

Institute of National Remembrance

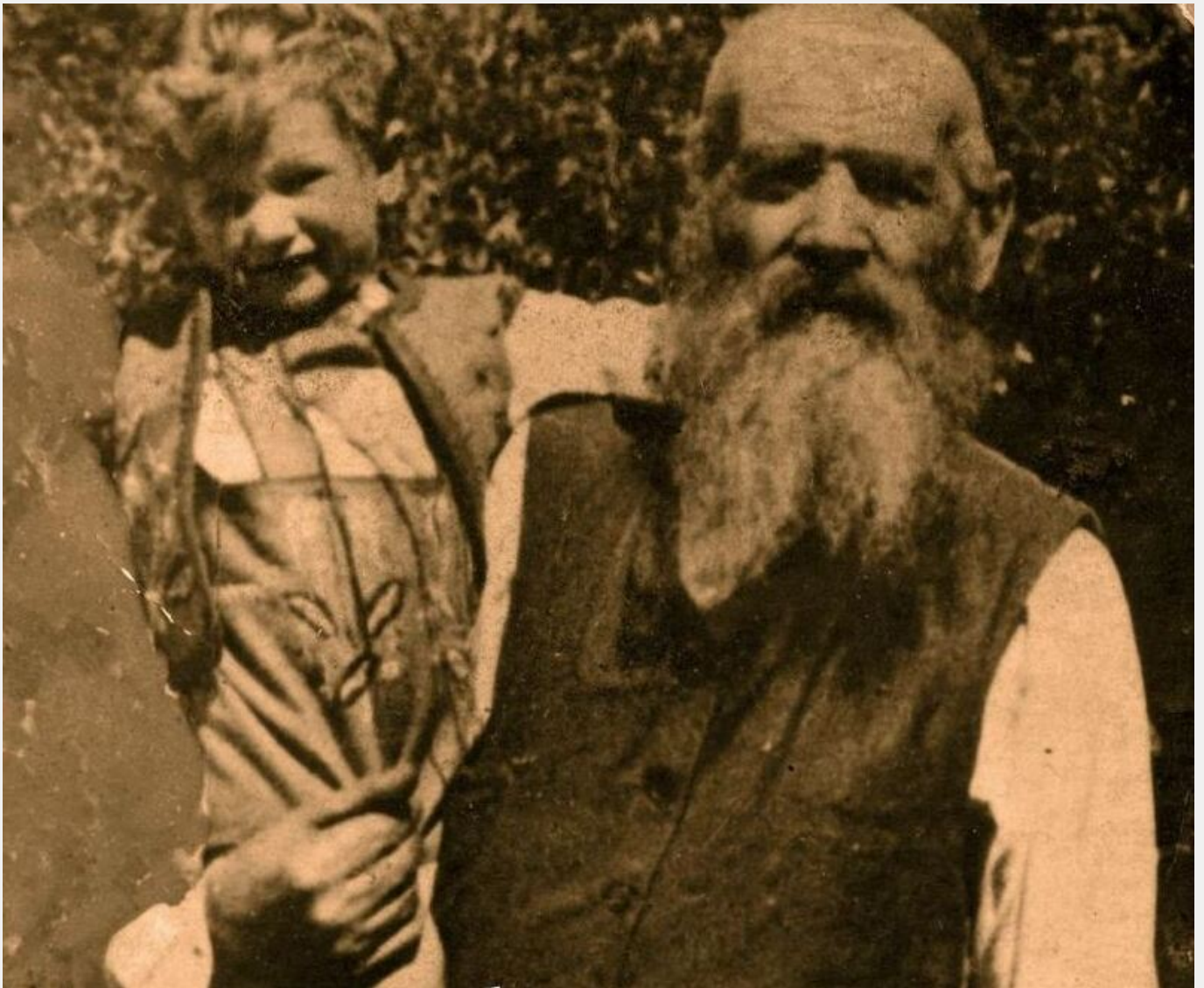
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They were all to die

The destruction of the Jewish community in occupied Poland was the core of the plan of liquidation of the Jewish nation in Europe, carried out with full consequences by the state structures of the Third Reich.



The distribution of the Jewish population in the territory of the Republic of Poland was uneven - while in the former Prussian partition their percentage was small, in the cities of the former Austrian and Russian partitions they formed communities of many thousands. The Jewish circles were characterized by enormous internal diversity. They were co-created by both completely Polonized people and religious Orthodox who could not speak the Polish language fluently. Property, cultural and political differences were also big. They were united by religion, respect for tradition, and pride in the material achievements of successive generations: synagogues and prayer houses, schools, hospitals, nursing homes for adults and children, etc. In the 1930s, Polish Jews attentively watched the rise of anti-Semitism in the Nazi-ruled Germany. However, no-one could have imagined that the outbreak of war would start a persecution aimed at the annihilation of the entire nation.

SEPTEMBER PRELUDE

On September 1, 1939, the roller of the German invasion began to roll through Poland. It ruthlessly crushed not only soldiers from broken divisions and regiments, but also civilians. In many places, the Germans acted ruthlessly, bombing and shelling objects of no military significance. In the occupied areas, people suspected of participating in recent fights and sabotage or subversion were murdered. The soldiers were seconded by policemen from special operational groups of the security police, who followed line units with the task of "cleaning" the front-line facilities. Jews became the target of specific harassment of the most varied nature almost everywhere. The

torturers cut off their beards and sidelocks with bayonets, ordered them to do gymnastic exercises, clean streets and squares on their knees, or perform other humiliating activities. It happened that those who were captured were gathered in front of churches, told to kneel, make the sign of the cross, sing various songs. Soldiers entered Jewish apartments and shops, taking from them valuable movables and goods. These excesses were often accompanied by beatings of men and rape of women. In some localities, such macabre "games" of soldiers turned into mass murders. For example, on September 8, in Lipsk by the Vistula River, the Germans closed and then set fire to a synagogue, in which over 80 men, women and children gathered to begin the Sabbath celebration with prayer. On September 12, in the town of Końskie, several dozen Jews were ordered to dig, with their bare hands, graves for German soldiers who died in front-line battles, and then 22 of these Jews were shot. Two days later, in the town of Dynów, about 200 men were taken from the streets and houses and shot in the forest. Similar events took place in many other localities in the first weeks after the outbreak of the war.

OUT OF LAW

After the end of the September fights, the Polish territory under German occupation was divided into two parts. Pomerania, Greater Poland, Silesia and part of Mazovia were incorporated into the borders of the Reich. The forced displacement of Poles and Jews to the other part of the occupied territory - the General-Gouvernement (GG) began very quickly. As the future showed, it became the place where the tragic fate of hundreds of thousands of people of Jewish origin was

completed. Already in the first six months of the occupation, the Germans introduced a package of anti-Semitic regulations in the General-Gouvernement. In November 1939, every person of Jewish nationality was obliged to wear on top of the sleeve a white band with a painted or sewn so-called star of David.

The same stars, painted with white paint, marked all shops and crafts and service workshops belonging to the followers of Judaism. At the same time, every Jew from the age of 14 to 60 was forced to work, and the Germans could enforce it in practice according to their own needs, paying for it symbolically or not at all. Subsequent norms deprived the persecuted of property, hampering the material basis of their livelihood. The first step was to block all Jewish accounts, deposits and bank vaults. This was accompanied by an order to immediately return to the authorities all cash in excess of 2,000 Polish zlotys per adult person. In December 1939, Jews were deprived of the right to pensions, disability pensions, social security and unemployment benefits, they were left only the opportunity to apply for support for medical care and medicines. It was an introduction to the process, started in January of the following year, of taking over by the Germans into fiduciary management all real estate owned by Jews - land, industrial plants, shops, craft workshops, residential buildings, etc. In many places, the German administration imposed on Jewish communities various contributions, including not only money, but also furniture, tableware, jewellery, etc. As a result, in just a few months, Jews became a stigmatized nation, stripped of all rights, robbed of their property and subjected to constant terror. These realities led to the

paralysis of public life: Jewish parties and social organizations, schools, kindergartens and cultural centres ceased to function. The Germans liquidated religious institutions, prohibiting the public practice of religious worship. The only representatives of local communities towards the occupants were the so-called councils of elders (Judenrats). Despite the tragic situation, many of those persecuted looked to the future with hope. Let us remember that at the beginning of the war, no-one imagined it would last as long as five years. It was believed that in the spring of 1940 there would be a British and French offensive, as a result of which Germany would suffer a complete defeat, and the occupation would turn out to be only a few months' episode. Therefore, they were vegetating for the time being, supporting themselves with savings and selling more valuable items.

GHETTO TIME

The next stage of the extermination of the Jews was confining them in ghettos. The first ghetto was established in the fall of 1939 in Piotrków Trybunalski, and over time, this operation covered several hundred other towns. The forced concentration of Jews in closed districts facilitated control over the persecuted, and made it possible to rob them of the rest of their property. Initially, leaving the ghetto was treated as an offence, and therefore punished with a high fine, with a possibility to convert it to arrest. Quickly, however, any Jew caught outside the closed district had to take into account the risk of loss of his life. Sometimes the Germans carried out death sentences, preceded them with parodies of court trials. It happened much more often that German policemen simply killed escapees caught on roads,

fields and in forests. For many months, the most important reason for sneaking out of ghettos was the desire to find food for themselves and their loved ones. Widespread and increasing hunger was only one element of the nightmare of living in closed districts. Ghettos were established in the poorest parts of cities and towns. It often happened that Jews were forced to vegetate 6-8 persons in one room, with limited access even to running water. Poverty, confinement and ruined bodies fostered the development of infectious diseases, which could only be fought in a limited way. Mortality in ghettos, especially among children and the elderly, increased from month to month. This was accompanied by frequent repressive actions carried out by German policemen, including arrests, deportations to concentration camps, and single and collective executions. In the spring of 1942, the Germans launched an action in the General-Gouvernement which they called "the final solution to the Jewish issue". Within its framework, individual ghettos were liquidated one by one, their inhabitants were transported - according to official statements - to work in the areas of the Soviet Union occupied by the German army. In fact, the transports were directed to the mass extermination camps in Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka, where Jews were murdered in gas chambers. Only a few forced labourers, imprisoned in camps at factories working for the Wehrmacht, were left on the territory of the General-Gouvernement. Only a few of them managed to survive until the end of the war.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS EXTERMINATION

Even before and during the liquidation of ghettos, many people of Jewish nationality decided to seek help outside the closed districts.

Some of the refugees - men, women and children - tried to survive in the forests by building makeshift camps and underground shelters there. Others counted on the help of Polish friends, acquaintances and former neighbours, asking them for shelter in their apartments and houses. Still others sought false, so-called Aryan documents. Regardless of the adopted strategy of survival, it was impossible to survive the next months and years without the help of Poles, for whom providing any help to Jews was punishable by the death penalty. Among Poles, however, there were those whose attitudes were and are assessed in an unequivocally reprehensible manner - traders who had already earlier made excellent deals in providing food to the ghettos, or blackmailers who blackmailed and often gave up hiding Jews to death. Many Poles, however, showed extraordinary courage, patriotism and respect for their neighbours, providing people of Jewish nationality with various help and thus saving their lives. Many of them paid the highest price for it.

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