

Sealing of the Warsaw Ghetto

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On 16 November 1940, by Order of the Warsaw District Head Ludwig Fischer of 2 October 1940, Warsaw's 'Jewish residential district' was sealed. German police set up check points at the ghetto boarder crossings. They also imposed a system of passes on all traffic between the ghetto and the 'Aryan side.'

The Jewish Warsaw was enclosed within a surrounding wall. The city's Jewish community – vigorous and highly diverse – was suddenly cut off from the rest of Warsaw. A huge enclave, a city within a city, was established with the view of facilitating ruthless economic exploitation and uncompromising plunder of its residents, continuing the methodical plunder of Jewish property which began with the occupation. In the weeks preceding the closure of the ghetto, 138,000 Jews were forced to resettle within its perimeter while 113,000 Poles were displaced from it. That operation in itself expedited robbery: approximately 4,000 Jewish-owned retail establishments and another 600 service and manufacturing businesses located on 'the Aryan side' were seized. Their resettled owners never recouped their property.

The building of the surrounding wall began in April of that year. "The wall separated people and that was why it was built; I cannot put it more succinctly," wrote Bogdan Wojdowski in the Foreword to his novel *Bread for the Departed*. By August 1940, 47 sections of a 3-meter tall barbed wire topped brick wall were in place, which ran along estate boundaries and building walls. That autumn, some streets were divided and closed off with the wall.

Corner of Leszno St. and Żelazna St. in November 1940, and the same location today: now Solidarności Ave. and Żelazna St.

Though guarded by German gendarmes and Polish Blue Police on the outside, and by the

Jewish Order Service, commonly referred to as the Jewish police, on the inside, the borders of the closed Jewish quarter were never impervious. Goods were smuggled on a major scale through the dozen or so ghetto gates, with bribes flowing to the gendarmes and the other law enforcement officials. Smaller scale smuggling occurred through what was popularly known as 'transfer points' operating in many parts of the city: inside border area buildings, which had masked wall passages and excavated underpasses. Another smuggling method involved throwing sacks of goods over the wall.

Germans confined approximately 400,000 people to 307 hectares. Personal journals and accounts from the ghetto as well as some scenes of the German propaganda films reveal the enormous population density of the 'Jewish residential district.' The ghetto boundaries continued to be redrawn in step with progress in implementation of the extermination policy, primarily in the aftermath of the first wave of the Great Deportation, in the summer of 1942.

The 16th of November 1940 and the construction of the wall etched themselves in the literary memory of Bogdan Wojdowski (translated by Madeline G. Levine, 1997): "One day, in plain view of the people on either side, bricklayers started building a wall along Żelazna and Sienna Streets, on Wielka, across Bagno, along Próżna, Grzybów, and Graniczna Streets, and then across Żelazna Brama Square to Hale, thus closing off the southern district. That was the Little Ghetto. The wall continued down Chłodna to Ptasia, along Przechodnia to Długa, from Mylna to Przejazd, Świętojerska to Ciasna, down Koźła to Przebieg, crossing Pokorna, Stawki, Dzika, and Okopy, enclosing the northern district. That was the Big Ghetto. A wooden bridge was erected across Chłodna Street near St. Karol's Church to link the two districts, which were separated by a streetcar line."

"It has begun, Jews,' Mordechai Sukiennik called out from a cloud of dust, gesturing."

Emanuel Ringelblum wrote: "[...] The population did not yet know that the ghetto would be closed, which is why the news came like a bolt from the blue. At all the intersections, there were now posts of German, Polish and Jewish policemen, who controlled everyone's right to cross. It turned out that the market halls were inaccessible to Jewish women. Bread and other products

ran out immediately and the new times were ushered in by an orgy of high prices.”

Chaim Kaplan wrote in his Journal from the Warsaw ghetto: “We have entered a new phase of life, it is hard to imagine the panic which this caused in the Jewish district. We suddenly realised we were confined and enclosed on all sides. We are now excluded and isolated from the world, expelled from human society.”