

HOLOCAUST LEARNING CENTER

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**"Our
Springtime"**



Children eating in the ghetto streets. Warsaw, Poland, between 1940 and 1943.

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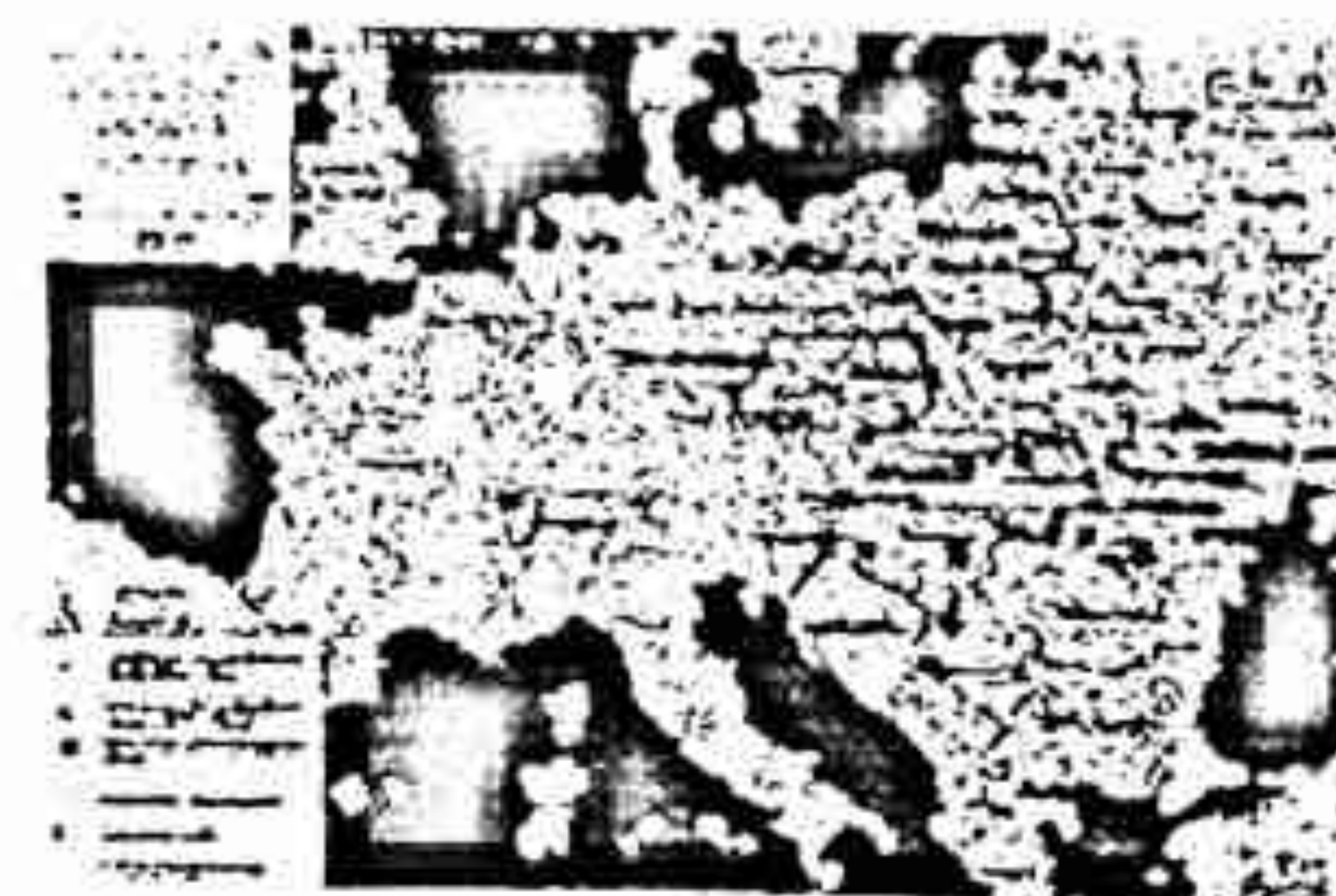
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

G HETTOS

The term "ghetto" originated from the name of the Jewish quarter in Venice, established in 1516. During World War II, ghettos were city districts (often enclosed) in which the Germans forced the Jewish population to live under miserable conditions. Ghettos isolated Jews by separating Jewish communities from the non-Jewish population and from neighboring Jewish communities. The Nazis established over 400 ghettos.

The Germans regarded the establishment of ghettos as a provisional measure to control and segregate Jews. In many places ghettoization lasted a relatively short time. With the implementation of the "Final Solution" in 1942, the Germans systematically destroyed the ghettos and deported the Jews to extermination camps where they killed them. A smaller number of Jews were deported from ghettos to forced-labor camps and concentration camps.

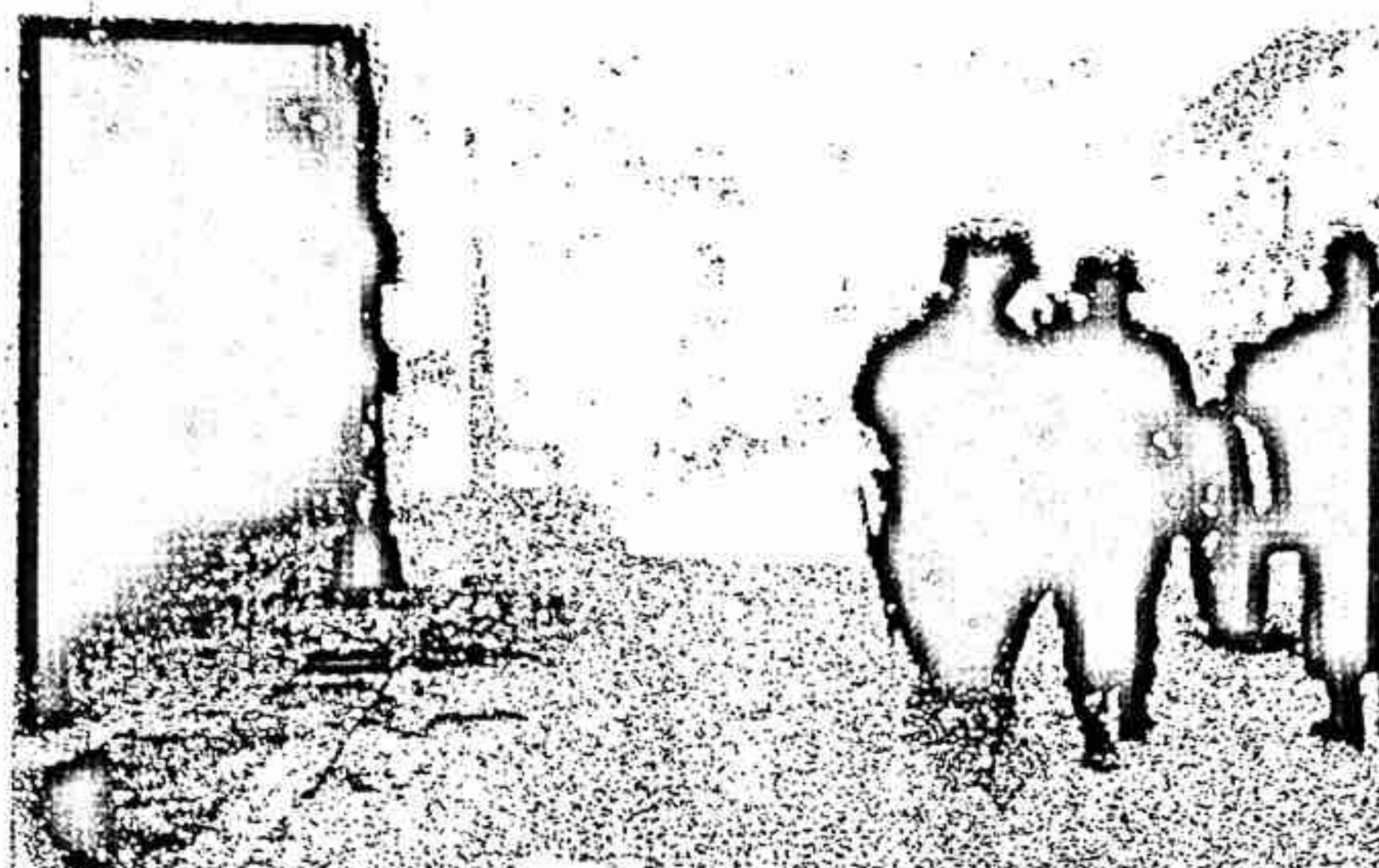
Most ghettos (situated primarily in Nazi-occupied eastern Europe) were closed off by walls, barbed-wire fences, or gates. Ghettos were extremely crowded and unsanitary. Starvation, chronic shortages, severe winter weather, and the absence of urban services led to repeated outbreaks of epidemics and to a high mortality rate.



**Major ghettos in
occupied Europe**

[See maps](#)

The largest ghetto in Poland was the **Warsaw ghetto**, where approximately 450,000 Jews were crowded into an area of 1.3 square miles. Other major ghettos were **Lodz**, **Krakow**,



German soldiers direct artillery against a pocket of resistance during the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Warsaw, Poland, April 19-May 16, 1943.

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WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING

Between July and mid-September 1942, the Germans deported at least 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw ghetto. For the 60,000 Jews remaining in the Warsaw ghetto, **deportation** seemed inevitable.

In response to the deportations, several Jewish underground organizations created an armed self-defense unit known as the Jewish Fighting Organization (Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa; ZOB). The Revisionist Party (right-wing Zionists) formed another resistance organization, the Jewish Fighting Union (Żydowski Związek Wojskowy; ZZW). Although initially there was tension, between the ZOB and the ZZW, both groups decided to work together to oppose German attempts to destroy the ghetto.

The Germans tried to resume mass deportations of Jews from Warsaw in January 1943. A group of Jewish fighters infiltrated a column of Jews being forced to the Umschlagplatz (transfer point) and, at a prearranged signal, broke ranks and fought their German escorts. After seizing 5,000-6,500 ghetto residents to be deported, the Germans suspended further deportations. Encouraged by the apparent success of the resistance, which they believed may have halted deportations, members of the ghetto population began to construct subterranean bunkers and shelters in preparation for an uprising should the Germans begin the final deportation of all remaining Jews in the reduced ghetto.



Warsaw environs, 1940

See maps

The Germans intended to begin deporting the remaining Jews in the Warsaw ghetto on April 19, 1943, the eve of Passover. When they entered the ghetto that morning, its streets were empty. The renewal of deportations was the signal for an armed uprising within the ghetto. Though organized military resistance was soon broken, individuals and small groups hid or fought the Germans for the following month, until May 16, 1943. The Warsaw ghetto

uprising was the largest, symbolically most important Jewish uprising, and the first urban uprising, in German-occupied Europe.

One of nine children, Hela grew up in the Polish capital of Warsaw. Her ...
Personal stories

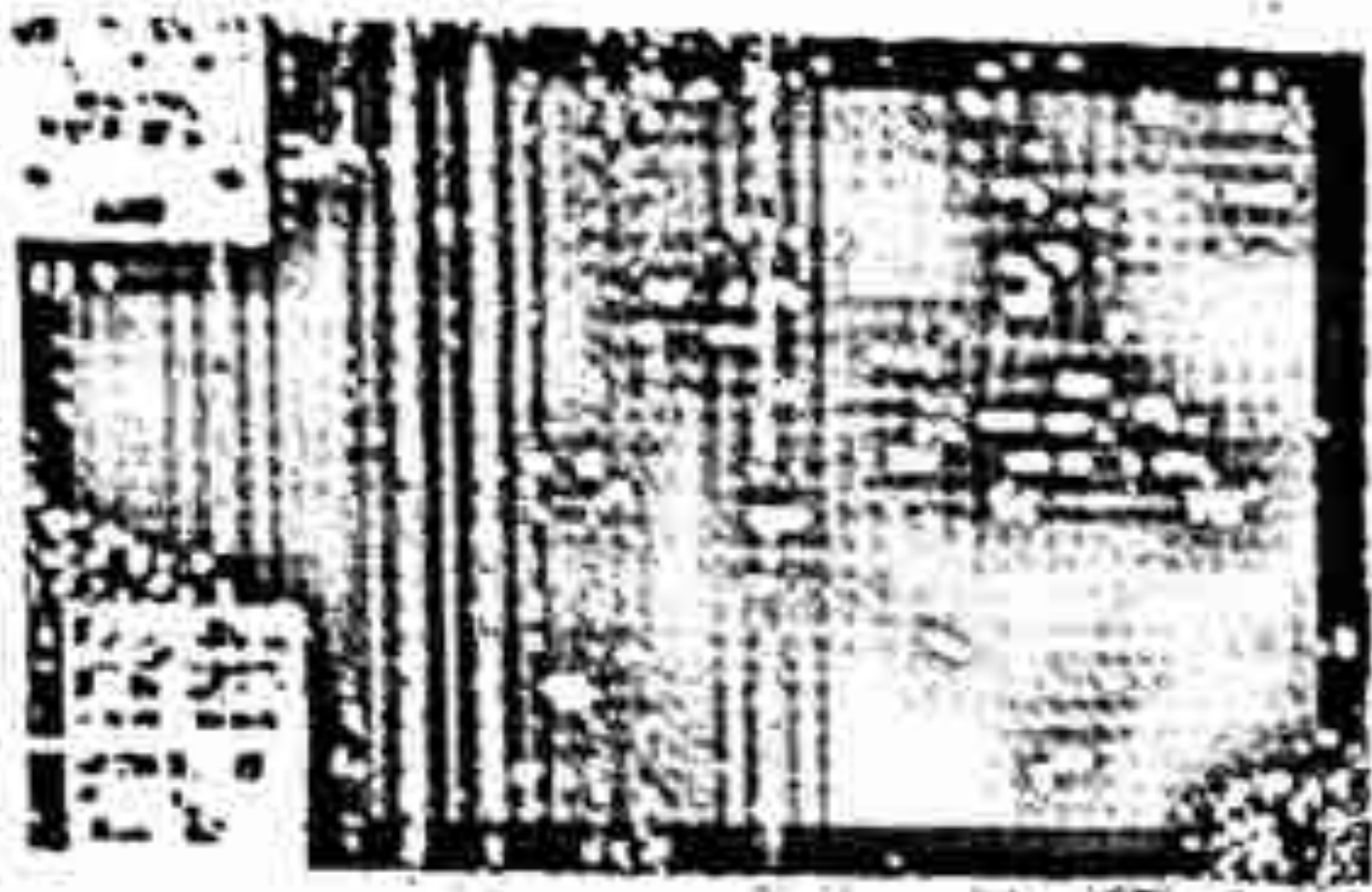


ZOB commander Mordecai Anielewicz led resistance forces in the Warsaw ghetto uprising. In the first days of fighting, Anielewicz commanded the Jewish fighters in street battles with the Germans. On the third day of the uprising, forces under German commander SS General Juergen Stroop began burning the ghetto, building by building, to force the remaining Jews out of hiding. Jewish resistance fighters made sporadic raids from their bunkers, but the Germans systematically reduced the ghetto to rubble. Anielewicz and those with him were killed in an attack on his command bunker, which fell to German forces on May 8.

On May 16, 1943, Stroop ordered the Great Synagogue on Tlomacki Street destroyed to symbolize German victory. The ghetto itself was in ruins. Stroop reported that he had captured 56,065 Jews and destroyed 631 bunkers. He estimated that his units killed up to 7,000 Jews during the uprising. Approximately another 7,000 were deported to Treblinka, where they were killed. The Germans deported virtually all of the remaining Jews to the Poniatowa, Trawniki, and Majdanek camps.

The Germans had planned to liquidate the Warsaw ghetto in three days, but the ghetto fighters held out for more than a month.

Life in the Ghettos



Life in the ghettos was usually unbearable. Overcrowding was common. One apartment might have several families living in it. Plumbing broke down, and human waste was thrown in the streets along with the garbage. Contagious diseases spread rapidly in such cramped, unsanitary housing. People were always hungry. Germans deliberately tried to starve residents by allowing them to purchase only a small amount of bread, potatoes, and fat. Some residents had some money or valuables they could trade for food smuggled into the ghetto; others were forced to beg or steal to survive. During the long winters, heating fuel was scarce, and many people lacked adequate clothing. People weakened by hunger and exposure to the cold became easy victims of disease; tens of thousands died in the ghettos from illness, starvation, or cold. Some individuals killed themselves to escape their hopeless lives.



Every day children became orphaned, and many had to take care of even younger children. Orphans often lived on the streets, begging for bits of bread from others who had little or nothing to share. Many froze to death in the winter.

In order to survive, children had to be resourceful and make themselves useful. Small children in the Warsaw ghetto sometimes helped smuggle food to their families and friends by crawling through narrow openings in the ghetto wall. They did so at great risk, as smugglers who were caught were severely punished.

Many young people tried to continue their education by attending school classes organized by adults in many ghettos. Since such classes were usually held secretly, in defiance of the Nazis, pupils learned to hide books under their clothes when necessary, to avoid being caught.



Although suffering and death were all around them, children did not stop playing with toys. Some had beloved dolls or trucks they brought



into the ghetto with them. Children also made toys, using whatever bits of cloth and wood they could find. In the Lodz ghetto, children turned the tops of empty cigarette boxes into playing cards.

Ghettos in Poland

Millions of Jews lived in eastern Europe. After Germany invaded Poland in 1939, more than two million Polish Jews came under German control. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, several million more Jews came under Nazi rule. The Germans aimed to control this sizable Jewish population by forcing Jews to reside in marked-off sections of towns and cities the Nazis called "ghettos" or "Jewish residential quarters." Altogether, the Germans

created more than 400 ghettos in occupied territories. The largest ghetto was in Warsaw, the Polish capital, where almost half a million Jews were confined.



Many ghettos were set up in cities and towns where Jews were already concentrated. Jews as well as some Roma (Gypsies) were also brought to ghettos from surrounding regions and from western Europe. In October and November



1941, the first group of German and Austrian Jews was transported to ghettos in eastern Europe. The Germans usually marked off the oldest, most run-down sections of cities for the ghettos. They sometimes had to evict non-Jewish residents from the buildings to make room for Jewish families. Many of the ghettos were enclosed by barbed-wire fences or walls, with entrances guarded by local and

German police and SS members. During curfew hours at night the residents were forced to stay inside their apartments.



In the Polish cities of Lodz and Warsaw, trolley lines ran through the middle of the ghetto. Rather than reroute the lines, workers fenced



them off, and policemen guarded the area to keep the Jews from escaping on the trolley cars. The passengers from outside the ghetto used the cars to get to work on weekdays, and some rode them on Sunday outings just to gawk and sneer at the ghetto prisoners.

