

“Freedom! Give us back our freedom...”

We hereby provide an article by Dr Martyna Grądzka-Rejak, the head of the Science and Research Department of WGM, published in the *Słowo Żydowskie* monthly to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the closure of the Warsaw Ghetto borders.

On 2 October 1940, just before Rosh Hashanah, Ludwig Fischer, Governor of the Warsaw District, issued an order to establish the Jüdischer Wohnbezirk, or the so-called Jewish residential quarter. A plan of streets that were to be included in the ghetto was attached to the order as well. Less than two weeks later, on Yom Kippur Day, the decision to create three residential districts in Warsaw: German, Polish and Jewish, was announced by megaphones. The Poles had to leave the streets and apartments that were to become part of the ghetto while the Jews were obliged to move to the designated area as soon as possible. A month later, on 16 November, the ghetto which had already been surrounded by walls was closed off.

Typhus-hazard area

The Germans took the first steps to create a ghetto in Warsaw as early as the autumn of 1939. Adam Czerniakow, head of the Warsaw Judenrat, made the following note in his diary on 20 December: “Rumours about the Prague district (ghetto)”. In January 1940, Waldemar Schön came to Warsaw. Before the war, he worked with Hans Frank, as well as others. The General Government authorities appointed him the head of the Resettlement Division and tasked him with the creation of the city ghetto. Schön initially planned to move the Jewish population to the other side of the Vistula River and set up a ghetto in the above-mentioned Prague district. However, due to many reasons, including economic and logistical ones, this idea was not implemented. The northern district, inhabited mostly by the Jews, was chosen instead. In March it was decided that walls must be built around the so-called “epidemic area”, referred to by the Germans as “Seuchensperrgebiet”. Their construction commenced in April 1940 and had to be financed by the Jewish community. This process took more than two months.

Damage due to the fighting in September 1939, migration, impoverishment of the population, as well as food and water shortage, led to the outbreak of typhus in Warsaw. The Germans took advantage of the fear of this disease to accuse the Jewish community of spreading it. In this way, they could justify the creation of a separate residential district for Jews. Ludwik Hirszfeld, a bacteriologist, referred to this issue in his memoirs: "The authorities wanted to isolate the carriers of dangerous germs. People calling themselves doctors of medicine justified this thesis. Science has long since eliminated medieval quarantines not only because it was cruel but also pointless. Pointless? It is not about eradicating the epidemic, but about exterminating the Jews.". A 3-metre-high and over 16-kilometre-long wall which divided the town was supposed to provide adequate protection.

Changing boundaries

Rumours about the creation of a ghetto have been circulating in Warsaw since the first months of the war, but it was Fischer's order issued in early October 1940 that finally confirmed them. However, the ghetto's boundaries and the plan of the streets that it was to include – which were attached to the order – differed from those marked as the "typhus-hazard zone" and published in August by the "Nowy Kurier Warszawski" and "Gazeta Żydowska" propaganda rags. The area between the Bankowy Square, the Senatorska and Bielańska streets, as well as part of the Saski Garden, were not included in it; instead, it included the Jewish cemetery and the surroundings of the Okopowa Street. Walls which had already been built on streets and squares which eventually did not become part of the ghetto (e.g. in the Old Town) were demolished. Before the ghetto's gates were finally shut, its boundaries had been corrected and various streets and border buildings re-assigned from one zone to another numerous times. Among the reasons for this were social and economic issues – e.g., industrial plants that could not be moved, as well as logistical issues – e.g. when erecting a wall in a given place would make accessing various institutions, like hospitals, much more difficult. Chaim Kapłan commented on this in the following way: "Even after the publication of the official order which defined the boundaries of the Jewish quarter, changes were made the very next day. This is why thousands of Jewish families live in a state of panic, wrestling between hope and fear". Such changes, appearing almost overnight, only deepened the already prevalent chaos. Emanuel Ringelblum, a ghetto

historian and chronicler, described German furniture requisitions and bribes that facilitated the moving process in his memoirs: "Today, they took the furniture from the No 4, 6 and 8 Leszno street [tenement houses] and ordered that the apartments at 8 Żelazna Brama Square to be vacated [...] Additionally, the displacement of Poles from some streets in the southern [part of Warsaw], i.e. Poznańska and Wspólna Street, has begun today. The Jews, if they pay a bit of cash, get a little more time to pack and are allowed to take all their belongings. The Jewish population is terrified – no one can be sure if they will spend the next night in their own bed". The inhabitants of the "disputed" streets did not know what to do and awaited binding decisions. Some of them moved several times before the ghetto was finally closed.

Separated, hidden, walled off

About 140,000 Jews and 113,000 Poles were forced to move. The city streets were full of horse carts carrying furniture and other belongings. The sidewalks too were full of people pushing trolley wagons and even children's strollers filled with their things. People who did not have carts carried toys, books, clothing and small household appliances in bundle bags. The apartments in the ghetto were overcrowded, with several families often forced to share a single, small area. As such, taking all of one's belongings was often impossible. The items that people could not take with them, e.g. musical instruments, were put up for sale. The propaganda rag newspapers were full of buy, sell and goods exchange offers. More valuable items were left for safekeeping with friends.

The decision to create a ghetto, although somewhat expected, came as a surprise to many people. The need to move there with your loved ones and leave the current apartment and the environment behind without any idea for how long was extremely difficult to cope with. Initially, the inhabitants did not know if the Warsaw ghetto would be an open or a closed one. However, with time, they realised that they would be walled off in an area of only about 400 hectares. By the end of 1940, almost 395,000 Jews – men, women and children of different age, education, profession, religiousness level, material status and social background – were imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto. They were cut off from the rest of the city, forced into a small area and left at the mercy of the German occupier.

On 16 November 1940, the gates of the Warsaw ghetto were closed. Since then, anyone attempting to enter or leave it without a pass was subject to punishment. As Ludwik Hirszfeld recalled: "There are guards at the outlets [22 gates of the ghetto], called "wacha" in the local dialect. They include a few armed Germans, observing the crowd with disdain, Polish policemen, as well as servile Jewish policemen, who get hit in the face whenever they are not being efficient enough". Being closed in the ghetto evoked various emotions among its inhabitants. Some people believed that although their living conditions would deteriorate and they would be separated from their old friends and their environment, they would still be able to live there in relative freedom. Others treated the ghetto as a kind of a centre that would increase the level of integration of the Jewish community. Some thought that being invisible, hidden behind the walls and far away from the war would allow them to survive until the end of the occupation in a safer way. No one knew that the war would drag on for four more years, so they believed that liberation was coming in the next several months. Mery Berg, who was a teenager at the time, described it in her diary as follows: "Some say it's better for us because the Germans won't dare to commit crimes so openly, and besides, we will be protected from attacks by Polish ruffians." With time, due to the increasing difficulties and the constant deterioration of the living standards, the ghetto and its surrounding walls became overwhelming for them and the feeling of "being walled off" accompanied them in their everyday life.

Stanisław Różycki, an attentive observer of ghetto life, described the conditions in the ghetto, as well as their impact on its inhabitants: "Faith has not been lost even at the threshold of hell when crossing these atrocious walls. [...] I look for parks, gardens and squares. There are none and it is futile to look for even a trace of greenery – everything has been deliberately excluded and walled off because the wretched, dirty Jews do not need reviving oxygen, ozone, air, health, rest or suitable conditions for children. So, it stinks here, and the wind carries a suspicious stench and a morbid smell". Many inhabitants of the Ghetto dreamed about the possibility to move around freely, return to their previous lifestyles, to the bygone world. Halina Aszkenazy-Engelhard, a teenage ghetto inhabitant, expressed this longing: "As I walked by the still growing ghetto walls and watched the birds flying over them, I envied them and dreamt of turning into one, crossing those terrible walls and running away so far, so far away that there were no Germans, no typhus, no horrible starving ghetto faces. [...] Freedom! Give us back our freedom – my heart seemed to

be shouting”. As weeks and months were going by, there was a growing desire to get out of the “tomb,” as the ghetto was often perceived. However changes were not coming, so it was around the walls that the life of ghetto inhabitants was centred. They walked past these walls, stopped, tried to look at the world on the other side, sought possibilities to smuggle the so much needed food. What was happening outside the walls, beyond this boundary between two worlds – was gradually becoming increasingly distant, hazy and strange.

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