

The Ghettos

To understand why Jews went to live in the ghettos without much resistance, one needs to keep several things in mind.

1. Ghettos were not a new invention. They had existed as far back as the Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century, Jews had been confined to certain parts of cities or required to live "beyond the Pale" in rural areas of Eastern Europe. Being separated by the Germans was nothing new.

2. Hitler believed Jews were a "cancer" that needed to be destroyed. He was not worried about weak Jews: they died quickly. It was stronger Jews who might come back to spread Judaism once again who must be killed.

3. Jews were not fighters by nature. Few owned guns or had officer training in military strategy.

4. Community and family were very strong in Jewish culture. Most Jews followed the advice of leaders who trusted reason as the way to convince the Nazis. They argued: "What good is a dead Jew to them?" They believed the Germans needed Jews to work in their factories. They also knew the SS swiftly punished disobedience. They thought that by cooperating with the SS, their masters would ease up on the pressure.

Family was very important. To be with relatives in uncertain times was important to survival. Parents often gave their food ration to their children. When families were transported to labor camps, mothers often gave up their own lives by staying with the children, and they went to die with them.

5. The Jews were too scattered in isolated *shtetls* and in small clusters in Gentile cities to put up effective resistance.

THE ORDER TO MOVE to the ghetto came with little warning. The *shtetl* leaders might be told early in the morning to have the Jews assembled and ready to move by 9 a.m. They could take only a suitcase or a small handcart. Some hid valuables, but their homes, furniture, and livestock had to be left behind. At the appointed time, they moved out, and scavengers quickly descended to steal whatever they could find.

Their column might join others headed for the ghetto. There, new arrivals were assigned a room. In an apartment where a family of four had lived before, 12 to 20 lived now. There was no privacy, few toilets, and little food. People were the only thing not in short supply. The streets were filled with beggars, the unemployed, and merchants selling smuggled food.

The Germans intended to make life for these "subhumans" as miserable and short as possible. Despite all the odds, Jews began to develop a system of schools, newspapers, and cultural and religious organizations. Schools were secretly organized, and students studied harder than ever before. Underground libraries sprang up, with the librarian secretly bringing books to the reader and picking them up. There were performances by ghetto orchestras before audiences starved for culture as well as food.

Religious life went on despite Nazi efforts to stop it. Many who had never been religious before took Judaism seriously now. Conditions in which they lived complicated Jewish law, and rabbis



Jews were rounded up and forced to move into ghettos.

had to consider new issues. Such questions as whether it was permitted to wear the clothes of someone who had died or whether one could eat non-Kosher food were considered. The rabbis ruled that preserving life was more important than dietary law.

GOVERNMENT of the ghetto was done by the *Judenrat*, which took orders from the Nazis. The leaders faced a thankless task, since those who told them what they must do had no interest in helping them create a pleasant community for those who lived there. The situations in Lodz, Warsaw, and Kovno illustrate different approaches to their task.

Lodz. The leader of the Lodz ghetto was Mordechai Rumkowski, who wanted to keep the Nazis happy at all costs. No food was to be smuggled in. As many workers as the Germans wanted were sent on labor details. Everyone was required to work; many were employed at one of the council's factories. Rumkowski believed that if the ghetto was productive, the Nazis would leave it alone. When other ghettos were being destroyed, the Lodz ghetto was allowed to continue, but its future was bleak.

In 1942, the Nazis began "resettling" Lodz Jews, sending them to Chelmno death camp. When the Nazis ordered Rumkowski to turn over the old people and children, he told parents to give him their sons and daughters. Many parents hid their children, but the Germans came into the ghetto and took them. After that, the Nazis left the Lodz ghetto alone for two years, then demanded more residents to be taken to Auschwitz and Chelmno. In August 1944, Rumkowski was taken and killed at Auschwitz.

Warsaw had the largest ghetto, with 400,000 Jews at its peak. The top man was Adam Czerniakow, a long-time leader of Warsaw's Jews. He made little effort to stop smuggling into the ghetto, and smugglers and children worked their way through sewers and holes under the wall to gather food for the residents. Smugglers charged high prices for food they brought in and lived much better than their customers.

In 1942, the Germans began taking Jews from the ghetto by quick attacks on blocks or buildings. Those captured were shipped to Treblinka. Czerniakow begged the Germans to let children go free; when he was turned down, he committed suicide.

Kovno in Lithuania had been a center for Jewish culture, but the city's Jewish population had suffered since the Russians took it in 1939. The Germans captured the city in 1941, and anti-Semitic Lithuanians killed 10,000 Jews in the first month of German occupation. The 30,000 remaining Jews were sealed off in a ghetto. The head of its *Judenrat* was Dr. Elchanan Elkes, who did his best to protect his people. In 1943, Dr. Elkes was taken away. By 1945, only 2,000 Jews were still alive in Kovno.

By 1943, the Nazis were determined to bring the Final Solution to a close. The only choice for those still surviving in the ghettos was whether to fight or die.

ACTIVITY:

The class becomes a *Judenrat*, and you have to make the following decisions:

1. The Nazis want 1,000 people per day to be resettled. Who would you choose?

2. The people are complaining that wealthy people are smuggling food while others starve.

Should you crack down on smuggling?

3. Some young people want the council to give them money to buy guns. Should you spend council funds on guns?

4. Musicians have scheduled a concert and have asked for an extra ration of bread each as their pay. Should it be given?