

# Black, bleak walls rising to the sky...

**We share a column by Martyna Grądzka-Rejak, PhD, the head of the Scientific and Research Dpt. of WGM, published in *Plus Minus* – the weekend issue of *Rzeczpospolita* – on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the closure of the Warsaw Ghetto.**

During World War II, there were almost 400 ghettos in the General Government (GG) and Bezirk Bialystok for a longer or shorter period of time, and over 600 ghettos in all occupied territories of Poland. Most of them were established by the Germans in the years 1940–1941. Some of them were operating for many months, others were established shortly before the deportation of Jewish people to concentration camps. The Germans tried to separate the ghettos from the remaining parts of towns, but brick walls were built only in a few towns.

## **Medieval inspirations**

Separate districts for Jews and special markings for them were not a concept introduced by the German Nazi. Such solutions were known already in the Middle Ages. After the fourth Lateran Council in 1215, Jews and Muslims were obliged to wear elements of clothing that distinguished them from Christians. The term ghetto itself, in turn, can be traced back to a district for Jews established in 1516 in Venice. The word was used to refer to a foundry, and it was coined in a part of the town which was adjacent to a foundry. The roots of this name are also found in the Italian word borghetto which means a town or a small district. In Rome, a separate quarter was established for Jews, and the process of its creation resembled the one repeated centuries later by the Germans. People who were leaving this area were told to mark their clothes with a yellow circle. The ghetto in Rome was intended to separate Christians from the “impure body of a Jew” and his or her “foul touch”. The same sanitary and epidemiological justification was also turned to an argument by the Germans to justify the necessity to form closed districts for Jews.

Ghettos were aimed at concentrating Jews in one place, separating them from the “Aryan” population, as well as at using them for labour for the benefit of the Third Reich economy. The establishment of the so-called Jewish residential quarters was, alongside the legal acts issued by the Germans which interfered with personal freedoms and regulated property-related, economic, and other issues, the first step to their physical extermination. In October 1939, the first ghetto in Piotrków Trybunalski was established. And the largest and the most crowded ghetto was established in Warsaw. Separate parts for the Jewish population were also created in the summer of 1942 during the implementation of the “Reinhardt” action aimed at the extermination of Jews in the General Government and Bezirk Bialystok. At that time they were created to gather them in one place before the execution or deportation to a death camp. However, ghettos were not established everywhere and it sometimes happened that Jews lived in their homes until deportation.

### **“Bricked up” in ghettos**

Confinement was a factor contributing to the sense of desolation, abandonment, and even being cut off from the world. In most towns, the boundaries of ghettos were wooden fences, barbed-wire entanglements, or individual streets additionally guarded by the stations of the so-called blue police, or Jewish police, and German police officers. Brick walls were built in a few towns; they were built, among other places, in Warsaw, Cracow, and Nowy Sącz. In June 1941, the Governor of the Lublin district Ernst Zörner issued an order that the ghetto in the Lublin castle grounds shall be enclosed with a wall. However, these recommendations did not enter into force. The accounts of the survivors mention a wall around a part of the Miechów ghetto. Also, fragments of a wall around the ghetto in Krosno are mentioned. It can be supposed that when the Germans were creating ghettos in these two towns, they used the already existing brick structures for this purpose instead of erecting new ones. A fragment of a brick wall from a demolished synagogue with a wooden fence was used to separate the ghetto in Łowicz.

Regardless of whether or not a ghetto was separated with a fence or another physical barrier, it was only possible to leave its area in designated places, upon presentation of special passes. Attempts to illegally leave a ghetto had serious consequences. German legislation regulated

these issues in detail. The so-called Third Ordinance Limiting the Stay in the General Government issued by Hans Frank on 15 October 1941 was of crucial significance. Not only did it uphold the earlier order to isolate Jews but it also stipulated that “Jews who leave their designated district without authorisation are subject to the death penalty. The same penalty was imposed on everyone who knowingly hid such Jews”. This law had a significant influence on those who considered the possibility to seek shelter on the so-called Aryan side; it also affected Polish-Jewish relationships and decisions about whether to help ghetto fugitives.

### **Warsaw, Cracow, Nowy Sącz**

The decision to build a wall encircling the Jewish district in Warsaw was made in March 1940. The Germans wanted to seal off the “area at risk of an epidemic”, as this part of the city was called. On 18 March, the President of the Judenrat in Warsaw, Adam Czerniaków, noted in a diary: “an order that the commune should surround the »ghetto« with barbed wire, drive in pales, etc. and then guard it”. Two weeks later the Judenrat received an official order to erect a wall. President Czerniaków noted under the date of 1 April: “today at 7 in the morning we begun digging holes for the erection of walls”. Bogdan Wojdowski in his book “Bread for the Departed” described subsequent stages of construction: “Here – at the intersection of Żelazna and Chmielna streets – the wall-boundary grew right outside the windows of tenement houses. From dawn to dusk, bricklayers’ shouts and increasing hum of water from the hydrant opened at the side, on the roadway were heard. Wheelbarrows working two shifts were chirping, the wet clapping of trowels and mortar thrown against the wall resounded. They were building a wall. It reached to the knees, then to the shoulders of the bricklayers. They measured, laid bricks, and proceeded. When it was twice the height of a man, they reinforced its top with broken bottles, thrown densely on wet cement”. The structure was ready before mid-June 1940. The wall which was sixteen kilometers long and three meters high was reinforced with barbed wire. It was not continuous, in some places, there was a wooden fence instead of a brick structure. The boundaries were also marked by the tenement houses in which doors and windows on the so-called Aryan side had been bricked up. As Chaim Kapłan wrote, “These walls partitioned the busiest streets”, which forced significant changes in traffic organisation. On 16 November 1940, the walls around the Warsaw Ghetto were closed, and its residents were isolated from the rest of

the city.

When looking at the photographs from the Cracow ghetto, one cannot ignore the impressive entrance gate leading to it from the Podgórze Market Square. There was the Star of David on it and an inscription in Yiddish „Jidiszer Woinbecirk”. The gate and the wall connected to it had a semi-circular top resembling a maceba – a Jewish tombstone. The Cracow ghetto was established under the decision of 3 March 1941. It was situated in the Podgórze district, in a neglected and poorly modernised part of the city. Initially, the area was fenced with barbed wire and guarded by German, Polish and Jewish services. In April, in the time of the Passover, employees of a Polish construction company employed by the German Arbeitsamt started building the wall around the ghetto. Tadeusz Pankiewicz, a Pole whose pharmacy was included in the ghetto, recalled: “dozens of bricklayers, carpenters, day and night were erecting the wall, barring windows in tenement houses overlooking the »Aryan« district, driving pales into the ground, building gates. People looked with horror at the growing walls which strangely changed the appearance of the ghetto.” Renia Knoll, a teenage girl, wrote in her diary: “It is so sad in here! Anywhere you look, you can see black, bleak walls rising to the sky with tombstones on top.” The area of the ghetto covered approximately 20 ha. In a space where previously about 3 thousand people lived, 10 thousand people were going to function now, and in the future, almost twice as many. Józef Bau, a witness to these events, wrote about the impression that the wall made on him: “like a noose made of bricks seasoned with hatred, it strangled the houses inhabited by Jews in an unbelievably constrained space. The wall was not a continuous structure, it was built, for example, along Lwowska and Rękawka streets, and the Podgórze Market Square, but there still remained sections fenced off with barbed wire which was later changed to a fence. In some places, like in Warsaw, the boundary was delimited by the walls of tenement houses whose windows overlooking the so-called Aryan side had been boarded up, wired or bricked up.

A wall, although much shorter, was built in Nowy Sącz. The ghetto in this town, or rather two parts of the ghetto – one for working people, and the other – located in the centre of the town – for non-working people, was established on 12 August 1940. In summer 1941 construction works were started to separate the area of the ghetto for non-working people from the so-called Aryan side. The two parts of the town were separated with a three-metre-high wall. The creation of a

ghetto in the very centre of Nowy Sącz and the erection of walls changed the topography of the town, destroying the existing communication routes and causing problems in its functioning.

Some fragments of the walls were eliminated after the deportations – especially the sections that caused difficulties in moving around the towns. In Warsaw and Cracow, it was partly done when the area of the Jewish district was reduced; the remaining sections were not demolished until after the war. It was the same in Nowy Sącz. The fragment which survived to the post-war period was demolished due to the demand for construction materials in the city which was being reconstructed at that time. Only a few fragments of walls have survived to the present day. They are silent witnesses of the tragic events taking place in their boundaries as well as a warning against the consequences of dividing people into better, worse, or redundant people, who should be isolated for various reasons.

**Martyna Grądzka-Rejak**, PhD – a historian, head of the Scientific and Research Department of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum, an employee of the Historical Research Bureau of the Institute of National Remembrance.

*Photo: APW*



Ghetto gate in Cracow

WIKIPEDIA

---

**Publication date:** 2020-11-17

**Print date:** 2023-05-02 14:37

**Source:** <http://1943.pl/en/artykul/black-bleak-walls-rising-to-the-sky/>