

Conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto

The city of Warsaw, the capital of Poland, had long been a centre of Jewish cultural life when the Second World War began in 1939. Around one third of its population was Jewish and there were many Jewish **shtetls** around the town. After heavy bombing the Germans took over Warsaw on the 29th September 1939. Within a week a [ghetto](#) had been established in Warsaw, forcing the Jewish population into one portion of the city, an operation which meant the forced movement of 138,000 Polish Jews from their homes.

Conditions in the ghetto were extremely poor. As more and more Jews from the surrounding region were forced into the ghetto, overcrowding became a serious problem. Between 8 and 10 people living in one room was normal, and the population density was 146,000 people per



Jews being moved into the Warsaw Ghetto. (October 1940, Yad Vashem Photo Archive)

square mile. (For comparison, modern Warsaw is 8,800 per square mile).

Those forced into the ghetto from outside Warsaw were only allowed to bring personal belongings and a single set of clothes, meaning they often had next to nothing. Proper hygiene was almost impossible, as many homes did not have running water and soap was an expensive commodity on the **ghetto black market**. Only five bath houses existed in the ghetto, and they served

approximately 17,000 people a month. This led to rapid spread of dangerous diseases like **typhus**.

Hunger and starvation were a persistent threat and the average **ration** for Jewish adults was 1,125 calories a day. This would eventually fall to a mere 180 calories a day. Most adults need to eat 2,000 calories a day to stay alive. On such rations, starvation was common and between 1940 and June 1942 92,000 inhabitants of the ghetto died from starvation, disease, or **exposure**.



Children in the Warsaw Ghetto. (Yad Vashem Photo Archive 25211)

Survivor [Abraham Lewent](#) describes the conditions below:

“The hunger in the ghetto was so great, was so bad, that people were laying on the streets and dying, little children went around begging, and, uh, everyday you walked out in the morning, you see somebody is laying dead, covered with newspapers or with any kind of blanket they found, and you found... And every day thousands and thousands died just from malnutrition because the Germans didn't give anything for the people in the ghetto to eat. There was no such thing. You can't walk in and buy anything, or getting any rations. It's your hard luck. If you don't have it, you die, and that's what it was.”