The history of the Jews in Poland spans a thousand years; Jewish merchants first arrived in Poland in the 9th and 10th centuries, travelling along the most important trade routes. The massive influx of Jews to Poland began in the Middle Ages. Jews living in Western Europe were often accused of being responsible for natural disasters or plagues, and were targeted during the Crusades.

Due to the Black Death — the greatest crisis of the Middle Ages — and because the Crusades never reached the bulk of the Polish lands, medieval Poland became a refuge for the Jews. The Polish kings encouraged Jewish settlement in Poland, hoping that it would boost economic and trade development.

The first local privileges for Jews in Poland were issued in the 13th century, providing them with religious autonomy and making them direct subjects of the king. The Jewish population during this time was mainly involved in trade. Migration meant that many Jews had extensive international contacts, enabling them to bring luxury goods to Poland, including fabrics, weapons, tools and exotic spices.

Poland experienced a cultural and economic boom in the 16th century, and the Jewish community entered a ‘Golden Age’. Poland became a major centre of Jewish learning with many important religious books written during this period, many of which are still used today by Jews around the world. One of the most important Polish rabbis during this Golden Age was Rabbi Moses Isserles, also known as the Remu.

At the end of the 16th century, the Polish king ordered the creation of a representative body for the Jewish population, the only body of its kind in Europe. It became the equivalent of a Jewish parliament, and Jews were seen as the fifth class in Poland, alongside the nobility, clergy, merchants and peasants.

The development of the Jewish community and their success in trade sometimes drew the resentment of the Christian middle class, often resulting in attacks on Jewish merchants and craftsmen. At the end of the 16th century, some Polish cities received the privilege de non tolerandis Judaeis, forbidding Jews to settle in the city.

The cultural and economic development of the Jewish community continued despite these problems until the middle of the 17th century, when Poland was ravaged by wars. About 20,000 Jews were killed during the Chmielnicki Uprising of 1648 (called by Jewish chroniclers The Calamity of 1648) and Jews were accused of collaborating with...
the Swedes during the so-called Swedish Deluge of 1655 and were persecuted.

In response to these changes, several new religious and mystical movements within Judaism developed in Poland. The most important of these was Hasidism, which was established in the 18th century by Israel ben Eliezer. Today, Hasidism remains an important movement within Judaism. Hasidism teaches that man can serve God through his everyday activities and through his constant desire to do good deeds. Additionally, an individual can commune with God through singing, dancing and personal prayer.

Poland was greatly weakened by the wars in the 17th century and the instability resulted in the three partitions of Poland, divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria. Poland disappeared from the map of Europe for 123 years. The majority of Polish Jews became subjects of Russia or Austria as a result of the partitions.

The Jewish enlightenment movement known as Haskalah reached the Polish lands in the 19th century. Haskalah promoted greater Jewish integration in society, improving secular Jewish education and the revival of the Hebrew language.

Poland regained its independence at the end of World War I, in 1918, after 123 years of partition. Out of its population of 35 million, Jews constituted nearly 10%. The major Jewish population centres were in big cities such as
Warsaw and Kraków. The majority, however, lived in shtetls – small towns and villages where they were a dominant minority or the majority of the population.

Polish Jews were an integral part of society in interwar Poland and were represented in almost all walks of life. There were Jewish industrialists, officials, doctors and members of the intelligentsia as well as shopkeepers, tradesmen and labourers. The great internal variation among the Jewish population was also reflected in the wide range of Jewish political parties and organizations that operated in Poland during the interwar years. Zionist parties played an especially important role. The Zionist movement, which was founded in the 19th century by Theodor Herzl, advocated the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Other major political parties included the Orthodox religious party and the left-wing Bund, a socialist party that also promoted Jewish life in Poland and Yiddish culture and was strongly anti-Zionist. There were also Jewish members of the illegal Polish Communist Party. Throughout Poland, Jews sat on city councils and were members of the Polish parliament.

Interwar Poland also saw the flourishing of Jewish cultural life. This scene was multilingual, with literature, Jewish theatre and films being produced in three languages – Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew. About 160 Jewish newspapers operated during this period in Poland.

The 1930s were marked by major economic crises throughout the world. Deteriorating living conditions led to an increase in antisemitism in Poland, as throughout Europe. Poland was rocked by a wave of attacks on Jews and the Polish government officially supported economic policies aimed at hurting Jewish businessmen, including a boycott of Jewish businesses and shops. Some schools and universities segregated Jewish students and placed admission quotas for Jewish students.

The situation worsened following the death of Marshal Józef Piłsudski in 1935. As the leader of Poland, Piłsudski had opposed the spread of antisemitic propaganda and was an advocate for Jewish equality. After Piłsudski’s death, the ideas of the antisemitic National Democratic Party became increasingly popular.
Despite these problems, however, 3.5 million Jews called Poland home in 1939. They constituted the largest Jewish community in Europe and the second largest in the world after the United States.

The outbreak of the Second World War and the Holocaust put an end to over a thousand years of Jewish presence in Poland. After occupying Poland in 1939, Nazi Germany implemented a programme of persecution of the Jews, which in 1942 became a full-scale genocide. The Germans murdered about 3.2 million Polish Jews in ghettos, concentration camps and death camps. Jews died of starvation, disease and overwork, and were murdered in mass executions and in gas chambers.

Less than 10% of Poland’s prewar Jewish community survived the war. Many fled or were deported to the Soviet Union, others survived on false papers or were hidden by Poles. Very few survived the camps.

It is estimated that just after the war, there were about 180,000-240,000 Jews in Poland. Holocaust survivors rarely returned to their former homes. Most chose to emigrate.

After the war, Poland fell under the Soviet sphere of influence. Many Jews left Poland to help build the newly created State of Israel. In 1968, Poland, together with other members of the Soviet Bloc, broke off diplomatic relations with Israel following Israel’s victory over the Soviet-backed Arab countries in the 1967 Six Day War. The Polish Communist government perpetrated an anti-Zionist campaign resulting in approximately 20,000 Jewish citizens being forced to leave the country.

The situation for the remaining Polish Jews changed greatly after the fall of Communism in 1989. The Jewish communities, which had been totally dissolved by the Communist authorities, reformed and regained their independence. Jewish culture and history also became a major topic of interest in Polish society after 1989. Today, there are many academic and cultural centres for Jewish studies operating in Poland and there are a number of festivals of Jewish culture that take place each year.
In 1939 there were 3.5 million Jews living in Poland. Less than 10% survived the war.

Unlike many Western European Jews, Polish Jews were typically not very assimilated into the general population. There were Progressive Jews who lived primarily in larger towns and cities, but the majority were traditional, Orthodox or Hasidic, and lived in rural areas and small towns.

Despite these varying degrees of assimilation or acculturation, Polish Jews joined in defending their country when Nazi Germany invaded in September 1939. About 1 million Polish citizens took part in what is now known as the September Campaign, including nearly 100,000 Jews (10%). The Polish forces suffered huge losses during the fighting and nearly 500,000 Polish soldiers, including 50,000 Jews, were taken prisoner and sent to German POW camps. Some Jewish soldiers were later released, but upon their return home they were sent with their families to the ghettos and later deported to the death camps.

The Germans began humiliating and persecuting Polish Jews almost immediately. Jews in the General Government area were excluded from political, social and economic life by a series of laws that left them almost totally
isolated. Jewish shops and businesses had to be marked with a Star of David; Jews were barred from entering public places such as parks or theatres and could only use designated parts of public transportation.

On 26 October, the General Government introduced compulsory labour decrees for Jews. Initially, people were forced to clear rubble or clean the streets but later were sent to work in factories and quarries. The labourers only received small portions of food as payment. Starting on 1 December 1939, Jews over 10 years of age residing in the General Government were forced to wear white armbands with a blue Star of David.

Along with isolation and forced labour, the Germans also began stripping Jews of their property and assets. Large Jewish-owned factories, warehouses and shops were confiscated almost immediately and later the smaller Jewish-owned workshops and businesses were taken. Jewish bank accounts were frozen. The Germans also issued a series of rulings demanding that Jews hand over their radios, fur coats, bicycles, jewellery and other valuables. Failure to comply was punishable by arrest or even death.

Jewish homes were also looted. This took place both during the first days of the occupation and on a larger scale when Jews were forced to resettle in the ghettos. When they moved to the ghetto, Jews had to leave most of their belongings behind. These were then taken by the Germans or by non-Jewish Poles whose houses also were taken by the Germans.

Some Jews were murdered in shootings and other actions in the first two years of the occupation, but the process of mass murder began in earnest in 1942. Initially, Polish Jews were told that they were being deported to labour camps in Ukraine. Often at their arrival at the so-called labour camp, they were forced to write postcards assuring their families of the good conditions at the camp before being killed – a process of deception used later to great effect when the Jews of Western Europe were deported to the death camps. All of this was to prevent resistance during the deportations. However, it was not possible for the Nazis to keep the death camps a secret from the Polish Jews for very long. By mid-1942, rumours of mass murder had reached the larger ghettos. Most people refused to believe the rumours and it was only after the mass deportations that the Polish Jews understood the terrible truth. By that point, however, the chance of rescue or escape was almost impossible.
Despite the dehumanizing conditions and overwhelming odds, Jews engaged in acts of active and passive resistance throughout the Second World War. In the popular consciousness, acts of resistance are limited to open ones – attacks on German soldiers, riots and uprisings – that were violent and aimed at trying to eliminate as many of the enemy as possible. Thus, it is easy to forget that there are types of passive resistance as well. Acts of passive resistance included deliberate defiance of German laws, smuggling food and medicines, and participating in clandestine educational or cultural groups. This silent battle was carried out by ordinary people of all ages and permeated Polish and Jewish society. The situation of the Jews was quite different than that of other Poles who, though subject to persecution and repression, did not become the targets of planned annihilation. Regardless of the type of resistance or the number of people involved, anyone caught openly defying the Germans would be punished severely, often by being shot on the spot.

Many acts of active resistance were carried out by members of the Jewish underground organizations. The largest of these groups was the Jewish Fighting Organization (known also by its Polish acronym, ŻOB). The members of these organizations were recruited mainly from pre-war Jewish youth groups, and thus the bulk of the Jewish fighters were high school or university-age students.

Initially, the Jewish underground focused on producing false documents, printing underground newspapers and collecting weapons. Until the end of 1941, their activities centred mainly on providing free food for the poor, organizing secret study groups, running underground libraries and other activities aiding those in need. The brutal actions and deportations of 1942 as well as the new information about the true nature of the camps made the Jewish Fighting Organization decide to launch military action. Previously, they had discouraged attacks on German soldiers for fear of retribution – for every German killed, tens or hundreds of Jews would be murdered as a reprisal. When it became clear that all Jews were destined for death, fear of German reprisal no longer mattered. A broad campaign of resistance began. The ŻOB organized attacks on German institutions and began using their funds to buy weapons and ammunition. The first large-scale fights, and the first major successes, occurred in Warsaw in January 1943 when the Germans entering the ghetto to carry out the deportations were met with strong resistance and were so shocked that they decided to stop the deportation earlier than planned.

The biggest battle between the Jews and the Germans was the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 1943. A few hundred poorly armed fighters from the ŻOB and the Jewish Military Union (Żydowski Związek Wojskowy, the underground organization for former Jewish soldiers of the Polish army) fought several thousand well-armed and experienced German soldiers. The fighting continued for over a month, and the Germans had to bring in heavy artillery and armoured equipment to crush the insurgents and liquidate the ghetto.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the first instance of Jews openly revolting against the Germans in occupied Europe. The ghetto was destroyed during the fighting and most of the fighters were killed. After the establishing of the State of Israel, the Uprising became an important part of the Israeli identity. Today it is the’s a most well known symbol of the Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.

Another form of resistance was trying to escape from the ghetto. This was not an easy decision because as long as people believed that the transports were being sent to labour camps rather than to the gas chambers in Belżec and Auschwitz very few were willing to risk escaping. Additionally, although the barbed wire fences surrounding most ghettos could be cut and certain guards could be bribed to look the other way, most Jews believed that they would be allowed to live so long as they obeyed the Germans. The choice between almost certain death if captured outside the ghetto and the German promise of being allowed to live in the ghetto kept many people from trying to escape. The situation changed in late 1942 because most Polish Jews were aware of the existence of the death camps and that the official stories about labour camps in the east were lies.
Often, escaping from the ghetto was not the most difficult part. The preparation for the escape was painful; family members had to decide whether or not to flee together, because groups would draw more attention and reduce the chance of success, or individually. Once out of the ghetto, they would have to find help to survive on the Aryan side, which was often easier for a single person to obtain. Thus, many Jewish parents often had their children smuggled to be hidden with Polish friends while they tried to survive in the ghetto. In most of these cases, the children never saw their parents again.

Jews who wanted to avoid capture outside the ghetto had to meet several conditions. First and foremost, they needed to look “Aryan” – having blonde hair and blue eyes would allow them to better blend in. People who had stereotypical Jewish features or curly black hair and dark eyes were usually recognized and exposed. The situation was even more complicated for Jewish boys because they were circumcised and thus it was easy for anyone to uncover their heritage. Additionally, it was extremely important to speak fluent Polish without an accent and have excellent knowledge of Polish culture, particularly Catholic traditions. However, even Polish Jews who could easily blend into the majority culture were often thwarted because of the large number of documents required by the Germans, including baptismal certificates and identity cards. False papers could be bought on the black market, but the prices were high and the quality varied. False documents were produced by both the Jewish and Polish underground, but it was difficult for most people to make contact with these organizations unless they already knew someone who was involved.

Those Jews who did not look Aryan, spoke Polish poorly or could not obtain the necessary documents were not able to move freely and so had to go into hiding. Many spent months or years hiding in tiny spaces, in closets or basements or underground bunkers specially designed to conceal them from the Germans. People hiding in these places rarely were able to get fresh air or even light. Hiding was only possible with the help of non-Jewish Poles who risked their lives and those of their families and neighbours to rescue Jewish friends, acquaintances or sometimes even complete strangers. After the war, many of these Poles were honoured by Yad Vashem with the Righteous Among the Nations medal. Yad Vashem was established in 1953 as the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority and is Israel’s official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. One of Yad Vashem’s main objectives is identifying and honouring the Righteous Among the Nations, non-Jews who risked their lives helping Jews during the Holocaust.

Another group of resistors were Jews hiding in the forests of eastern Poland in the so-called family camps. These usually consisted of groups of people who managed to escape from the ghettos who created small encampments in remote parts of the forest that were protected by Jewish partisans. The largest family camps were inhabited by hundreds of people and looked like small towns, with their own bakeries and weapons factories.
THE EXPERIENCE OF EUROPEAN JEWS DEPORTED TO OCCUPIED POLAND

The Wannsee Conference held on 20 January 1942 in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee between representatives of ministries and offices of the Third Reich and the SS, who outlined the Nazi plans to murder the 11 million Jews in Europe. These plans described the deportation of all European Jews to ghettos and death camps in the east, where they would mainly be murdered in camps equipped with gas chambers. This was to take place for the most part in Nazi-occupied Poland, for several reasons:

- Firstly, as home to Europe’s largest Jewish community from before the war, the largest number of Jews was still living in this area.
- Secondly, the central position of Poland on the European railway system meant that the cost of transporting Jews into Poland from elsewhere – such as France, Denmark, Hungary or Greece – would be lower than to elsewhere.
- Thirdly, the Germans were convinced that in Poland it would be easiest to hide their crimes: all Polish witnesses could be resettled or eliminated, and the operation could be undertaken secretively, away from public view and the rest of the world.

Although killings of Jews had been taking place since the start of the war, the mass deportation of the Jews of Europe to the occupied Polish territories began soon after the Wannsee Conference. The new arrivals from Western Europe to the ghettos were extremely different from the majority of Polish Jews. These Jews were mostly assimilated and had had no idea neither about conditions in occupied Poland nor the extent of German brutality. Most arrived with all their belongings, believing that they were going to work in a labour camp, on a farm or in a factory in the east. Arriving at the ghettos was a complete shock and it was very difficult for these Jews to adapt to their new situation.

Despite the fact that all Jews in the ghettos were in a similar situation, there was a great deal of distrust between Western European Jews and Polish Jews. Western European Jews often looked down on Polish Jews because they were poor and often very traditional. Even those who wished to make contact with one another were often thwarted because of the language barrier. All of this meant that most Western European Jews – even those who were deported first to ghettos – did not know that the deportations from the ghettos led to the death camps. Most Western European Jews, however, were sent directly from their countries to the death camps and had no idea of the fate intended for them until the very last moment. They were sent to the camps in luxurious passenger trains or on buses as ticketed passengers and came wearing their best clothing. When the trains arrived at the stations, they were told by the Germans that they would have some time to relax and have a shower before continuing east. After such a long time travelling by train, this was the best news they could have heard. They were asked to deposit their valuables and were given a receipt so that they could reclaim them after their shower. Luggage was tagged with people’s names and people were asked to tie their shoes together so they would not get lost. In the undressing rooms, people hung their clothing on numbered hooks and were told to remember
their number so that they could easily collect their things. All of this was accompanied by the polite orders of the German guards, who acted with exaggerated gentleness.

Both the stations and the gas chambers looked like pleasant, neat places. The stations were well-painted, had flowers in window boxes, nice signs and the roads were covered with gravel. The gas chambers were tiled and had fake showerheads so that they resembled a public bath.

This elaborate plan was intended to deceive the victims so that they would go into the gas chambers with little or no resistance and thus expedite the killing process and limit the possibility of panic. However, the deception did not always work, particularly for Eastern European Jews who were transported to the camps in cattle cars and subjected to a brutal selection process before being driven into the gas chambers.

European Jews were deported to the death camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Chełmno, Belżec, Sobibór, Treblinka and Majdanek. Each of these places was chosen for its proximity to railroads, its location on communication lines and its remote and isolated location that would serve as camouflage. The local Polish population was expelled from the areas around the camps and the Nazis put up signs saying that unauthorized persons found near the camps would be killed.

The majority of Western European Jews were sent to Auschwitz. The largest group of Jews deported from outside of Poland to Auschwitz was 430,000 Hungarian Jews from late April to August 1944. Also deported to Auschwitz were 73,000 Jews from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia; 69,000 from Slovakia; 60,000 from France; 55,000 from the Netherlands; 25,000 from Greece; and 23,000 from Belgium. About 10,000 Jews from Germany and Austria were also sent directly to Auschwitz and several thousand more were sent there via the Theresienstadt ghetto-camp in Czechoslovakia. 10,000 Yugoslav Jews were also sent to Auschwitz along with 7,500 Jews from Italy and 690 from Norway. About 300,000 Polish Jews were murdered in Auschwitz.

Approximately 72,500 Jews from Germany and Austria were murdered in Belżec. Another 7,500 Slovak Jews and 7,000 Jews from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were also murdered there.

The victims of Sobibór included about 10,000 Jews from Germany and Austria; 6,000 from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia; 24,500 from Slovakia; 34,000 from the Netherlands; 5,000 from France; and 13,700 from Belarus and the Baltic States.

About 8,000 German, Austrian and Czech Jews were murdered in Treblinka along with 7,000 from Slovakia, 11,000 from Bulgaria and 2,800 from Greece.

The total number of Jews from western, northern and southern Europe who were murdered in the Belżec, Sobibór and Treblinka death camps is estimated to be at least 135,000 people. In total, approximately six million Jews from across Europe were murdered by the Nazis.
To achieve the total isolation and, later, the total destruction of the Jews, the German authorities issued a number of rulings aimed at excluding Jews from participating in political, social and economic life. In Central and Eastern Europe the primary method of separating Jews from the rest of society was relocating them to separate, enclosed areas called Jewish residential areas or ghettos.

The first ghetto in occupied Poland was created by the Germans in October 1939 in the city of Piotrków Trybunalski in central Poland. To justify the need for isolation, German propaganda falsely claimed that the Jews were the source of infectious diseases such as typhus. In fact, it was to obtain complete control over them, use them as free labor and confiscate their property. The Germans established about 400 ghettos in occupied Poland. They ranged from small ghettos, intended for hundreds, to enormous ones like the Warsaw ghetto, which held about 450,000 Jews at its peak. Some ghettos existed for only a few months while others lasted for years before being liquidated.

A major distinction between ghettos in occupied Poland was if they were open or closed. Open ghettos were certain streets where Jews were forced to resettle. Although Jews could not leave those streets, the area was not physically enclosed. Open ghettos generally were located in smaller towns. By contrast, closed ghettos were physically sealed off from the outside world. Sometimes the area would be surrounded by a wall, as was the case for the ghettos in Warsaw and Kraków. In other cases, the Germans used wooden or barbed wire fences. Buildings on the borders of the ghettos had their windows and doors blocked. All of these measures were to ensure the total isolation of Jews from the non-Jewish population. Non-Jews who maintained contact with Jews ran the risk of being arrested and sent to prison or a concentration camp. Those who helped Jews in any way were subject to the death penalty along with their entire family.

The horrifying conditions in the ghettos made them into places of death. Many Polish Jews died in the ghettos as a result of mass executions, starvation (their official daily food ration contained only 300 calories), disease and the terrible sanitary conditions resulting from overcrowding. The Germans also deported Jews from other European countries such as Czechoslovakia, Austria and the Netherlands to ghettos in occupied Poland. Even before the ghettos were established, Jews were forced to wear badges identifying them as Jewish – in Western Europe Jews mostly wore a yellow Star of David sewn onto their clothes while Jews in the General Government wore white armbands with a blue Star of David. Many young, healthy Jews from the ghettos were used by the Nazis as slave labour and were forced to work in factories and to aid the German war effort. Employment allowed these people to secure documents sparing them from deportation, giving them a better chance of survival. Those without work documents – including the elderly, the children and the sick – were among the first to be deported to the death camps.

German orders were communicated to the inhabitants of the ghettos by the Judenrat, a Jewish council established by the Germans. Members of the Judenrat were responsible for providing for the basic needs of the people living in the ghettos, but they were above all meant to carry out all German orders. The most important of these
was keeping an up-to-date census of ghetto inhabitants and then help organize the deportations to the death camps. The Germans also organized the Jewish Order Police (known as the OD from their name in German, Judischer Ordnungsdienst). Members of the OD were to maintain order in the ghetto and also had to take part in the German actions there. Despite their cooperation with the Germans, both members of the Judenrat and members of the OD were eventually murdered by the Germans.

The process of ghettoization occurred gradually. Initially, ghettos were created in large cities and small towns. Over time, the smaller ghettos were liquidated and the Jews were resettled in ghettos located in larger cities. The situation changed following the Wansee Conference in January 1942, during which the Nazi leadership decided on the process of annihilating Europe's Jews. Part of implementing the so-called Final Solution – the plan to murder European Jewry – was the systematic liquidation of the ghettos and their inhabitants.

Most Jews from the ghettos were either shot in pre-selected sites outside of their towns or deported, mainly in cattle cars, to the death camps. Sometimes, a small group of young people would be sent to concentration camps for forced labour. The chance of survival in the concentration camps, however, was extremely small.

Despite the terrible conditions of life in the ghettos – starvation, disease and violence from the Germans – the Jews attempted to resist. This included both passive and armed resistance. Passive resistance included smuggling food, medicines, weapons or information into the ghettos. Despite the danger and German decrees forbidding it, Jews organized orphanages, secret schools and synagogues. Armed resistance meant launching a mostly symbolic attack against overwhelming odds, pitting Jewish fighters with few or no weapons and little training against well-equipped and trained German soldiers. The most famous example of armed Jewish resistance is the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising which broke out in April 1943 and lasted almost a month.

The ghettos were the focal point of the process of isolation, dehumanization and, finally, the mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust. Almost all of the ghettos were established by the Germans in Eastern Europe.
CONCENTRATION AND DEATH CAMPS

THE CAMP SYSTEM
Between 1933 and 1945, Nazi Germany created an extensive system of camps in which to imprison millions of people from Germany and the occupied territories. These camps were typically located in isolated places and served a wide range of functions:
– concentration camps primarily functioned for any person Nazi Germany deemed a threat;
– forced labour camps were centred around factories and industries; and
– death camps were primarily built for the mass murder of Jews.
It is estimated that about 10-12,000 camps existed across occupied Europe.
The first Nazi camps were established in Germany almost immediately after Hitler came to power in 1933. The legal basis for their creation was the Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of the Nation and State of 28 February 1933, which suspended civil rights guaranteeing personal freedoms and allowed for the arrest and indefinite detention of any suspected opponent of the regime as enemies of the state and the German people. Less than a month later, on 22 March the first concentration camp was established outside the German town of Dachau.
The earliest concentration camps such as Dachau, Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald, were created to imprison political opponents such as German socialists and communists, as well as Roma (Gypsies), Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals and people accused of ‘asocial’ behaviour.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS IN THE OCCUPIED COUNTRIES
Following the outbreak of the Second World War and the occupation of Poland, the camp system was expanded and thousands of new camps were built on Nazi Germany’s newly-conquered eastern territories. As these territories expanded eastwards, the nature of the camp system changed greatly: instead of serving as a place of detention for political opponents and a source of forced labour, the camps now served as places where biological destruction was to be carried out. In occupied Poland, concentration camps became places for the murder of the country’s elite and for the mass murder of the Jewish population, a policy later expanded to include all of European Jewry under Nazi rule.

CONDITIONS IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS
The structure of the camps and living conditions of prisoners were similar in most Nazi concentration camps.
After arriving at the camp, the prisoners were forced to leave all their clothes and personal belongings. Their heads were shaved and they were given striped prison uniforms. They were categorized through a system of badges sewn onto their clothes:
– a red triangle denoted a political prisoner;
– common criminals received green triangles;
– so-called ‘asocials’ (e.g. prostitutes, beggars, alcoholics, the mentally ill) were given black triangles;
– male homosexuals received pink triangles and lesbians – categorized as ‘asocials’ – black triangles;
– Roma were initially assigned black triangles as ‘asocials’, later they were given brown triangles;
– Jews either received a yellow triangle or a Star of David.

In addition, a letter specifying the prisoner’s nationality in German was placed inside the triangle. The prisoners were also given numbers, which were sewn onto their uniforms. Only prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau had their number tattooed on their skin.

Prisoners were then sent to designated barracks and assigned to various work brigades (kommando) – groups of several dozen prisoners who were led by a kapo, a prisoner chosen to oversee the work details. These groups performed various duties in and around the camp. Many work details involved hard physical labour, and prisoners assigned to these groups often did not survive for more than 3 or 4 weeks.

Rations in the camps were minimal and of terrible quality, often contributing to disease and illness. The combination of starvation and hard physical labour killed many prisoners.

Prisoners also died from beatings and torture, or were executed. Disease was widespread and many thousands of people died of typhus, cholera or dysentery. The corpses of the dead prisoners were buried in pits lined with lime or burnt in large open-air fire pits or in crematoria.

German concentration camps were also the sites of large-scale pseudo-medical experiments that were conducted on prisoners. Nazi doctors studied such things as the resistance of the human body to rapid temperature change and also tested new medicines on prisoners who had been infected with malaria, typhus, tuberculosis or were suffering from hypothermia. Other experiments included muscle and bone transplants and sterilisation. Many of these experiments were performed for German chemical and pharmaceutical companies, while others were conducted to benefit the German state. They resulted in the death, disabling or infection of thousands of prisoners.
THE ESTABLISHMENT AND LOCATION OF THE DEATH CAMPS

The Nazis began building gas chambers for mass killings in 1941. At this point, concentration camps became sites of deliberate, mechanized mass murder as well as the source of slave labour to benefit the German economy and war effort. The location of the camps in the east was determined by a variety of factors. To reduce the chance of escape, the camps needed to be located in remote, isolated areas. At the same time, they needed to be close to lines of communication, such as roads or railways, to facilitate the transport of prisoners. Additionally, forced labour camps were often located near factories, mines or quarries.

In January 1942 at the Wannsee Conference, the Nazis decided to implement what they called ‘the Final Solution of the Jewish question in Europe’, which aimed to physically annihilate European Jewry. To do this, death camps were built, in addition to those concentration camps which already had gas chambers by this time.

The Nazis created four designated death camps: Chełmno, Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. Majdanek and Auschwitz II-Birkenau were considered "mixed" camps because they functioned as both concentration and death camps. Auschwitz II-Birkenau was the largest of all concentration camps, and held over 100,000 prisoners at its peak. It was also the site of four gas chambers and crematoria intended for mass murder.

Death camps were mostly located in forests near sparsely populated areas that were accessible by specially-built railroad tracks. The decision to locate the death camps in occupied Poland was made for several reasons:

– Firstly, Poland was home to Europe’s largest Jewish community and the largest numbers of Jews were still living in this area.

– Secondly, the central location of Poland within Europe meant that the cost of transporting Jews into Poland from other countries – such as France, Denmark, Hungary or Greece – would be lower than elsewhere.

– Thirdly, the Germans were convinced that in Poland it would be easier to hide their crimes: all Polish witnesses could be resettled or eliminated, and the operation would be undertaken away from public view.

These camps were designed as killing centres that would murder Jews in gas chambers. The prisoners who arrived at these places were killed upon arrival – no records of names were kept because of the vast number of victims and the fast rate at which they were murdered.

The only prisoners who worked in the death camps were members of the Sonderkommando. Their task was to manage the process of destruction – to pull the bodies out of the gas chambers, to cut the victims’ hair so it could be used by the German military industry, to pull out gold teeth which were then melted down into bars and to sort through the victims’ belongings before they were sent to Germany. The number of prisoners in the Sonderkommando varied in different camps, but never exceeded more than a thousand people in total. Members of the Sonderkommando were systematically killed by the Germans to eliminate witnesses and reduce the chance of a revolt. They were then replaced by new arrivals. There were very few Sonderkommando survivors.

Despite the Germans’ attempts to hide the activities of the death camps, Polish underground organizations managed to gain information about what was happening to the Jews. In late 1942 the Polish underground prepared a report. Jan Karski, as an emissary, was to carry the report and meet with the most important British politicians, US President Franklin Roosevelt and members of international Jewish organizations. Most of those who heard Karski’s report did not want to believe it. Although he presented his findings to top members of the British and American governments, his appeals did not change the Allied war strategy to include aid to the Jews.

It is estimated that the Nazis murdered between 1.5 million and 1.7 million people in the five death camps, the overwhelming majority of whom were Jewish. The number of people murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau is estimated as 1.1 million people, of which at least 90% were Jews.
RESISTANCE IN THE CONCENTRATION AND DEATH CAMPS
Despite overwhelming odds, acts of resistance were carried out by prisoners in concentration camps and death camps. There were many escape attempts, but also example of passive resistance, such as religious Jews trying to observe the most important Jewish holidays even though they knew they would be killed if caught.
Several armed rebellions also took place in the camps. A revolt broke out in the Treblinka death camp on 2 August 1943 where several hundred prisoners set fire to some buildings, stormed the fence and escaped. Less than 60 of these prisoners survived the war. The prisoners of the Sobibór death camp revolted on 14 October 1943 and 400 prisoners managed to escape, making it the largest mass escape of the Second World War. About 60 of these people survived the war. In the cases of both Treblinka and Sobibór most of the escapees were caught and killed in the immediate aftermath.
The last major revolt took place at Auschwitz-Birkenau in October 1944 and was organized by Jewish prisoners who were members of the Sonderkommando and some Soviet POWs. They planned to blow up the crematoria, set fire to the surrounding buildings and escape in the ensuing confusion. The revolt took place on 7 October when the Germans issued an order to kill part of the Sonderkommando. During the revolt the group managed to blow up one of the crematoria. 451 prisoners and 3 SS men were killed.

At the end of the war, when it was apparent for the Germans that they would lose the war, they began to attempt to remove evidence of their criminal activities. By late 1944, the death camps at Chelmno, Belżec, Sobibór and Treblinka had all ceased operation and had been demolished by the Germans. Other camps that were still in operation were liquidated and their equipment was destroyed or dismantled. From January 1945, tens of thousands of prisoners were forced on Death Marches, walking hundreds of kilometres from occupied Poland to Germany, where the Nazis wanted to finish the process of mass murder. Many prisoners were shot or died from cold or starvation during the Death Marches.
In the last phase of the Second World War as they invaded territories occupied by Nazi Germany, the Allied armies liberated the camps located there, revealing the enormity of Nazi crimes. Despite the immediate assistance the Allies offered, many prisoners died shortly after liberation because of diseases and exhaustion.

THE NUMBER OF PRISONERS AND VICTIMS
Overall, between 1933 and 1945, the Nazis established 10-12,000 different types of camps and sub-camps in the Third Reich and the 17 occupied countries. More than 18 million people passed through these camps and more than 11 million of them were killed. Approximately 9 million of them were specifically sent to concentration camps and death camps and at least 7.2 million (8%) died. In the death camps alone, the Nazis murdered over 3 million Jews.
The scale of terror and mass murder carried out in the occupied Polish territories can be illustrated by the fact that the Nazis established nearly 6,000 camps that imprisoned 7.5 million people in this area. Approximately 6.7 million, mostly Jews and Poles, were murdered. Over 3 million of these victims were Polish Jews, about 90% of the pre-war Jewish population of Poland. It is impossible to determine the exact numbers of prisoners and victims of Nazi camps because the Germans managed to erase much of the evidence of their crimes.
In occupied Poland during the Second World War, the penalty for any form of individual assistance to Jews was death. Often, the individual’s entire family would also be executed. This decree meant most of Polish society did not extend aid to Jews. Nazi promises of monetary or other rewards for turning in Jews also led to collaboration, including the blackmailing or denouncing of Jews and their helpers.

But despite the risk, there were many Poles who decided to help Jews.

In September 1942, when the murder of Jews reached its height, a special group within the Polish resistance called the Provisional Committee for Aid to the Jews was formed. In December of that year, it was renamed the Żegota – the Council for Aid to the Jews. The Council was a branch of the Polish Underground State in occupied Poland. The organization was mostly financed by the Polish Government-in-Exile, but about 10% of Żegota’s funding came from Jewish organizations abroad.

Żegota mainly operated in Warsaw, Kraków and Lwów and provided financial assistance to Jews in hiding. In 1944, about 4,000 people were receiving aid from Żegota. Żegota was also involved in producing counterfeit ‘Aryan’ papers and between 1943 and 1944 provided about 50,000 of these to Jews.

Members of Żegota also tried to find housing for Jews and built hiding places in existing properties. The group also helped place Jewish children with Polish families or in orphanages and monasteries. They also established contacts in some of the labour camps and delivered mail and money to the prisoners. They even helped organize the escape of some prisoners and helped smuggle people out of Poland.

Żegota also tried to influence the attitude of society toward Jews by printing articles in the underground press. They also sought to eliminate blackmailers and informers, upon whom the Polish resistance placed the death penalty.

Jan Karski worked for the Polish Underground as a courier, carrying documents and information to the Polish Government-in-Exile in London. He snuck into the Warsaw ghetto twice in order to gather evidence of German
crimes and later risked his life by sneaking into the transit camp in Izbica disguised as a guard. He then went to England and the USA, where he presented his findings about the mass murder of the Jews of Poland. He met with President Roosevelt in July 1943 and told him about what he had seen in Poland. Although Karski presented his report not only to American but also British government he couldn’t change Allies war strategy. Karski worked tirelessly to publicize what he had seen to spur people to action, but most people were either unwilling to believe his report or were simply not interested in the tragedy of the Jewish people.

Some Poles who saved Jews are well-known today, such as the Polish diplomat working in Hungary, Henryk Sławik, and Irena Sendlerowa. However, there are many hundreds whose names will never be known. Some died while saving Jews; others never chose to reveal their actions after the war. We know of at least 800 Poles murdered by the Nazis for helping Jews. Among them was Apolonia Machczyńska-Świątek, who hid 25 Jews, and the 13-member Kowalski family, who were burned alive by the Germans in the village of Ciepielów.

Non-Jews who saved Jews during the war are honoured with the title Righteous Among the Nations. The award was established in 1963 by Yad Vashem in Israel. Since then, over 22,765 people from 42 countries, including 6,135 Poles (the largest group), have received this award. The recipient of the award (or, if it is awarded posthumously, an immediate family member) receives a commemorative medal and diploma and has his or her name inscribed on the Wall of Remembrance in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem. The honouree also becomes an honorary citizen of the State of Israel.
Like most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after the Second World War, the Polish state was under Soviet influence. Its borders, under the provisions of international agreements, were moved and Poland lost considerable territory to the east while regaining large areas in the west and north.

The first postwar years were associated therefore with migration. Poles from the territories incorporated into the Soviet Union came back to their home country, whilst Germans in the reclaimed western and northern parts of Poland were forced out. Migration also affected the Polish Jews: some Holocaust survivors returned to Poland, but often only for a year or two, then many emigrated to Western Europe, the United States or to Palestine.

During the war, Poland had lost a large part of its intellectual elite and public morale was low. In the immediate aftermath of the war, violence and crime rates rose to alarming levels. Although most of Poland’s Jews were murdered by the Nazis, antisemitism remained strong due to the influence of Nazi propaganda as well as residual pre-war and wartime attitudes. There were also major problems surrounding property rights – when Jewish families were resettled in ghettos, their homes and businesses were given to non-Jewish Poles. When survivors returned to reclaim their property they were often met with violence and some were killed. In 1945-1946 there were several major pogroms, including in Kraków and Kielce.

The 1940s were characterized by a struggle for power. The Communists, with support from the Soviet authorities, sought various ways to gain full control of Poland. Thus, in 1946, they rigged the referendum and during the elections of 1947, they achieved their goal – legal opposition ceased to exist.

In 1952, the Parliament adopted the Constitution of the Polish People's Republic, as Poland was now called. According to this Constitution, the highest organ of state power was the Parliament, called the Sejm. Another authority supplementing the activities of the Sejm was the State Council, which included the head of state – the president. The Prime Minister and government were elected by the Sejm.

The Polish government in the postwar years was a Stalinist, totalitarian system. The authorities sought to eliminate any kind of independence in economic, social and cultural life. The Stalinist period ended in 1956, during the so-called Thaw that occurred after Stalin’s death in 1953.

In the years 1964-1968, a nationalist faction of the Communist party that used antisemitic slogans gained a relatively strong position in Poland. At the same time, the Soviet Union had been giving increasing support to the Arab nations since the mid-1950s as Israel became a major Western ally. The anti-Israel attitudes and policies of the USSR became especially clear after the Six-Day War, when Israel defeated the Soviet-backed Arab nations. As a result, all countries of the Soviet bloc except Romania broke diplomatic relations with Israel. The government of Poland ordered a campaign of anti-Israel and anti-Zionist propaganda. In March 1968 student protests broke out against the communist government in Warsaw and later in other cities.

Bands of Communist party ‘worker-squads’ attacked the students, and the party blamed the student protests on ‘Zionists’. They then used this as a pretext to launch a larger antisemitic campaign. The antisemitic campaign of 1968 led to mass emigration of Polish politicians and intellectuals with Jewish roots.
The 1970s saw many changes:

- Primarily due to an increase in the price of food, unionist protests broke out, mainly in the coastal areas. In many coastal cities there were clashes between the police and protesters.

- Edward Gierek became the head of the Communist Party, promising economic reform and instituting a program to modernize industry and increase the availability of consumer goods.

- The standard of living temporarily increased in the 1970s. But by 1976 price increases became necessary and new riots broke out, and although they were forcibly suppressed, the planned price increases were cancelled.

- Foreign debts, food shortages, and an outdated industrial base compelled a new round of economic reforms in 1980. Once again, price increases set off protests across the country, especially in the Gdańsk and Szczecin shipyards. The leadership of the Communist Party faced a choice between repression on a massive scale and an agreement with the workers.

Finally, in August 1980, the Gdańsk Agreement was signed. The Agreement acknowledged the right of Poles to be members of free trade unions, and it eliminated censorship, increased the minimum wage and abolished weekend work. The Gdańsk Agreement also led to the formation of Solidarność (Solidarity) – an independent trade union, originally led by Lech Wałęsa. However, corruption, housing shortages and food rationing were among the factors contributing to the growing social unrest.

Thus on 13 December 1981, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, who had become Prime Minister and the Party’s First Secretary, declared martial law, introducing military rule on society in order to crush the anti-communist opposition. At the same time, Poland entered a decade of deep economic crisis; investment projects stopped and due to food shortages, ration cards were introduced for basic consumer goods.

Martial law was lifted in July 1983. The government slowly started to accept the idea that some compromises were necessary. During this period, Solidarity functioned as an underground organization, but enjoyed increasing support from Polish society.

From November 1988 to April 1989, the Round Table Talks were held, and as a result Solidarity was again legalized and allowed to participate in semi-free elections. Two-thirds of seats in the Sejm went to the Communist Party and its coalition partners, and the remaining third of seats were left to independent candidates. The victory of Solidarity after its candidates won all seats available to them in the Sejm and 99 of 100 seats in the Senate led to a political earthquake. The Communist Party had lost its legitimacy.

It was clear that a Solidarity member would become Prime Minister. Tadeusz Mazowiecki formed the first non-communist government, which immediately started radical economic reforms.

In 1990, Lech Wałęsa won the presidential elections, and in 1991 the first entirely free parliamentary elections took place.

In 1997, the parliament passed the Constitution of the Third Republic of Poland, which still exists today.
THE CONTEMPORARY POLISH-JEWISH COMMUNITY

Following the fall of Communism in 1989, Jewish life underwent a gradual rebirth in Poland. This revival has centred mainly in large cities: Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań, Wrocław, Łódź, Gdańsk, Legnica, Szczecin, Katowice and Bielsko-Biała, where today there are legally recognised Jewish communities. The Jewish community has many social, cultural and religious organizations, but in many cities the community is relatively elderly. The umbrella organization of Jewish communities in Poland is the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland. The Hasidic Chabad-Lubavitch movement is also present in Poland and there are two Progressive Jewish organizations, Beit Warszawa in Warsaw and Beit Kraków in Kraków. In 2008, a Jewish Community Centre was opened in Kraków, where the Jewish community now meets to celebrate Shabbat and other Jewish holidays as well as to participate in educational programmes and social projects.

There are also organizations focusing on secular Jewish life. These include the Socio-Cultural Association of Jews, the Jewish Youth Organization and the Association of the Second Generation. There are several Jewish publications, including Dos Yidishe Wort (The Jewish Word) and Midrasz. Poland is also home to the Esther Rachel Kaminska Theatre, which is one of only two Yiddish theaters in Europe.
The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation has played a major role in Jewish revival in Poland. It runs Jewish day schools and provides financial support for Jewish communities and associations. There are many other organizations devoted to the preservation of Jewish heritage in Poland, including the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland which helps to restore many Jewish cemeteries and synagogues. The Foundation also monitors antisemitism in Poland.

There are also many academic programmes that focus on Jewish history and culture. There are Jewish Studies departments at five Polish universities, including the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and the University of Warsaw, which are considered to be Poland’s top two institutions of higher education. The Emmanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw is a major research centre for scholars and genealogists. Additionally, there are many museums and memorials that work to introduce Poles and foreign tourists to the history and culture of Polish Jews. The Polish government is currently co-funding the construction of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

Every year there are ceremonies throughout Poland in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. The largest of these is the March of the Living, which takes place every year in April. Participants, mainly Jewish teenagers from around the world but also many young Poles, walk from Auschwitz I to Auschwitz II–Birkenau. In addition, celebrations of Jewish culture are held in towns and cities throughout the country. The two largest and most famous of these are the Jewish Cultural Festival in Kraków and the Singer Festival in Warsaw.

Today, Poland also welcomes Jews from around the world in search of their roots, making pilgrimages to the graves of famous rabbis and tzaddik, as well as visiting sites connected with the Holocaust.

According to the national census in 2002, 1,055 people in Poland declared themselves as Jewish. It is estimated, however, that the actual number of Jews in Poland is much greater.
KEY SITE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU CAMP

Opened in April 1940, Auschwitz-Birkenau was the largest Nazi concentration and death camp. The main camp, called Auschwitz I, was initially intended for Polish political prisoners and the first transport arrived there on 14 June 1940.

The death camp of Auschwitz II-Birkenau was established three kilometers from Auschwitz I in 1942. It was equipped with four large gas chambers connected to crematoria and became a destination for transports of Jews from all over occupied Europe. Approximately 70-75% people from each transport were selected for immediate death in the gas chambers and were never registered as prisoners of the camp. Those who survived the initial selection were used as slave labour. Many prisoners died as a result of exhaustion from the backbreaking work. Most of the prisoners were marked with numbers, usually tattooed on the arm. The camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau was the only Nazi camp that used this method.

The last mass execution in Auschwitz-Birkenau took place on 17 January 1945, 4 days before the Nazi soldiers left and 10 days before the camp was liberated by the Soviet army. During the entire operation of the Auschwitz camps, the Nazis killed 1.1 to 1.5 million European Jews, 70,000-75,000 Poles, 20,000 Roma, 10,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and thousands of prisoners of other nationalities.

A museum was opened on the site in 1947, and today over 1 million people visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum each year.
**BELZEC DEATH CAMP**

Belżec operated initially as a forced labour camp for Jews and Roma, starting in 1940. In 1942, it was transformed into a camp of immediate mass murder, using six gas chambers. The first transports of Jews arrived at the camp in March 1942 and two or three transports arrived every day starting in June 1942. The killing centre existed there for 9 months, during which the Nazis murdered about 600,000 people – including about 550,000 Jews from Poland, the Soviet Union, Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Holland, Germany, Norway and Hungary. Non-Jewish Poles from nearby villages and from Lvów also died there.

In an attempt to destroy the evidence of their crimes, the Nazis closed down the camp between January and July 1943. The corpses of the murdered were excavated from mass graves and burned. All the camp equipment was removed.

In 2004, a large monument and a museum were opened on the area of the former Belżec death camp.

![The museum and memorial site at Belżec](image)

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**CHEŁMNO DEATH CAMP**

The camp at Chelmno was the first Nazi death camp set up on the conquered Polish territories. It was established in December 1941 in the village of Chelmno. From the beginning it was to serve as a place of mass murder of the Jews from areas annexed to the Reich, especially from the Łódź ghetto. The first mass execution took place there on 8 December 1941. Before being murdered, the Jews transported to the camp were forced to undress and then were led to specially designed trucks – precursors to the gas chambers – where they were suffocated by car exhaust fumes. Death occurred after about 10-15 minutes. The camp at Chelmno served only as a death camp: there were no factories, quarries or other places of forced labor on its premises. There were only a few barracks designed for soldiers and for the storage of the property looted from the murdered Jews.
The camp operated until March 1943, but reopened in April 1944 with the liquidation of the Łódź ghetto and functioned until September 1944. As the Red Army approached, the Nazis liquidated the camp and completely destroyed it. The last German troops left the Chełmno camp on January 17, 1945. About 320,000 Jews were murdered in Chełmno and there are only two known survivors.

**TREBLINKA DEATH CAMP**
Established in 1942, the Treblinka death camp was the site of the murder of most of the Jews from Warsaw and its surrounding areas. Additionally, tens of thousands of Jews from other occupied countries were also murdered there. By November 1943, approximately 750,000-800,000 Jews had been murdered in Treblinka. The camp was hidden in the woods and located near a railway line.
Treblinka was divided into a number of separate zones – one contained barracks for the 700-800 Jewish prisoners who worked in the camp sorting through the possessions of those who were murdered while another contained the approximately 300 Jews forced to remove the bodies from the gas chambers and burn them. All transports entered the south western part of the camp and groups of new arrivals were led out into a large square. There, women and children were separated from the men. Each group was led into separate barracks, where they were stripped of their clothes and valuables. The brick building containing the gas chambers was located nearby. Initially, there were three gas chambers, but an additional ten were built in the autumn of 1942. The corpses were burned in big open-air bonfires.
The first transport of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto arrived at Treblinka on 23 July 1942. This death camp was the final destination not only for Jews from Poland, but also from Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece and other European countries. In August 1943, a prisoner revolt took place in Treblinka. Approximately 600 prisoners escaped, but only 20 survived the war. The camp was liquidated in November 1943.
Today on the site of the former camp there is a Museum of Fighting and Martyrdom.

**SOBIBÓR DEATH CAMP**
The Sobibór death camp was established in March 1942. It was located in a swampy area in a forest near the village of Sobibór. The camp was connected with the main railway line with one set of tracks that ran into the forest, making the transports of Jews seemingly disappear into the woods. The camp staff consisted of 30 SS men and 150 Ukrainian guards. The preliminary selection of Jews took place on the ramp, where some Jews were separated to work in forced labour camps. The rest then entered the Sobibór camp. The new arrivals were directed to Camp II, where they handed over their clothes, luggage, money and valuables. Men were then separated from women and children. From there, the victims were sent to the gas chambers in Camp III. Each gas chamber could hold up to 1,200 people at a time. Approximately 200-300 Jewish prisoners were forced to work around the gas chambers and bury the corpses of the murdered people.
From October 1942 to June 1943, Sobibór was the destination for the transports of Jews from the General Government, Slovakia, France and the Netherlands. On 14 October 1943, Sobibór was the site of the largest prisoner revolt of the Second World War. The prisoners murdered several German SS guards and their Ukrainian helpers and about 300 escaped. However, most were caught and killed almost immediately afterwards. About 65 prisoners were still alive by the end of the war. Following the revolt, the camp was closed down. All signs of the crimes committed there were erased and the site was turned into a farm. Today, there is a memorial and small museum on the site.
MAJDANEK DEATH CAMP
The camp at Majdanek, today on the outskirts of Lublin, was established in October 1941. It was initially used as a concentration camp for prisoners of many nationalities including Poles, Soviet prisoners of war and Jews. It was only in 1943 that seven gas chambers were built there and Majdanek became part of the annihilation of European Jewry. In addition to killing by gas, mass executions by firing squad also took place in Majdanek. Out of the 500,000 prisoners who passed through the camp, at least 360,000 were killed (about 60% due to terrible conditions in the camp, 40% were murdered in gas chambers or shot). Approximately 50,000 of the victims were Jews. The so-called Operation Harvest Festival (Ernfest) took place at Majdanek on 3 November 1943. During this, 17,000 Jews were shot in one day in one of the largest mass shooting of the Holocaust. Today the Majdanek State Museum operates on the site of the former camp.

PŁASZÓW CONCENTRATION CAMP
The labour camp in Płaszów was established by the Germans at the end of 1942 on the site of two Jewish cemeteries on the outskirts of Kraków. It officially became a concentration camp in 1944 and acted as such until liberation in January 1945. Despite the fact that it was built for approximately 6-8,000 prisoners, 25,000 people were often held there at a time. The camp was dismantled and the last prisoners were forced to leave Płaszów on a so-called Death March in January 1945. During the Death March, the prisoners were evacuated on foot to concentration camps further west. Many prisoners died or were killed during this march. Those who survived Płaszów recall the terrible living conditions, hunger, disease and exhausting work that killed thousands of people. Prisoners were constantly subjected to beatings and humiliation by the German and Ukrainian guards. The sadistic camp commandant Amon Goeth became a symbol of evil and cruelty. After the war, he was found guilty of personal involvement in the murder of at least 500 people. Hundreds of others were murdered at his command by the guards. The camp was also used as a place of execution of people detained in the city’s jails. The total number of Płaszów victims remains unknown.
Even in such difficult conditions, there were acts of passive and active resistance by the Jewish prisoners. Despite the danger, prisoners tried to help the most vulnerable by directing them to easier work. There were escape attempts, but unfortunately most of them ended in failure. To discourage the prisoners from escaping, the Germans used the principle of collective responsibility. In September 1943, as punishment for the escape of one prisoner, 60 others were shot. Jews were sent to Plaszów from the liquidated ghettos in towns across the General Government as well as from countries such as Hungary. The Nazis intended to build the gas chambers and crematoria at the camp, but this plan was not realized. The liquidation of Plaszów began in the autumn of 1944 and ended in January 1945.

Today the majority of the former camp area is overgrown and neglected, although three monuments have been placed there in memory of the prisoners killed in the camp.

**WARSAW GHETTO**

The Warsaw ghetto was established in October 1940. It was surrounded by a three-meter high wall topped with barbed wire.

The Warsaw ghetto was the largest ghetto in occupied Europe. At its peak, the population reached about 450,000 people concentrated in an area of about four square kilometres.

The population was decimated by hunger and outbreaks of typhus almost from the start. It was common to see corpses or people dying in the streets of the ghetto.

Because of the lack of food, the Warsaw ghetto was the scene of a large black market. Organized groups of smugglers, many of whom were young children, snuck the most needed food supplies into the ghetto. In exchange for food, the smugglers took valuables out of the ghetto - jewellery, clothing and even furniture. According to the writings of Adam Czerniaków, the president of the *Judenrat*, approximately 80% of food supplied to the ghetto came from smuggling.

The liquidation of the ghetto began on 22 July 1942. Adam Czerniaków was commanded to deliver a certain number of Jews to the *Umschlagplatz* for deportation every day. Failure to comply would result in the execution of a group of hostages, including Czerniaków’s wife. Faced with a choice he could not make, he committed suicide as a last desperate gesture of resistance but his death did not slow the German actions in any way.

From 21 September 1942 about 280,000 people were taken from the *Umschlagplatz* to the Treblinka death camp in what was known as the Large Action. Thousands of people were killed in the streets of the ghetto. After this, only about 60,000 people were left in the ghetto.

The Jewish Fighting Organization (known by its Polish acronym, ŻOB) was formed on 28 July 1942. Headed by Mordechai Anielewicz, the group consisted of members of a wide range of pre-war Jewish youth organizations. On 16 February 1943, Heinrich Himmler ordered the complete liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, and the Nazis began planning to deport its remaining inhabitants to their deaths. On 19 April 1943, the ŻOB launched an uprising in the ghetto. At its height, the ŻOB numbered about a thousand poorly-armed fighters and faced a German force of nearly 2,000 *Wehrmacht* soldiers, the SS and squads of Latvian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian soldiers. The fighting lasted for nearly a month. On 8 May, ŻOB commander Mordechai Anielewicz and about 120 other fighters committed suicide in a bunker rather than surrender to the Germans surrounding them. Only a few of the fighters managed to escape the area from the ghetto through the underground sewer system. On 16 May, the Germans announced that the ghetto had been liquidated and the site was nearly razed to the ground by the end of the month.
**KRAKÓW GHETTO**

The Kraków ghetto was created in March 1941 in the district of Podgórze. About 3,000 Poles were evicted from the area and about 16,000 Jews from around Kraków were resettled there. Because of this, the ghetto was extremely overcrowded. In April, the ghetto was surrounded by a wall with four gates and starting in October Jews caught leaving the ghetto without the proper documents were shot on the spot.

The first deportation from the Kraków ghetto took place in June 1942 when approximately 7,000 people were deported to the Belżec death camp. The ghetto was then drastically reduced in size. The next big deportation took place in October 1942 – about 4,500 were sent to Belżec and about 600 were killed in the streets of the ghetto. Once again, the ghetto was drastically reduced in size and in December 1942 was divided into two sections, A and B. Ghetto A was for people who had German work permits while ghetto B was designated for those residents that were considered by the Germans as being unable to work, including children, the elderly, the disabled and the sick. In March 1943, the Jews from ghetto A were taken to the nearby Płaszów camp and those from ghetto B were sent to the death camps, mainly to Belżec. Approximately 2,000 people were shot on the spot.

Today the history of the Kraków ghetto is shown in the Muzeum Pod Orłem (The Eagle Pharmacy Museum) at Plac Bohaterów Getta (Heroes of the Ghetto Square) in Podgórze. During the time of the ghetto’s operation the Eagle Pharmacy was run by Tadeusz Pankiewicz, a non-Jewish Pole, who for his work in aiding Jews in the ghetto was later recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations. The main Kraków memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust is located on Heroes of the Ghetto Square, which during the time of the ghetto was used by the Germans as an assembly point for the deportation of the Jews. The memorial comprises 70 chairs, symbolising the furniture thrown onto the assembly point as the Jews were held there prior to their deportation but also the emptiness after the ghetto’s liquidation.

**ŁÓDŹ GHETTO**

The Łódź ghetto was established on 8 February 1940 in the poorest part of the city. It had more than 200,000 residents. In most buildings there was no running water or electricity. Besides imprisoning the Jewish population from Łódź, transports of Jews from the Czech Republic, Austria and Germany were also sent to this ghetto.

The Łódź ghetto was completely isolated from the outside world. It was surrounded with barbed wire and the buildings adjacent to its perimeters were demolished. The ghetto even had a separate currency, which effectively prevented the practice of smuggling food, as it was harder to buy it outside of the ghetto. The population had to try and survive on the small and irregular official food deliveries.

Chaim Rumkowski, the chairman of the Łódź Judenrat, was an extremely controversial figure. He convinced the inhabitants of the ghetto that the only way to survive was to be the most efficient workers and obey all of the German orders without question. The Łódź ghetto became a huge workshop where Jews manufactured various goods and provided all kinds of services. All the profits and products went to the Nazi administration. Perhaps due to this, the Łódź ghetto survived until August 1944, the longest of all the ghettos in occupied Poland. During the liquidation of the ghetto in August 1944, Chaim Rumkowski and his family were deported to their deaths at Auschwitz-Birkenau on one of the last transports.
EXCERPTS FROM LITERATURE AND POETRY

PART I – TESTIMONIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AND EYE-WITNESSES

I. IN THE GHETTO

WHEN THE WAR STARTED...

Michael Etkind, Polish Jewish schoolboy, Łódź
We listened to the German radio, sometimes in Polish, sometimes in German. [Earlier in the year] they were broadcasting a speech by Hitler. My mother was listening. I didn’t understand much German then but there was one sentence which she explained to me, “The Jews must disappear from Europe.” I realised we had been sentenced to death. It was a very frightening moment.

Michael Etkind, Polish Jewish schoolboy, Łódź
Then various notices appeared; for example, Jews were not allowed to walk on the main street which was renamed Adolf Hitler Strasse. They were not allowed to go into parks, swimming pools, or cinemas and theatres. All the money in the bank was frozen, all property belonging to Jews automatically confiscated. Then Jews had to wear an armband with the Star of David on it to show that they were Jews; somebody started making them and you bought them at street corners. The death penalty was imposed for the slightest deviation from the order. People were being hanged for nothing, just to terrify the population. I am very squeamish and found it strange that out of morbid curiosity, people would go to where corpses were hanging in the square.

Helen Stone, young Polish Jewish woman, Będzin
They burned our synagogue with the people inside. Opposite the synagogue was a church. And about two o’clock in the morning the priest heard that the synagogue was burning and he ran to the church, opened the door in case somebody ran out of the inferno, and quite a few people did; he saved their lives. I was moved about nine or ten times in Będzin as they were making streets Judenrein-cleansed of Jews.

IN THE GHETTO

Andrew Bąkowski, Polish child, Warsaw
The first evidence of something happening so far as the Jews were concerned started slowly. At first we didn’t know it was the ghetto area, it wasn’t referred to as such. Then things began to change and they started to build walls on the periphery of the ghetto. Then the station began to receive more Jewish transports. At the beginning I’m not sure I knew they were Jews, but soon I reckon we did. It’s one of those things you don’t talk about with
your parents, but you talk about with the kids. "They’re Jews." Transports would arrive and large columns of people would make their way across the front of our house heading in a westerly direction, turning north into the ghetto area. They would move in quite an orderly way, quietly. We would see them from our windows, you could hear people talking, you could see guards walking, not many. Some of them wore badges—the Star of David—some of them would wear uniforms—they were bus conductors, or postmen, and there were families, and people with cases. Occasionally they would stop for the trams, and they would then go into the ghetto.

Regina Rubinsztejn Pluda, Polish Jewish girl, Warsaw Ghetto

In 1940–1941, the Nazis forced Polish and Jewish men to build a wall around our predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Warsaw, turning it into a ghetto. From that time on, Jews were not allowed to leave the ghetto freely. Wagon loads of Jews from outlying towns were sent into the ghetto. Jews from other neighborhoods in Warsaw were given only minimal notice and compelled to move into the area with only a few of their belongings.

LIFE IN THE GHETTO

Joanna Kaltman, Polish Jewish girl, Warsaw Ghetto

Living conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto are well known – the ever growing feeling of being in danger, the crowding, the growing shortage of food and decreasing rations gotten with cards, decimating typhus, forced labor in the ‘shops’, nightmarish guard posts from which they shot for amusement and hunted for hungry children who were attempting to smuggle some food supplies through the walls. In the streets, there were even larger numbers of people dead from hunger and exhaustion or simply illness, bodies lying everywhere covered by newspapers until they were collected on carts so they could be buried somewhere like decomposing carcasses.

Halina Kahn, young Polish Jewish woman, Łódź Ghetto

Because I didn’t look Jewish, I used to go to the black-market. I took the Star of David from my coat and went into the shops saying, “Heil Hitler!” One Sunday morning I bought ten or twelve pounds of potatoes and went on the tram and stood in front with the potatoes. When the conductor came, I went to get some money, and as I took it out my star fell down; there was a young Hitler Jugend (Hitler Youth) nearby and he put his boot down so that the conductor couldn’t see the star. When the conductor went he gave it back to me. I was completely struck, he had saved my life and he was a Hitler Jugend.

Regina Rubinsztejn Pluda, Polish Jewish girl, Warsaw Ghetto

As time went on, the meal more frequently consisted of just one loaf of bread that my father was miraculously able to split 11 ways, some watery, grated root soup, and once in a while, tea. When we had soup, I’d ask my mother first for one very small portion, so that I could relish the extravagance of an ‘extra’ serving. We were expected to live on rations of bread and marmalade. Sometimes we were able to barter with other Jews whose children smuggled wares out of the ghetto and brought food in.

ROUNDUPS AND DEPORTATIONS

Adam Adams, Polish Jewish teenager, Lublin Ghetto

Aktionen [round-ups for deportations] usually happened at night. I remember the hiding place we had behind the wardrobe and how we would sit together through the night. They would come into the room shouting and
shooting, there would be flames all around. I cannot describe to you... Imagine, winter nights, suddenly you hear noises, voices, you hear shooting, the fear is indescribable and the running, everyone scrambling. The human behaviour in such a situation is to preserve your own life, so you don't look at what you're doing, you run, maybe you're running over other people, but you don't care. And that is the terrible thing—you lose all human dignity, that was terrible.

Regina Rubinsztejn Pluda, Polish Jewish girl, Warsaw Ghetto
We started to hear rumors of the death camp Treblinka. The train motorman who drove to Treblinka provided some of the information. Every day, people were loaded onto trains bound for the camp. The trains later returned without people but with their clothes and shoes. Some escaped and told others what they had seen, but no one could believe these horrors. As the underground resistance movement formed, leaflets were passed out warning people about Treblinka and urging resistance: "Don't go like sheep".

Halina Kahn, young Polish Jewish woman, Łódź Ghetto
When the people left the ghetto in 1944, my husband and I were in the last seven hundred that remained. A few months before the Russians came, the guards took the men out at night from the factory to the Jewish grounds to dig graves there. The men had to keep quiet about it. They were working through the night and when my husband came back in the morning very quiet, very distressed. I asked him, "What kind of work do you do when it's so dark?" He said, "It's not important, I am here." Later I heard they had to dig seven graves, for the seven hundred of us that remained, each grave for a hundred of us.

IN HIDING

Jadwiga Fiszbain-Tokarz, Polish Jewish girl, Kraków
We had to frequently change where we were staying. I did not have ‘good looks’; Semitic features and black curly hair attracted attention. It made it more difficult to maintain safety. I was being hidden in a variety of the least expected places: in a beehive, in a bread-baking oven, in a made-up bed covered with a bedspread, in cellars, in small gardens, and in haystacks. I spent six weeks underground in a hideout, especially dug out for me in a little garden, on top of which was placed a beehive.

Karolina Heuman, Polish Jewish girl, Nowy Sącz
After a few months of staying in the ghetto, we managed to escape. At that point, our entire family split up. Mother, under an assumed name, left for Lwów, and my brother and I were placed by Father in the cloister of the Sisters of Charity in Czerwonogród. I remember how we were driven by night in a horse-drawn wagon to the cloister and how Father bade us farewell. Pointing at the sky, he said, "We shall meet there." He then paid for our stay with money he kept hidden in a bottle, and he left. I never saw him again.

Malwina Wollek, Polish Jewish girl, Drohobycz
At the news of the intended liquidation of the ghetto, my mother and I escaped to the leather tannery (where my Uncle Natan worked) and hid there for several months. Then, Catholics with whom we had been friendly arranged an escape for us. Hidden under straw in a horse-drawn wagon, we were taken to the Bronicki Forest. We stayed there in a shelter dug out of the ground. Through this entire period of time, I saw no daylight.
2. THE CAMPS

Anna Bergman, Young Czech woman, Auschwitz-Birkenau
I was with a friend whose parents were in the same transport but had been sent to the other side during the selection by Mengele. When we got into our barrack, she asked the women already there, "Where are my parents? When will I see them again?" And they all started screaming with laughter, "You stupid idiot, they are in the chimney by now!" We thought they were mad, and they thought we were mad.

Antonie Krokova, Czech Gypsy child, Lety
It was late afternoon and we were free in the camp and my sisters were with us. Most of my sisters were older, eighteen, nineteen years old. They stuck together these poor girls, because mum wasn't alive any more. And the two cops were standing there with another two on the side, and one came up and started chatting to them. We watched as he chatted to them, right? He was looking at my sister and suddenly he grabbed her and she pushed him away. Then this other guy started, and my sisters were defending one another. Then the third came and pulled my sisters apart. He was a strong guy, you cannot beat a strong guy—it wasn't allowed anyway. So he slapped her a couple of times, and threw her on the ground. They were trying to keep us away, we were crying and they forced us back. And we ran to tell what was happening, calling the names of our sisters. Our dad ran that way and he caught one of them. The other man saw that and shot him dead. My brother ran there too, he was fourteen then and he got shot too. So they shot all four of them dead: my sisters, my dad and my brother. They dragged them away and that was it. We had to keep quiet. We weren't allowed to cry either because they threatened that they would shoot us too.

Alfred Huberman, Polish Jewish youth, Skarzysko-Kamienná
Really, it became the law of the jungle, you couldn't afford to be nice to other. I remember coming across three Greek Jewish brothers and they used to pinch each others' bread ration. There were no standards: no right and wrong, you just looked after yourself if you could.

Maria Ossowski, young Polish woman, Auschwitz-Birkenau
In May 1944, when the Jewish population of Hungary arrived, they were burning 3,000 bodies a day. You have to remember that Birkenau itself was built on the lower lands near the River Sola and it was low, wet and horrible. So the air there was never fantastic, but given the addition of the smoke belching out of those five chimneys, day after day, night after night, breathing in the camp was very unpleasant and it was very difficult to do the hard work. I am so ashamed to say that when I knew I was going away into another Kommando, six kilometres from Birkenau, what I was thinking was: thank God, no more smoke; because I left in the middle of the destruction of the Hungarian Jews.

Albin 'Alex' Ossowski, Polish prisoner, Auschwitz-Birkenau
The most tragic contact we had in the camp was with the Sonderkommando (special Jewish units forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria). What they described, what they had to do, was so horrible. One man said that in the group he had to burn were the bodies of his wife and children. He was crying all night and you couldn't help him or do anything. The Sonderkommando lived under sentence of death because after three, four months, the Germans suspected they were going insane and they killed them.
Rena Quint, Polish Jewish child, Bergen-Belsen
I don’t remember very much about my time in Bergen-Belsen. I don’t remember what we did except seeing all those bodies. And I have asked people, “What did children do?” and they said, “They didn’t do anything, they just tried to keep out of the way.” There were two women guards and every time they came in, people would start shivering because they were really mean people with whips.
I was not affected by the sight of dead bodies, in Bergen-Belsen there were bodies all the time and I don’t think it even bothered me. I mean I didn’t know this was not normal as I had been in this situation for most of my life. I remember saying to myself, “I’m never going to cry, I’m not going to call for my mummy or daddy because they’re not going to come.” There were other people I could call, but they were always new people. I remember a lot of survivors say that everybody was out for themselves. I don’t remember that at all. Somebody always took care of me. As a small child, without having someone there for support, I could not possibly have survived.

PART 2 — HOLOCAUST POETRY: SELECTED POEMS BY JEWISH AND NON-JEWISH AUTHORS.

A Girl of Six from the Ghetto
Begging in Smolna Street in 1942

she had nothing
but eyes to grow up to
in them quite by chance
two stars of David
perhaps a teardrop would put them out

so she cried

Her speech
was not silver
worth at least
a spit a turning away of the head
her tearful speech
full of hunchbacked words

so she fell silent

Her silence
was not golden
worth at most
3 ha’pence perhaps a carrot or whatever
a very well behaved silence
with a Jewish accent
of hunger
so she died

Jerzy Ficowski
(Translated by Keith Bosley)

Letters from the Ghetto

Your brief letters –
Three lines on a card, nothing more.
As if every mile added a stone –
That is how heavy they are.

A line about everybody’s health,
Each one mentioned by name,
There is no need to worry,
And the white blankness pleads for mercy on the paper,
Thus, probably, is the script of tears.

These brief letters –
They all lie gathered to me,
They will remain until the end of generations.
I see the trembling hand that writes them now,
I know the fiery hand
That will inscribe the blankness with mercy.

Kadya Molodovsky, 1941

I Did Not Manage To Save

I did not manage to save
a single life

I did not know how to stop
a single bullet

and I wander round cemeteries
which are not there

I look for words
which are not there
I run

to help where no one called
to rescue after the event

I want to be on time
even if I am too late

Jerzy Ficowski
(Translated by Keith Bosley and Krystyna Wandycz)

Pigtail

When all the women in the transport
had their heads shaved
four workmen with brooms made of birch
twigs
swept up
and gathered up the hair

Behind clean glass
the stiff hair lies
of those suffocated in the gas chambers
there are pins and side combs
in this hair

The hair is not shot through with light
is not parted by the breeze
is not touched by any hand
or rain or lips
In huge chests
clouds of dry hair
of those suffocated
and a faded plait
a pigtail with a ribbon
pulled at school
by naughty boys

The Museum, Auschwitz, 1948
Tadeusz Różewicz
(Translated by Adam Czerniawski)
Never Shall I Forget

Never shall I forget that night,
the first night in the camp
which has turned my life into one long night,
seven times cursed and seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.
Never shall I forget the little faces of the children
whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke
beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames
which consumed my faith forever.
Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence
which deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments
which murdered my God and my soul
and turned my dreams to dust.

Never shall I forget these things,
even if I am condemned to live
as long as God himself.

Never.

Elie Wiesel

The Survivor

I am twenty-four
led to slaughter
I survived.

The following are empty synonyms:
man and beast
love and hate
friend and foe
darkness and light.

The way of killing men and beasts is the same
I’ve seen it:
truckfuls of chopped-up men
who will not be saved

Ideas are mere words:
virtue and crime
truth and lies
beauty and ugliness
courage and cowardice.

Virtue and crime weigh the same
I’ve seen it:
in a man who was both
criminal and virtuous.

I seek a teacher and a master
may he restore my sight hearing and speech
may he again name objects and ideas
may he separate darkness from light.

I am twenty-four
led to slaughter
I survived.

Tadeusz Różewicz
(Translated by Adam Czerniawski)

Merciful God

Merciful God,
Choose another people,
Elect another.
We are tired of death and dying,
We have no more prayers.
Choose another people,
Elect another.
We have no more blood
To be a sacrifice.
Our house has become a desert.
The earth is insufficient for our graves,
No more laments for us,
No more dirges
In the old, holy books.

Merciful God,
Sanctify another country,
Another mountain.
We have strewn all the fields and every stone
With ash, with holy ash.
With the aged,
With the youthful,
And with babies, we have paid
For every letter of your Ten Commandments.

Merciful God,
Raise your fiery brow,
And see the people of the world-
Give them the prophecies and the Days of Awe.
Your word is babbled in every language-
Teach them the deeds,
The ways of temptation.

Merciful God,
Give us simple garments
Of shepherds with their sheep,
Blacksmiths at their hammers,
Laundry-washers, skin-flayers,
And even the more base.
And do us one more favour:
Merciful God,
Deprive us of the Divine Presence of genius.

Kadya Molodovsky, 1945

God Hid His Face.

All the roads led to death,
all the roads.
All the winds breathed betrayal,
all the winds.
At all the doorways angry dogs barked,
at all the doorways.
All the waters laughed at us,
all the waters.
All the nights fattened on our dread,
all the nights.
And the heavens were bare and empty,
all the heavens.
God hid his face.

Rayzl Zychlinsky

Resistance

To smuggle a loaf of bread was to resist
To teach in secret was to resist
To cry our warning and shattering illusion was to resist
To rescue a Torah Scroll was to resist
To forge documents was to resist
To smuggle people across the borders was to resist
To chronicle events and conceal the records was to resist
To contact those under siege and smuggle weapons was to resist
To rebel in death camps was to resist
To rise up in ghettos, among the crumbling walls, in the most desperate revolt was to resist.

Chaim Guri and Monia Avrahami.

Only King David Remained

The nation was cut down –
Wound and death.
The roads bestrewn,
The houses burned.
Only King David remained,
He with his crown in his hands.

The horn’s echo has died.
The last runner has fallen –
Wound and death.
Blazing, destroyed walls.
Tear mourning-rents in the sky.
Only King David remained,
He with his crown in his hands.

The wind whines in ruined nests –
Wound and death.
The green meadows of childhood,
The flocks of sheep are wrecked.
Only King David remained,
He with his crown in his hands.
The land is measured in graves –
Wound and death.
One single path turns green and fresh.
The path to Messiah, His son,
Whom this people dreamed of and revered.
There walks the mourner, the king,
He with his crown in his hands.

He carries the hallowed heritage –
Wound and death.
– Here, Messiah, your diadem,
All the pearls spared, not spent.
Here, Messiah, your diadem
In the last two Jewish hands.

_Kadya Molodovsky_

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**PART 3 – DOCUMENTS**

**I**

Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact – Secret Additional Protocol

*Article I*

In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and U.S.S.R. In this connection the interest of Lithuania in the Vilna area is recognized by each party.

*Article II*

In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish state, the spheres of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R. shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narev, Vistula and San.

The question of whether the interests of both parties make desirable the maintenance of an independent Polish state and how such a state should be bounded can only be definitely determined in the course of further political developments.

In any event both governments will resolve this question by means of a friendly agreement.
Article III
With regard to Southeastern Europe attention is called by the Soviet side to its interest in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterest in these areas.

Article IV
This protocol shall be treated by both parties as strictly secret.

Moscow, August 23, 1939.

For the Government of the German Reich v. Ribbentrop
Plenipotentiary of the Government of the U.S.S.R. V. Molotov

II
Proclamation of the General Government
On 12 October 1939, the Fuhrer and Chancellor of the German Reich, Adolf Hitler, has entrusted me with the management of the General Government in the occupied Polish lands starting from 26 October 1939.

From the creation of the General Government today, after the carrying out of the military protection of the Polish territories in the range of German territorial interests, we close the historical episode for which both the blind clique ruling the former Polish nation and the unctuous warmongers in England must bear responsibility. The operations of the German army have restored order in the Polish lands. The threat to peace in Europe because of this ‘state’ that violently emerged from the Versailles Treaty has been for once and for all removed.

Polish citizens!
As Governor General, the Fuhrer has entrusted me with the role of overseeing the Polish lands in such a way as to ensure that in the future there will be peace in this country and to develop neighborly relations on the part of the Poles to the huge superpower of the German nation.

You can still live your lives according to your customs; you can keep your Polish identity in all social aspects. However, this country has been totally destroyed by the criminal actions of your former rulers and thus requires the most vigorous reorganization and for you to roll up your sleeves and work with us. Freed from the coercive political adventure of your intellectual ruling class, under the powerful protection of the Great German Reich, you will fulfill your general duties of work that lie within your power. Under fair rule, each shall work for his daily bread. For the warmongering politicians, industrial hyenas and exploitative Jews, however, there will be no place under German authority.

All attempts of resistance against the published regulations, and against the peace and order in the Polish lands will be put down with all the severity and might of the Great German Reich. All submitting to the just orders of our Reich and keeping to their way of life will be able to work in peace. We will free you from the many problems that you are still suffering from because of the unreliable policies of your former rulers.

The Governor General
for the occupied Polish lands

Frank.
Announcement

Announcement!

Death penalty for helping Jews residing outside of the Jewish district without permission.

In the last while, many Jews have left their specified district without permission. Some of them are now living in the Warsaw area.

I remind you that the Third Decree of the General Government from 15.10.1941 (VBI.GG.S.595) stipulates that the death penalty will be applied not only to Jews who leave their district without permission but also people supporting and sheltering them. It is not only forbidden to provide them with food and accommodations, but giving them any kind of support including providing transportation or buying Jewish property.

I urge the population of Warsaw to report every Jew who has left the Jewish district to the nearest police station. Anyone who has supported or is supporting Jews but reports to the nearest police station by 09.09.42 at 16:00 will not be punished.

Additionally, anyone in possession of Jewish property and hands it over to the police by 09.09.42 at 16:00 will not be prosecuted.

The SS- and Police Chief of the Warsaw District.

Warsaw 5.9.42
REFERENCE MATERIALS

HISTORY OF POLAND

- When did Poland adopt Christianity? Which branch of Christianity was it and how did this affect Poland’s future development?
- What was the Nobles’ Democracy?
- What was the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth?
- Describe how Poland’s geographical location has influenced its history.
- What were the Partitions of Poland? What effect did they have on the development of Polish identity?
- Who was Józef Piłsudski and what role did he play in interwar Poland?
- How was the German occupation of Poland during WWII unique?


HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN POLAND

- When did Jews first arrive in Poland?
- What roles did Jews traditionally play in Polish society in the Middle Ages and why? How did this change over time?
- Discuss different types of Jewish religious movements that were popular in 19th century Poland.
- Describe some instances of antisemitism in Poland before the Second World War.


HISTORY OF THE HOLOCAUST

- Describe ways in which Jews were discriminated against under the Nazi regime.
- Describe the process leading up to the mass murder of Jews. How can prejudice and discrimination lead to physical violence?
- What kinds of effects can consistent exposure to violence have on individuals and communities?
- Who were the Einsatzgruppen and what role did they play in the mass murder of Eastern European Jews? Why is this part of the Holocaust relatively unknown today?
• What was the ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question’?
• What made the Holocaust possible – how could the Nazis carry out the systematic mass murder of 6 million Jewish people?
• How did ordinary people react to the Nazis? Did they resist, collaborate or act as bystanders?


THE EXPERIENCE OF POLISH JEWS DURING HOLOCAUST
• How were the experiences of Polish Jews during the Holocaust different from those of Jews from other parts of Europe?
• Describe the experiences of three of the authors from the list below during the Holocaust.
• Find the testimonies of Polish-Jewish children in the section "Excerpts from Literature and Poetry". Try to describe the process leading to mass killing.


THE EXPERIENCE OF EUROPEAN JEWS DEPORTED TO OCCUPIED POLAND
• Compare and contrast the experience of European Jews deported to occupied Poland with that of Polish Jews.
• When were most European Jews deported to occupied Poland? What countries were they from? Why were they deported to Poland?

– Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz.* Touchstone, 1996. (Also titled *If This is a Man*) 
**Ghettos in Occupied Poland**

- What is a ghetto? Name three major ghettos and describe them.
- Describe life in the ghettos. How did people imprisoned in them try to create some kind of normal life in the ghetto?
- How did people try to survive? Was escape from the ghetto possible? Describe the danger connected with living in hiding outside the ghetto.
- Describe the types of Jewish resistance in the ghettos.


**Concentration and Death Camps**

- What is the difference between a forced labor camp, concentration camp and death camp?
- Describe examples of Jewish resistance in the concentration and death camps.
- Describe the ways in which prisoners were humiliated and dehumanised in the concentration camps.
- What were the reasons for the high mortality of the prisoners in slave labour and concentration camps?


**Polish Resistance and Rescuers**

- Define the term Righteous Among the Nations and give three examples of people who have received this title.
- What was the punishment for giving assistance to Jews in occupied Poland and other Nazi-occupied European countries?
- Why do you think non-Jewish rescuers would run such a great risk to save Jews?
- How did the Polish resistance try to stop the genocide of the Jews? Give examples of organisations and individuals involved in helping Jews.
- How did the Allies react to the persecution and mass murder of Jews?


**Post-War Poland**

- How did the Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences affect Poland’s postwar political situation?
CONTEXTUALISING VISITS TO POLAND

- How did the Communist party come to power in Poland after the Second World War?
- What happened in Poland in July 1946 and in March 1968? How did this affect Poland’s Jewish community?
- What is Solidarity? What was its impact in Poland?
- How did the fall of Communism in 1989 affect Poland and Polish society?


THE CONTEMPORARY POLISH-JEWISH COMMUNITY

- How would you describe the Jewish community in Poland today?
- What are the challenges facing the rebuilding of a Jewish community in Poland?
- Describe some of the measures taken today to promote Polish-Jewish dialogue.
- What are the reasons for the revival of Jewish culture in today’s Poland?


WEB RESOURCES

– Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum: http://en.auschwitz.org.pl
– Diapositive: the Adam Mickiewicz Institute’s page on Jewish topics: www.diapozytyw.pl/en/site
– Galicia Jewish Museum: www.galiciajewishmuseum.org
– Jewish Virtual Library: www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org
– Memorial de la Shoah: www.memorialdelashoah.org
– State Museum at Majdanek: www.majdanek.pl
– Taube Foundation: www.taubephilanthropies.org
– The Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute: www.jewishinstitute.org.pl
– Thomas Blatt’s site about Sobibór: www.sobibor.info
– United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: www.ushmm.org
– Yad Vashem: www.yadvashem.org

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– Yad Vashem: www.yadvashem.org
GLOSSARY

HISTORY OF POLAND

BOLSHEVIKS – a political wing of the Russian Communists founded by Lenin at the beginning of the 20th century. The Bolsheviks became popular among the Russian workers, peasants and soldiers, and succeeded in mobilizing a mass-scale revolutionary party. They came to power in Russia during the October Revolution in 1917 and later founded the Soviet Union.

COMMONWEALTH – in the context of Polish history, the formal union between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania made in 1569 that created the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The country was essentially ruled by the Sejm (see below), which was divided into two chambers: the Senate and the Chamber of Envoys, which consisted of representatives of the Polish and Lithuanian nobility. The Commonwealth was ruled by a king, but he had limited power.

COMMUNISM – a political movement aiming for a classless social structure developed in 19th century Europe. According to Communist ideology, the distinctions between the rich and poor could be eliminated only through revolution. Certain features of the Communist revolution were the abolition of private property, government ownership of industry and agriculture, government control over education and culture, and atheism. The practical implication of Communist rule in Soviet Union and some other Soviet bloc countries resulted in terror and widespread persecution.

CONSTANTINOPLE – the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, now called Istanbul and located in Turkey.

CONSTITUTION – a set of laws created and agreed upon for government.

EU – (abbreviation) the European Union. Founded in 1993, it is the political and economic association of member states located in Europe. It currently consists of 27 nations.

GENERAL GOVERNMENT – the south-central areas of occupied Poland during the Second World War that were theoretically separate from the German Reich, but in reality were under the control of the Nazi German authorities.

MARTIAL LAW – the imposition of emergency military rule on the civilian population by military authorities, usually on a temporary basis. Martial law is often brutal and is characterized by the restriction of civil rights and mass arrests of political opponents of the government. Poland was under martial law between 1981 and
1983. Daily life was greatly restricted and pro-democracy movements were banned. Thousands of people were arrested. Between 60 and 100 people were killed as a result of Martial Law in Poland.

**NATIONALISM** – an ideology based on the belief that an individual’s loyalty to his or her nation should surpass all other individual or group interests. Nationalism developed in the late 18th and 19th centuries and has become a major factor in modern history. Nationalist ideology emphasises that each nationality – which is primarily defined by a combination of factors such as ethnicity, language and religion – should have its own political entity – the state – and all others should be excluded from full membership in the nation-state.

**NATO** – (abbreviation) the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Founded in 1949, NATO is a military alliance in which the member states pledge mutual defence in response to an external attack. Members of NATO include the USA, Canada and most of the countries in the European Union, including Poland.

**OTTOMAN EMPIRE** – one of the longest reigning empires in history, covering much of the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, and sustained by Islam and Islamic institutions. The Ottoman Empire was founded by Turkish tribes at the end of the 13th century in Anatolia and was replaced by the Turkish Republic in 1922.

**POGROM** – violent and often organised attacks by a local population against ethnic, national or religious minorities. This is the term used most frequently to describe the attacks by non-Jewish populations on Jewish communities.

**REFERENDUM** – a government act that is first put to a vote of approval by the public.

**SEJM** – the lower house of the Polish Parliament (the upper being the Senate).

**STALINISM** – the theory and practice of Communism under Joseph Stalin, who became the leader of the Soviet Union in 1929 and ruled until his death in 1953. Stalinism is a totalitarian system and is distinguished by mass repression and terror, the centralization of power and the cult of Stalin. It is estimated that about 20 million citizens of the Soviet Union died as a result of mass executions, imprisonment in labour camps and famine during this period. Following the Second World War, Stalinism was imported to the countries making up the Soviet Bloc – including Poland – and became the official mode of government until 1956.

**TEUTONIC KNIGHTS/TEUTONIC ORDER** – full name: Order of Brothers of the German House Saint Mary in Jerusalem – a Roman Catholic German crusading military order formed at the end of the 12th century that conquered and ruled large territories in what is today north-eastern Poland and the Baltic States.

**TRADE UNION** – an organisation of employees formed to mediate and hold negotiations with employers.

**WORLD WAR II AND THE HOLOCAUST**

**AKTION** – German for ‘action’. Term used to describe large roundups in the ghettos and the operations undertaken during the deportations of Jews to concentration or death camps.
ANTISEMITISM – term coined in 1879 in Germany used to describe prejudice toward, hostility against or hatred of Jews for religious or racial reasons. 19th century pseudoscientific theories asserting that Jews were inferior to the so-called Aryan race (see below) gave antisemitism popular support and it became a powerful political tool. In Germany, racial antisemitism became one of the major elements of the Nazi ideology and culminated in the Holocaust.

ARYAN RACE – theory that appeared in mid-19th century claiming the superiority of white people who speak Indo-European languages ('Aryans') over everyone else and that the most "pure" Aryans were Northern European or Germanic people with blonde hair and blue eyes. This theory was rejected by most 20th century anthropologists. In Nazi Germany it became one of the crucial elements of state policy and led to the persecution and mass murder of Jews, Roma and others considered to be 'non-Aryan'.

BLACK MARKET – the illegal and covert exchange of goods.

CREMATORIA – in the context of the Holocaust, buildings in the concentration and death camps where the bodies of murdered prisoners were burnt.

GETTO – In the context of the Holocaust, the term used to describe the area of a city, often enclosed, where Jews were forcibly resettled by the Nazis.

FINAL SOLUTION – in full, the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question'. The Final Solution was Nazi Germany’s plan to systematically murder all European Jews during the Second World War. The primary architect of this plan was Heinrich Himmler and it was finalized at the Wannsee Conference (see below) held in Berlin in January 1942.

HITLER JUGEND – German for 'Hitler Youth'. A paramilitary organisation for German boys aged 14-18. The teenagers undertook activities similar to basic military training. They were also indoctrinated in antisemitic Nazi ideology.

JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES – Christian denomination heavily reliant on the Bible, reading it as literal, divinely inspired and historically accurate. They practice a strict moral code, refraining from all political or military activity.

JUDENRAT – German for ‘Jewish council’. Jewish administrative council set up in the German-occupied cities with a Jewish population, in particular in the ghettos, to organise living conditions and forced labour, but mainly to carry out German orders. Although its members were granted some powers, the Judenrat was essentially entirely subordinate to the Germans.

JUDENREIN – German for ‘free of Jews’. This term was used during the Second World War by the Nazis in the occupied countries to describe towns and cities from which all Jews had been expelled and, in most cases, deported to concentration and death camps.

KOMMANDO – German for ‘unit, command, work group’. In Nazi Germany this term was used to describe the basic unit of organization of prisoners or slave labourers.
KRISSLNNACHT – often translated from the German as ‘the Night of Broken Glass.’ Refers to the destruction of thousands of synagogues, Jewish businesses and homes, as well as attacks, arrests and the murder of Jews in Germany and Austria on the night of 9-10 November 1938 by the Nazis.

MENGELE, JOSEF (1911-1979) – a Nazi doctor who carried out selections (see below) at Auschwitz-Birkenau and conducted medical experiments on prisoners. After the Second World War, he fled to South America to evade being brought to justice for war crimes. Despite many attempts, the Allies failed to arrest him and he never stood trial.

NUREMBERG WAR CRIMES TRIALS – military trials held from November 1945 to April 1949 in Nuremberg, Germany, to judge the actions of high-ranking Nazi officials and institutions and punish them accordingly.

OD – (abbreviation) the German acronym for Judischer Ordnungsdienst, the Jewish Order Police. The OD acted as the armed force of the Judenrat (see above), patrolling the streets and borders of the ghetto as well as assisting in the requisitions of goods imposed by the Nazis. The OD was also responsible for assisting in round-ups and deportations.

PARTISAN – member of a clandestine or independently organized group aiming to sabotage the efforts of an occupying army.

POW – (abbreviation) Prisoner of War.

RATION – a fixed allowance of food.

RED ARMY – the army of the Soviet Union.

RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS – an honorary title given by the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem, Israel, to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

ROMA – the Romani people, an ethnic group colloquially referred to as gypsies. The Roma originated in India, but migrated to Europe and practised a nomadic lifestyle for centuries. The Nazis believed the Roma were racially inferior and persecuted them, eventually sending a significant number of Europe’s Roma population to their deaths in concentration and death camps.

SELECTION – in the context of the Holocaust, the process by which new arrivals at concentration camps were either sent straight to the gas chambers or were designated as being fit to work.

SS – (abbreviation) Schutzstaffeln, literally: ‘protection squads’. A group initially created to serve as the personal protection force for Hitler and the Nazi leadership, later evolving into a powerful security service and military organization responsible for the majority of Nazi crimes during the Second World War, including the Holocaust.

SONDERKOMMANDO – German for ‘special work unit’. In the Nazi death camps, groups of Jewish prisoners who were forced to pull the bodies from the gas chambers and burn them in the crematoria. They were kept in isolation from other prisoners. In most Nazi camps the members of Sonderkommando were killed after a few weeks of
work and replaced by new prisoners. The Sonderkommando prisoners in the death camps at Sobibór, Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau organised revolts and uprisings.

**Soviet Union** – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was a totalitarian Communist state existing in Eastern Europe and Northern Asia from 1922 to 1991. During this time, the Soviet Union was geographically the world’s largest country, with more than 100 distinct nationalities living within its borders and, in its final years, consisting of 15 Soviet Socialist Republics. The capital was Moscow.

**Star of David** – a six-pointed star used to represent Judaism and Jewishness. Jews in occupied German territories during the Second World War were typically forced to wear armbands with a Star of David or sew patches shaped like the Star of David on their clothes so they could be easily identified as Jews.

**Third Reich** – a term used to describe the Nazi regime that held power in Germany from 1933 to 1945. Reich is the German word used to describe an empire or nation.

**Umschlagplatz** – German word that literally translates as ‘a collection or reloading point’. In the context of the Holocaust, this refers to the area in the ghetto where Jews were assembled for deportation.

**Wehrmacht** – the unified armed forces of Germany from 1935-1945, including the army, navy and air force.

**Wannsee Conference** – the meeting on 20 January 1942 in the Wannsee suburb of Berlin where senior Nazi officials met to discuss the Final Solution (see above).

**Yad Vashem** – the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, Israel. Centre for documentation, research, education and commemoration of the Holocaust, established in 1953.

**ŻOB** – abbreviation of the Polish Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa, the Jewish Fighting Organisation. The ŻOB was an underground combat organization established in the Warsaw ghetto with units operating in ghettos throughout occupied Poland. The ŻOB urged the ghetto inhabitants to resist deportation and was largely responsible for the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943.

**History of the Jews**

**Acculturated** – referring to the cultural dimension of assimilation (see below).

**Assimilated** – referring to the extent to which a minority has conformed or adjusted to the customs and attitudes of another group of people or nation.

**Hasidism** – a movement within Judaism founded in Poland in the 18th century by Baal Shem-Tov and characterized by its emphasis on mysticism, prayer, ritual strictness and religious joy.
**Haskalah** – a Hebrew term meaning Enlightenment. It was a trend that emerged in Jewish circles in Western Europe in the late 18th century and spread throughout the continent. Its followers supported the ideals of the Enlightenment, and the introduction of secular education for Jews. They were also proponents of the integration of Jews with non-Jewish communities. Haskalah greatly contributed to the emancipation and assimilation of European Jews, and the emergence of Reform, or Progressive, Judaism (see below).

**Matzevot** – (sg, matzevah) a Hebrew term for tombstones.

**Orthodox Judaism** – a branch of the Jewish religion adhering to strict interpretation of Jewish religious laws and customs as set out in the Torah and the Talmud (oral Torah). Orthodox Jews believe that the Torah and all of Jewish law was given to Moses by God in its entirety and that each of the 613 commandments described in the Torah must be kept by all Jews.

**Progressive/Reform Judaism** – a branch of Judaism that believes that Judaism and Jewish traditions should be modernized. It is characterized by liberal attitudes toward Jewish law and a strong emphasis on social justice. Progressive Judaism emerged in the 19th century but has roots in the 18th century with the Enlightenment and Haskalah (see above).

**Shtetl** – Yiddish term used to describe a small town with a large Jewish population found in Central or Eastern Europe before the Second World War.

**Six-Day War** – the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, which lasted six days. In response to the mobilization of its Arab neighbours’ forces, the Israeli authorities decided to prevent the attack and destroyed the Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian air forces. Israel’s victory led to the annexation of disputed territories such as the Old City of Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and the Sinai Peninsula.

**Synagogue** – a Jewish place of worship, study and communal activity. A typical synagogue contains an ark where the Torah scrolls are kept, an eternal light burning before the ark and a bimah – a raised platform from which passages of the Torah are read.

**Tzaddik** – a term indicating a man who has attained an unusual level of piety and holiness; a title given to Hassidic spiritual masters and leaders.

**Yiddish** – the language of Central and Eastern European (Ashkenazi) Jews, written with Hebrew characters. It emerged from a fusion of old-German dialects and Semitic languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, and later included many Slavic components. The earliest documents written in Yiddish date from the 12th century. In 1908, Yiddish was proclaimed one of the Jewish national languages during the Yiddish Language Conference in Czernowitz.

**Zionism** – a Jewish political movement that began to develop in 19th century Europe. There are different branches of this movement, but generally Zionism promotes the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel and the establishment of a sovereign, independent homeland there. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, Zionist schools of thought and institutions continue to support the Jewish State.