

**IN WARSAW, POLAND, THE NAZIS ESTABLISHED THE LARGEST GHETTO IN ALL OF EUROPE.** 375,000 Jews lived in Warsaw before the war – about 30 percent of the city’s total population. After Poland’s surrender to the Nazis in September 1939, the Jews of Warsaw were treated brutally and taken for forced labor. The Jews were forced to wear a white armband with a blue Star of David. Economic changes led to the unemployment of most of the city’s Jews. A Judenrat (Jewish Council) was created under the leadership of Adam Czerniakow, and in October 1940, the establishment of a ghetto was announced. On November 16, the Jews were forced inside the area of the ghetto. A third of the city’s population was Jewish, yet the ghetto stood on just 2.4 percent of the city’s land. Masses of new refugees brought the ghetto population up to about 450,000.

Surrounded by walls they were forced to build with their own hands and under strict and violent guard, the contact of Jews of Warsaw with the outside world was severely restricted. Some Jews were taken to work in German factories outside the walls under close guard, and a daring few, including many children, furtively slipped out of the ghetto in order to smuggle food and necessities back in.

Within the ghetto, the inhabitants’ lives became a desperate struggle to survive the disease and starvation.

The living conditions were unbearable and the ghetto was extremely overcrowded. On average, six to seven people lived in one room. The daily food rations provided about one-tenth of the nutrition needed to live. Most work under the auspices of the ghetto administration and German overseers was compensated by inadequate food or a very meager wage. Private economic activity was mostly illegal, such as the smuggling of food or selling personal items, but those who took part in these illegal acts or had other savings were able to survive longer in the ghetto.

**The walls of the ghetto could not silence cultural expression.** Despite the dreadful conditions, many artists and writers continued their creative work. The Nazi occupation stirred them to find a way to reflect the destruction of their world. In the ghetto, there were underground libraries, a secret collection of historical records (the “Oneg Shabbat” Archive), youth movements, and even a symphony orchestra. Books, study, music, and theater served as an escape from the harsh reality surrounding them and a reminder of their previous lives.

The crowded ghetto became a site of disease, epidemics and mass death, which Jewish community groups were helpless to combat, despite their best efforts to improve hygiene and provide healthcare without even basic medicines. More than 80,000 Jews died in the ghetto, mostly from the combination of starvation and disease. In July 1942, deportations to the Treblinka death camp began. When the first deportation orders were received, Adam Czerniakow, the chairman of the Judenrat, refused to prepare the lists of persons scheduled for deportation, and, instead, committed suicide on July 23, 1942. His act did not influence the continued wave of transports that ended only in October 1942.



Jewish refugees waiting in a soup line at a shelter at 33 Nalewki Street

Adapted from: Yad Vashem. Warsaw Ghetto. <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/ghettos/warsaw.html>.