

**Zvi Wiernik**

## **The Holocaust on European Jewry**

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The history of the Jewish people is filled with suffering, tears and blood throughout its entire existence - beginning with Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, who enslaved the Jews, oppressed them, tortured them and ordered their [new-born] sons be cast into the river, through Haman the Evil, who plotted to kill and destroy them, the Spanish Inquisition, which burnt thousands at the stake, to the Ukrainian marauders Chmielnicki and Petlura, and the Arabs - with the Mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini at their head, who perpetrated pogroms, robbed property and killed Jews.

But all along this blood-soaked path, never did the persecutions and killings reach the magnitude of the atrocities carried out by the Nazi regime, both in the number of victims and in the cruelty of the perpetrators, their systems and their actions.

Never was there, in the annals of Jewish martyrdom or in the history of any of the world's nations, such a genocide which was planned and conducted in cold blood and with elaborate technical methods that were calculated down to the smallest detail. Only in our generation did it happen that the mechanism of a large nation rose up against a peaceful, helpless population - men, women, elderly, children, infants and babes - to exterminate them by all kinds of unnatural deaths - starvation, shooting, hanging, beheading and strangulation - and all this in an absolutely horrifyingly systematic manner, while the rest of the world's nations stood silently by. Eight and a quarter million Jews lived in the European lands that the Nazis occupied. Six million of them were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust. The People of Israel, which numbered 18 million in 1939, are now just 12.5 million.

This evil was also unprecedented in that this genocide, unparalleled in the history of mankind, was not perpetrated due to a spontaneous urge flaring up. It was not plotted by individuals, but by the villainous collaboration between thousands and tens of thousands, with and without uniforms, as well as organisations and squads whose only purpose and reason to exist was to carry out this vile mission.

### **The Holocaust in Poland**

Polish Jewry, which numbered 3.5 million before the War, bore the heaviest brunt. Immediately when the Nazis invaded Poland, the terror and persecutions against Jews commenced, which were organised and managed by an agency that the Germans established solely for this purpose. It was headed by the nemesis Adolf Eichmann, who formulated and put into effect the annihilation of European Jewry. His agents were attached to all units of the German military and participated in the management of all the Nazi-occupied territories in the whole of Europe. Germans, of all social strata, took part in planning the war against the Jews. The jurists prepared "legal" grounds to strip Jews of their legal rights, to turn them into defenceless people whom it was permitted to humiliate, starve, rob of all their possessions, enslave and, finally, kill. Experts on psychological warfare exploited the difference of opinions within the local population in matters of religion [and] culture and ignited anti-Jewish sentiments. Their economists formulated plans on how to strip Jews of their property to the very last bit, including the hair and gold teeth of those killed. Intellectuals, artists, clerics, writers, journalists and radio presenters did all they could to justify the evil. The engineers designed the gas-chambers and crematoria, whilst the medical "experts" trained on the corpses of the victims, mainly

Jews. The concentration camps became colossal epicentres, where millions of victims waited in line to be killed, pondering on the smoke from the crematorium chimneys, which symbolised the end of suffering.

The chemists invented a special gas called "Zyklon". A few boxes of "Zyklon" could suffocate thousands simultaneously! German industrialists efficiently drained the Jewish slave's last drop of sweat with twelve-hour working days of back-breaking, unpaid labour, in the course of which a person was transformed into a *muselmann* [walking skeleton] in a short time.

And the German army obeyed orders loyally. A genocide cannot take place without an army. No expulsion can be affected without its backing. They were the ones who destroyed the ghettos and wherever opposition sprung up - everything was turned to ashes. The ruins of the Warsaw, Czestochowa and many other ghettos bear violent and trustworthy testimony to this. This mighty mechanism rained its blows on the Jews of Europe and, in order to deceive their victims, they used various cunning subterfuges, spreading illusions to the very last moment.

In order to make their extermination task easier, they appointed autonomous *Judenräte* [Jewish Councils] in every ghetto and camp, which was meant to streamline the process of mass murder. These men naively thought that cooperation with the enemy would prevent calamities or perhaps weaken their power and, when they realised their bitter error, it was already too late.

The Jewish public did not accept the decrees that the Germans rained down on them and resisted, with its meagre means, to withstand the tempest. This resistance was manifested in all areas. Financially, despite all the decrees and the confiscation of Jewish property in industry and commerce, and despite the exclusion of Jews from all sources of existence and livelihood and their being crammed into ghettos, they fought for their [own] subsistence and also attended to the needy by establishing soup-kitchens, welfare institutions, hospitals. They waged a desperate war against epidemics. They saw to it that food and medication be brought inside the ghetto, selflessly and sacrificially – sometimes paying with human life.

Despite the prohibition to conduct schooling, the youth received private lessons - in courses which were organised clandestinely. Despite the synagogues having been closed down, prayer services were held - Jews worshipped in cellars and attics. There were secret libraries. The weapon of satire was deployed in the form of a monthly periodical, which denounced those who exploited their status and did not prove their social maturity. Organisations and political youth movements operated covertly and were in contact with all the Polish Resistance organisations. Despite the great terror and in defiance of the strict prohibition to leave the ghetto (the only punishment was death), dozens of youths left the ghetto in different manners, with all sorts of ploys. They travelled throughout Poland and were in live contact with the concentrations of Jews tortured in the ghettos of Warsaw, Łódź, Wilna, Kraków, Zagłębie and more.

### **The Holocaust in Czestochowa**

[These youths] were the source of all the information inside the Czestochowa ghetto about what was happening in the cities of Poland - about the gradual annihilation of entire communities, the concentration camps in which people quickly became walking skeletons, the epidemics and hunger, the mass killings by shooting, gas-chambers and in gas-wagons [mobile gas-chambers in lorries] around Chełmno [and] about Oświęcim [Auschwitz] and Majdanek. Feverish activity ensued between all political parties to unite and defend the ghetto. The first operation was the raising of funds for the Leftist faction of the Polish Resistance. The news of the suicide of Czerniaków, who had been the head of the Warsaw *Judenrat* and had refused to give the Germans lists and aid them in the

expulsion of tens of thousands of Jews from Warsaw to the Treblinka death camp, spread quickly in our city. The news of the ruin and destruction of the largest of the European Jewish communities proved that the Angel of Death was quickly approaching our city also. The Polish resistance was oblivious to our plight and people sought refuge. Some procured false certificates and travelled to work in Germany and other places as forced labourers, as Poles, or approached Polish acquaintances who, for money, promised to save them.

People gave babies up to convents or built bunkers in which to hide until the wrath had passed. Those, who were unable to find refuge, obtained certificates from the Germans stating that they were useful professionals. Among all these, a small part nevertheless found courage in their souls and dared to rebel against the terrifying reality. Their operations and daring deeds are told in detail further on, in the "Resistance and Rebellion" section [of this book]. As we said, this was only a small part. Everybody else generally despaired - helplessness reigned supreme and the illusions that the *Judenrat* sowed were in vain. The murder machine was activated to its fullest ferocity the day after Yom Kippur in 1942, when about 35,000 men, women and children were sent to Treblinka. Around 1,000 were murdered at once and 6,000 were crammed into a few narrow streets, which were called the "Small Ghetto". During the expulsion, some attacked Germans and Ukrainians, but they were killed on the spot. Some, before leaving their homes, ruined and destroyed everything, so as not to leave anything for the Germans. There were those who managed to escape from the railway carriages, to afterwards meet their deaths on the roads or those who arrived in Treblinka and were able to maintain contact with the ghetto from there. A few succeeded in escaping from there to the "Small Ghetto". If anyone in the "Small Ghetto" had until then entertained any hopes at all regarding the fate of the deportees, now the bitter truth of the Germans' "Final Solution" became known - utter annihilation.