

## 1. Life in the Ghetto

THE WARSAW GHETTO HAS BEEN DESCRIBED MANY TIMES, IN official documents and private accounts as well as in fiction. John Hersey's book *The Wall* gives probably the best portrayal in English of how people lived in the Ghetto, but, being a novel, it necessarily omits some of the details necessary for a thorough understanding of the reasons why the Ghetto physicians undertook the study of starvation.

After the surrender of Warsaw to the Germans on September 27, 1939, the Jewish community underwent a series of attacks by the invaders, calculated to break down morale, to make them recognize that they were "sub-humans," slaves of their Nazi masters. The *Kehillah* (Jewish Community Council) was dissolved on October 4, and a *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) set up to facilitate the carrying out of the German orders by the Jews and, incidentally, to take over the social and cultural functions of the *Kehillah*. In June 1940, the *Judenrat's* duties were limited by decree to the execution of the orders of the German authorities. In September 1940, a "Quarantine Area" was marked out, a section containing 240,000 Jews and 80,000

Christians. On October 16, all Christians were given two weeks to move out of the area and all Jews resident in other parts of Warsaw were ordered to move into it. On November 15, 1940, the Quarantine Area—now called by the Nazis the “Jewish Residential District”—was sealed by the walling off of thoroughfares, windows, doors, open spaces, etc.;<sup>1</sup> it consisted of nine square miles in the poorest part of Warsaw—1692 houses in all.<sup>2</sup> In January 1941, a census showed 378,979 Jews in the Ghetto; in the next four months this number was increased by the approximately 72,000 Jews deported from other regions of Poland and, to some extent, from other occupied countries. In May 1941, half a million Jews were registered in the Ghetto, but the Germans stated that there were many more “illegal” inhabitants there. On October 5, 1941, the death penalty was established for leaving the Ghetto without permission. On October 23, the Small Ghetto was abolished and the residents were driven into the Large Ghetto. On December 1, 1941, all food packages from outside relief organizations were forbidden to be received; those sent were confiscated. The extermination program, euphemistically called “resettlement,” began on July 22, 1942. 380,000 Jews were registered at that time in the Ghetto. By September 21, 1942, the Ghetto area had been reduced by half and three-quarters of its population removed from Warsaw to the extermination camps. In January 1943, only 40,000 Jews were left in the Ghetto. An attempt was made to remove this remnant on January 18, but was unsuccessful because of the resistance movement. The Ghetto was finally liquidated on May 16, 1943, after a month of fighting. It was bombed, set afire, and then the buildings were razed,<sup>3</sup> including a chapel, a mortuary, and all other buildings in the Jewish cemetery.<sup>4</sup>

Crowded together in the Ghetto, an average of thirteen

people to one room,<sup>5</sup> were Orthodox Jews, atheists, recently baptized Christians and the Catholic children of baptized Jews, twice-a-year religionists, Zionists of all types, Communists, Socialists, big and little capitalists, workers, artisans, *Luftmenschen*, refugees, philanthropists, gangsters, assimilated Jews who neither spoke nor read Yiddish, Hasidim with their eyes fixed on Heaven, engineers, doctors, lawyers, social workers, priests. And in this mish-mash there was one thing in common—the Shield of David, the yellow patch. No matter what it was called, it distinguished them from the rest of the population as Jews, a people bearing the mark of their inevitable destruction.<sup>6</sup> Everyone wore it, for death awaited those who went without it. It was a potent factor in keeping them effectively subdued. Fearful of the unknown but certain terror that was outside the Ghetto, the vast majority resigned themselves to the expected medieval miseries within the walls.

Imbued with a fatal sense of history, the Ghetto dwellers began the re-organization of their lives. Within the walls developed a distorted mirror-image of the world outside. The main task was to keep alive. The only economic connection with the outside was the importation of food and raw materials to be worked on in the Ghetto shops and then exported via the official exchange station. Workers fought for places in the large shops, such as those of Toebbens and Schultz, to assure themselves of a fixed income and exemption from forced labor. Other Jews, who had managed to bring in with them foreign currency, jewels, rare stamps, books or other valuables, and those who had hidden stores of raw materials traded their possessions through intermediaries for food and money. New industries developed in the Ghetto; the displaced manufacturers, engineers and chemists set up dye works, tanneries, textile plants, even a cigarette factory.<sup>7</sup> “From sugar, with-

out cocoa or nuts, they made almond chocolate."<sup>8</sup> In cellars, in every available nook and cranny, women and children made toys, dolls, brushes, mattresses, blankets, whatever the traditional sweat-shop could produce.<sup>9</sup> The everyday machinery of life creaked along, breaking down intermittently under the impact of the Nazi decrees. The Ghetto was a vast work-shop for the Germans and yet, because of the constant influx of refugees and deportees, there was mass unemployment.

In the "points," asylums for the displaced and homeless, misery was the order of the day. Here the Jewish community took upon itself its traditional duty of helping the helpless in the same way it had in the past ironically "better" days, but on a larger scale than ever before. Relief organizations did what they could to mitigate the general distress. In the words of Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, the underground archivist of the Ghetto, "Through the active and generous aid of the American Joint Distribution Committee a large web of institutions for communal welfare was spread throughout Warsaw . . . conducted by the Jewish Society for Social Welfare, the Central Organization for the Protection of Children and Orphans, and the Society for the Protection of Health of the Jewish population. . . . Tens of thousands of adults and children were able to survive for a longer period because of the help of these institutions and of the ramified network of House Committees which cooperated with them."

Behind the brick wall surmounted by broken glass, the Jews were visited again with the quadruple Biblical curse of death by pestilence, by the sword, by wild beasts, and by famine. Epidemics swept through the Ghetto. Dysentery followed typhus and typhus followed dysentery. Tuberculosis, always a hidden threat, now became an open menace. Shootings were a daily event, sometimes "for cause"—

removing the yellow patch, forgetting to remove the hat when speaking to a member of the Master Race, smuggling food, and sometimes without cause, for the sake of "amusement"—every red-headed boy, every fifth woman, any random target. But one plague was widespread—starvation. Hunger pervaded every moment of the day for workers and officials; it *was* the whole life of the homeless and jobless. The Ghetto songs were those of hunger, the poems were of hunger, the tales were of hunger. Hunger was feared even more than the unpredictable Nazi decrees.