

# Guide to a Lost City

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**Part of the center of contemporary Warsaw was at one time the Warsaw Ghetto, a closed district where Polish Jews were forced by the Nazis to live from October 1940 to May 1943. This part of the city no longer exists in its prewar form.**

Under German occupation, Warsaw was in many ways a divided city. The instrument of this division was a Nazi edict that established a new spatial organization and new laws in the city. It created something which can be termed a “decreed space.” The Nazis’ decision to establish a Jewish district was announced on 15 November 1940. It was an arbitrary form of urban space, imposed by force and executed with utmost severity, which was to reflect a new occupational „order.” The dichotomy between the two parts of Warsaw, the Ghetto and the Aryan side, created two spheres characterized by completely different living conditions, delineated by a Ghetto Wall.

The Ghetto, with its inhabitants and urban infrastructure, suffered a gradual decline until its complete eradication. The people of the Ghetto were killed; its buildings, squares and streets were burned, blown up and destroyed. The destruction of the urban space was carried out in stages, along with the waves of extermination of its Jewish



Krzysztof Kallinski

**Surviving fragments of the Warsaw Ghetto wall along Sienna Street, in the very heart of Warsaw. The Palace of Culture and Science, a Warsaw landmark, can be seen in the distance**

inhabitants. The first stage was characterized by the closing off of the space, overcrowding, and the breaking of social bonds and topographic structures. Then there was a gradual decrease in the area occupied by the Ghetto, a reduction of the space in which Jews were allowed to live. The borders of the Ghetto were continuously changed to encompass less and less area, gravitating towards the northern part: the Umschlagplatz. Through 1943, the urban tissue of the Ghetto was transformed in many ways. After the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, this part of the city was completely annihilated.

### Inhabitants of the Ghetto

At the peak of the resettlement action in March 1941, a Ghetto area of only 180 hectares was inhabited by 490 thousand Jews – accounting for more than 30% of the Warsaw population at that time. Jews were resettled from other parts of the city as well as from other parts of Poland. Their numbers changed along with the waves of extermination. In July 1942, on the eve of first extermination operation, about 380 thousand Jews lived in the Ghetto. From 22 July to 21 September 1942 alone, 280 thousand Ghetto inhabitants were deported to Treblinka, 10,300 were killed in the Ghetto itself and 11,580 were deported to a transition camp. There were some Jews who escaped to the Aryan side of Warsaw. It is hard to estimate their number, but data from research done by G. S. Paulsson in 1998 showed that 27,000 Jews lived on the Aryan side of Warsaw after the Ghetto extermination.

### Living in the Ghetto

What did social stratification look like? On the very bottom of the Ghetto hierarchy were the starving “down-and-outs,” living in hovels, staircases, in rooms with a dozen inhabitants. One level higher were the street sellers, who earned 2-3 zlotys a day selling candies, cigarettes and shoelaces. Children smuggling food from the Aryan side could earn 2-5 zlotys a day. The next strata comprised the unemployed, who had to gradually sell off their possessions. In a little better condition were street sellers who sold junk like old clothes. The next level consisted of people who had been wealthy before the war. Physicians, teachers, office workers, shop owners and agents of various sorts were in a relatively better situation. At the very top of the hierarchy was a group of “big smugglers who got rich during the war.”

At the outset, the Ghetto’s main economic activity was trading in recyclable wastes. Numerous illegal craftsman workshops operated in the Ghetto, such as carpenter’s, tailor’s, and brush maker’s shops. From 1941 on, the main form of production in the Ghetto were so-called “shopas” – big enterprises with German owners. Work conditions at the “shopas” were very hard, with a long working day and poor nutrition, but people worked there to earn

money as well as for safety considerations: it was believed that workers at “shopas” would be not exterminated.

### Epilogue: the Ghetto area today

Following the Ghetto Uprising, this whole part of the city was wiped out. Although we still can notice fragments of the Ghetto Wall or segments of cobbled road in certain locations, the essence of the Ghetto has been covered over by soil, asphalt, foundations of new buildings and oblivion. As Warsaw was covered by 20 million cubic meters of rubble immediately after WWII, including in



Marketplace in the Ghetto along the no longer extant Lubeckiego Street

Archives of the Jewish Historical Museum

the Ghetto area, removing all of it was not a realistic prospect. Such rubble was then used as a material for foundations and embankments for places where houses were built. The new district was to serve as a model of the new Communist architecture and as a kind of monument reminiscent of the Warsaw Ghetto. Work lasted from 1949 to 1967, although the last stage of restoration the Ghetto area was not completed until 1973.

The contemporary network of streets in the whole area has been almost completely changed. Some of the streets no longer exist. Some streets have for the most part changed their course, despite their names remaining the same. Some street names have also been changed: the former Gęsia street now bears the name of a hero of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Mordechaj Anielewicz. And so, if we want to perceive this lost world of the Warsaw Ghetto, we have to dig it out from under a heap of oblivion, indifference and ignorance. For the only place where we can find the Ghetto’s inhabitants and buildings and streets is our memory. ■

#### Further reading:

- Engelking B., Leociak J. (2001). *The Warsaw Ghetto - Guide to a Nonexistent City* (in Polish). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFIS PAN.  
Paulsson G. S. (2002) *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940-1945*. Yale University Press.