgouvernement* civil administration, with Ludwig Fischer serving as district governor.

As soon as Poland fell to the Germans, the Jews of Warsaw were subjected to brutal attacks and forced labor. In November 1939 the German authorities issued the first anti-Jewish legislation. This included the order for Jews to don a white armband with a blue Star of David (see also Badge, Jewish) and various economic restrictions. As a result, many Jews lost any means of supporting themselves and their families.

A *Judenrat* was also set up under the chairmanship of Adam Czerniakow, and no Jewish institutions besides the *Judenrat* and welfare organizations were permitted to function. The Jewish Mutual Aid Society (ZTOS) was outstanding in its aid distribution activities. Funded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, ZTOS ran over 100 soup kitchens, created House Committees to help alleviate the crowding, set up youth clubs and kindergartens, and arranged cultural activities.

In October 1940, the Jews were informed that a ghetto was to be established in Warsaw. On November 16th the ghetto was sealed off and at its peak, housed some 445,000 Jews. From the start, the living conditions in the ghetto were insufferable. 6 or 7 people lived in one room, the food rations supplied by the Germans were a tenth of what they should have been, and many people died of disease, cold, and malnourishment. The ghetto's legal economic exchanges with the outside world were regulated by the German Transfer Office. However, most economic activity conducted by the ghetto Jews was illegal, including the smuggling of food. Most Jews who survived in



the ghetto either subsisted on their savings or participated in "illegal" economic activities.

Despite the grave hardships, life in the Warsaw Ghetto was rich with educational and cultural activities, conducted by its underground organizations. There were secret libraries, classes for the children, and a symphony orchestra. In addition, prominent writers and poets continued to flourish. The *Oneg Shabbat* Archive, an underground enterprise led by the historian Emanuel Ringelblum, worked on documenting the history of the Warsaw Ghetto and other communities in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Many of the underground organizations were offshoots of various Jewish political parties and youth movements. In March 1942 Yitzhak Zuckerman of the *Dror He-Halutz* Zionist youth movement tried to unite the various movements into one self-defense organization. However, not all groups wanted to join, so the leftist Anti-Fascist Bloc was created instead. This organization lasted 2 months, and collapsed in May 1942 when its Communist leaders were jailed.

During the first half of 1942, growing panic spread in the ghetto, as reports began to come in about deportations from other ghettos. In addition, the Germans began carrying out night raids, in which Jews were plucked from their houses at random and murdered. Then, in late July, the Germans launched a two month long wave of deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto. *Judenrat* chairman Czerniakow committed suicide, as he was unwilling to help the Nazis decide who to deport, as they had ordered. By September 12 about 300,000 Jews had been deported, some 254,000 of them to the Treblinka extermination camp.

The 60,000 Jews left in the ghetto soon went through a great psychological shift. At the beginning of the deportations, a cross-movement self-defense group had finally been organized, under the command of Mordecai Anielewicz. Known as the Jewish Fighting Organization (*Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, ZOB), many of its members were galvanized to fight the Nazis when they realized that the deportations meant death.

In January 1943, a second wave of deportations was launched. Believing that this was to be the final liquidation of the ghetto, the ZOB sent its armed



fighters to resist the Germans. The deportations were halted after just five days (some 6,000 Jews having been deported), leading the Jews to believe that it was their resistance that had stopped them. In fact, the German plan had only been to deport a few thousand Jews at that time. Whatever the truth was, however, the ghetto Jews now believed that they had a chance of survival. The ZOB fighters had no such illusions: they knew that they would have to fight to their last man, and their goal was not survival, but “resistance for resistance's sake.”

On 19 April 1943, the final liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto commenced. The Jews had been warned and they were ready and waiting in their bunkers, which they had built in anticipation over the previous months. As the general population hid from the Germans who entered the ghetto, the ZOB fighters attacked, launching the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising---the first uprising of an urban population in occupied Europe. Days of guerilla-type warfare stumped the Germans, who then resorted to searching for the Jews, bunker by bunker, and burning down the ghetto. The members of the ZOB and the smaller Jewish Military Union (aligned with the *Betar* movement) fought heroically, but in the end, they were no match for the Germans. By May 8 the ZOB leaders were discovered in their bunker, and on May 16, the Germans felt that the operation was over. Nonetheless, individual Jews hid in the ghetto for well over a year, and thousands crossed over to the Polish side of Warsaw in search of refuge. Indeed, many were killed in the general Polish uprising that broke out in Warsaw in August 1944 (known as the Warsaw Polish Uprising). Warsaw was razed to the ground after the failed revolt, and more than 150,000 Poles were sent to labor or concentration camps.

On January 17, 1945, the Soviet army liberated Warsaw. Some 300 Jews were found hiding in the Polish part of the city. (see also Jewish Fighting Organization, Warsaw and Jewish Military Union, Warsaw.)