Approximately 200,000 Jews lived in Budapest (the capital of Hungary) and 825,000 in all of Hungary before World War II. Hungary was allied with Nazi Germany. Despite widespread antisemitism and anti-Jewish laws there, the country remained relatively safe for Jews until it was occupied by Germany on March 19, 1944. Then the situation changed dramatically. Between May and July 1944 – in a period of just 56 days – the Germans and Hungarians deported close to 500,000 Jews from the Hungarian provinces to Auschwitz, a complex of concentration and extermination camps in Poland. By the end of July, Budapest was virtually the only Jewish community that remained in Hungary.

In June 1944, the Hungarian authorities ordered the Jews of Budapest into over 2,000 designated buildings scattered throughout the city. The buildings were marked with Stars of David. Representatives from the Swedish, Swiss, Vatican, and other legations (diplomatic missions or offices) organized protective passports and safe houses, saving tens of thousands of Jews.

In October 1944, the fascist Arrow Cross party seized power and instituted a reign of terror in Budapest. Hundreds of Jews were shot; others were drafted for brutal forced labor. On November 8, 1944, the Hungarians concentrated more than 70,000 Jews – men, women, and children – in the Ujlaki brickyards in Obuda. From there they were

Deportation of the Budapest Jews to the Ghetto

taken on a forced march to camps in Austria. Thousands were shot and thousands more died as a result of starvation or exposure to the bitter cold. The remaining Jews in Budapest – especially those who didn't have protective papers of neutral countries – were ordered by the Arrow Cross into a closed ghetto. Between December 1944 and the end of January 1945, the Arrow Cross took as many as 20,000 Jews from the ghetto, shot them along the banks of the Danube, and threw their bodies into the river.

On February 13, 1945, when the Red Army liberated Budapest, there were 100,000 Jewish survivors in the city.

Source: Yad Vashem, Raoul Wallenberg, https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/wallenberg.html.