

VIII

Vandalism on Part of the *Volksdeutschen*

As soon as the Germans managed to occupy any location at all in Poland, a special category of people, who were referred to as "*Volksdeutschen*" [ethnic Germans], sprang up as if from under the earth. The same happened in our city. The local population knew the freshly-baked "*Volksdeutschen*" well - they had always been Poles but, once the Germans had arrived, the hitherto Poles began wearing special badges, with which they were transformed, all of a sudden, into "Germans".

As it later emerged, they had been German spies before the War, who had occupied positions in Polish governmental offices. Some of them were actually remotely descended from Germans and even had German names.

These *Volksdeutschen* had taken care that the Poles did not destroy anything upon leaving the city and, afterwards, they helped the Germans settle in and revealed to them where anything was being hidden.

The first anti-Jewish manifestation on part of the *Volksdeutschen* in our city was the destruction of the Jewish synagogues. To that purpose, they organised the Polish antisemites, whom they knew well from before the War and, one day in November 1939, they and a band of Polish street youths entered the Municipal Synagogue and wrought devastation there. They tore off the doors, smashed the windows, hacked apart the Holy Ark and tore down the balconies from the women's gallery. Dozens of Gentiles carried pieces of wood from the broken benches and tables around the streets, until the Synagogue was left emptied out, with stripped, barren walls.

The same fate was also shared by the Study-Hall, which had been built a few years earlier, named after the deceased local [Chief] Rabbi, Reb Nachum Asz z''l.

This deed of vandalism had a very crushing effect on the morale of the entire Jewish populace. Not only the religious, but also the non-religious felt hurt and insulted. It also made a harsh impression on some of the Poles, but the greater part of the Polish population made jokes and surveyed the destruction with satisfaction.

On 25th December 1939, on the night of the great Christian holiday, they set fire to the large synagogue¹, which was considered one of our city's most beautiful buildings. It had a beautiful, wide entrance, a long stairway and spacious, high-ceilinged halls. The magnificent synagogue burnt all night, after which people came, for days on end, to the quiet ul. Wilsona to survey the Germans' "heroic deed".

¹ [TN: Viz. the New Synagogue, or so-called "German Synagogue".]

When the Polish men of the underworld pillaged the destroyed synagogues and carried off anything they could, the Germans filmed these scenes. These images were subsequently shown in the cinemas, with titles [noting] how the Poles were taking revenge upon the Jews.

The Germans also took their share of loot from the torched synagogues. They thoroughly inspected whatever things of value that were left. The ironware from the walls and the metal components of the entrance, stairs and railings – all this was torn out from the structure and, on the Jewish populace, it made an impression as if they were tearing pieces off a living limb.