

Witnessing Extermination:
Using Diaries to Understand the Final Solution in Poland

Honours Thesis

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Introduction

The Holocaust spanned multiple years and states, occurring in both German-occupied countries and those of their collaborators. But in no one state were the actions of the Holocaust felt more intensely than in Poland. It was in Poland that the Nazis constructed and ran their four death camps— Treblinka, Sobibor, Chelmno, and Belzec – and created combination camps that both concentrated people for labour, and exterminated them – Auschwitz and Majdanek.¹ Chelmno was the first of the death camps, established in 1941, while Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec were created during Operation Reinhard in 1942.² In Poland, the Nazis concentrated many of the Jews from countries they had conquered during the war. As the major killing centers of the “Final Solution” were located within Poland, when did people in Poland become aware of the level of death and destruction perpetrated by the Nazi regime? While scholars have attributed dates to the “Final Solution,” predominantly starting in 1942, when did the people of Poland notice the shift in the treatment of Jews from relocation towards physical elimination using gas chambers? Or did they remain unaware of such events?

To answer these questions, I have researched the writings of various people who were in Poland at the time of the “Final Solution.” I am specifically addressing the information found in diaries and memoirs. Given language barriers, this thesis will focus only on diaries and memoirs that were written in English or later translated and published in English.³ This thesis addresses twenty diaries and memoirs from people who were living in Poland at the time of the “Final Solution.” Most of these diaries (fifteen of twenty) were written by members of the intelligentsia.

¹ See Appendix A.

² David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-1949*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016), 428 and 479-480. Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 131.

³ The diaries included were written in a variety of languages, and some diarists switched languages while they were writing. The main languages that the diaries were translated from are Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish.

Many of the diaries are from Jews who lived in ghettos, most in Warsaw, although there are some from Jews in the Lodz ghetto. Some of the diarists lived outside of the ghettos, mainly in the Polish countryside. Two of the works analyzed for this thesis were written by individuals who experienced first-hand the camp systems. The diarists are disproportionately men. Out of twenty writers, only four were written by women. To supplement the Polish diaries and memoirs, this thesis also consults two document collections from the two main ghettos: Warsaw and Lodz.⁴ Outside of direct quotations from diarists, all town names are spelled using English versions.⁵ To maintain consistency throughout this thesis, I will use the Anglicized names of Polish cities and towns (for example, Łódź will be Lodz).

This thesis was inspired by the diary of Zygmunt Klukowski, a Polish doctor who wrote a diary to record the events of the war for future historians. Through his diary, Klukowski described the deportation of Jews from the Zamosc region. Halfway through his work, he noted that the people of his town now understood that the Jews were not being relocated but were being sent to the camps and gas chambers.⁶

It is essential to understand the “Final Solution” in the context of Poland because it was in Poland that the “Final Solution” occurred. Those in Poland were already suffering from German occupation, and it is meaningful to consider how living during and through the “Final Solution” affected people’s daily lives, both Jewish and Christian. In this thesis, I am focusing not on the history of the war, nor that of “Great Men.”⁷ Instead, I focus on people who were not

⁴ These volumes are extensive, but not exhaustive. As such, the document reader is not always clear as the where and by whom any one document is from.

⁵ For example, Treblinka will be written as Treblinka.

⁶ Zygmunt Klukowski, *Diary from the Years of Occupation*, translated by George Klukowski, edited by Andrew Klukowski and Helen Klukowski, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

⁷ “Great Men” refers to the “Great Man Theory”. The theory is based off of the idea that history is shaped by the impacts of “Great Men”.

deemed crucial for the course of history. It is necessary to view the major points of history from the perspectives of people who experienced and witnessed them. History needs to be understood both from a macro and micro level.

Background

The “Final Solution” is the name attributed to the series of events and decisions made by Nazi leaders to resolve the so-called “Jewish Question” in Europe. This solution is often tied to the Wannsee Conference held in January 1942, but plans were being discussed as early as 1941.⁸ This “Final Solution” was to eliminate the Jewish population from German living space through physical extermination. Scholar Tadeusz Piotrowski explains that initially, the Nazis discussed pushing the Jews out of German lands via expulsion, but these ideas were not effective enough for the Nazis.⁹ The “Final Solution” additionally marks a change in how Nazis and their collaborators treated Jews. Before the “Final Solution,” there was the T4 program, which was created to slowly kill the *Untermenschen* through starvation and, later, with gas vans.¹⁰ On the Eastern Front, there was the “Holocaust of bullets,” were Germans – the Einsatzgruppen, *Schutzstaffel* (S.S.), and Order Police – forced the Jews to dig their own graves and shot them into the graves.¹¹ Scholars have identified the official start of the “Final Solution” as January 20, 1942, the day that the Wannsee Conference occurred. The conference was merely a formality for

⁸ Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*.

⁹ Tadeusz Piotrowski, *Poland's Holocaust: Ethnic Strife, Collaboration with Occupying Forces and Genocide in the Second Republic, 1918-1947*, (London: McFarland & Company, 1998), 29. An example of this is the Madagascar Plan where the Germans were going to create “reserve” for the Jews in Lublin before shipping them off to Madagascar; which was controlled by the French.

¹⁰ Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 428. *Untermenschen* is the Nazi term for ‘inferior people’. This term covered a large group of people (Jews, Roma, Slavs, physically and mentally disabled people, and others).

¹¹ Patrick Debois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008). *Schutzstaffel* is German for “Protection Squadron.” The S.S. were a major Nazi paramilitary organization.

actions that were already occurring as it allowed for the coordination between branches of the Nazi regime and the German state. At the Wannsee Conference, “the highest echelon of the Nazi regime decided on complete and immediate physical destruction of the Jews. This direction of the ‘final solution’ was decided upon formally in consultation with heads of the Nazi regime in the Reich and the occupied countries.”¹² Rudolf Vrba, an escapee from the camps, noted that “no written order, signed by Hitler, has been found, explicitly instituting the whole program of segregation, deportation, and finally murder of so many persons.”¹³ Although the Wannsee Conference was the formal recognition of the “Final Solution,” the Nazis had already considered physical extermination as the solution to the “Jewish Question.” On December 10, 1939, there was the memorandum sent by Secret Service Brigadeführer Friedrich Übelhoer, in which he “asserts that the establishment of the ghetto is only a *transitional* measure: ‘the final aim must be to burn out entirely this pestilent abscess.’”¹⁴ It is this change in policy, from concentrating and relocating the Jews to their physical extermination through the use of gas chambers and bullets, on which this thesis focuses.

Historiography

The field of Holocaust studies is vast, and the topics covered by scholars are quite varied. However, scholars who cover the “Final Solution” – beyond a chapter – are comparatively few. Given language constraints and the specificity of the questions being asked and answered, this thesis is only utilizing a small portion of the historiography that discusses the Holocaust. Two

¹² Rudolf Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, (Fort Lee, New Jersey: Barricade Books, 2002): 290.

¹³ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 290

¹⁴ Alan Adelson and Robert Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community Under Siege*, (New York: Viking, 1989), xiv. Secret Service Brigadeführer Friedrich Übelhoer was the governor of Lodz and ordered the creation of the ghetto. He was adamant that the ghetto was purely a temporary measure. His rank Brigadeführer is the SS equivalent of a Brigadier general or one-star general (USA).

major scholars who study the “Final Solution” are Christopher Browning and David Cesarani. Both Browning and Cesarani have published books that extensively detail the Final Solution from the planning stages to its conclusion with the end of the war.¹⁵ Cesarani deals with the years 1933-1949, whilst Browning predominantly concentrates on the years 1939-1942. Browning’s major work on the “Final Solution” details the lead-up to the “Final Solution,” as he analyzes the origins of the policies. Cesarani’s work also covers the lead-up to the “Final Solution,” the events of 1942-1944, and the after-effects of the “Final Solution.” Cesarani additionally addresses his understanding of the “Final Solution” in the broader context of the German war efforts. While most scholars discuss the “Final Solution” in passing, many are focused on detailing specific events of the war or the Holocaust. Some scholars who have focused on the Holocaust do so through a lens that concentrates on a single country’s experience. Bart van der Boom is the best example of a historian who has done work like this thesis. In his article, he analyzes diaries to understand the degree to which Dutch people knew of the Holocaust.¹⁶ There is, however, limited scholarly works that focus purely on the Holocaust in Poland. One scholar who addresses this is Tadeusz Piotrowski. Piotrowski concentrates predominantly on the sociological aspects of the Holocaust in Poland and different nations’ interactions with Poland, covering the years before and after the war.¹⁷ There is no single work, in English, that details the events of the “Final Solution” and Holocaust as they occurred in Poland, the place where all extermination centers were located.

There is a small amount of works that strive to understand when people knew about the Holocaust. Two major scholars who deal with this aspect are Richard Breitman and Walter

¹⁵ Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution* and Cesarani, *Final Solution*.

¹⁶ Bart Van der Boom, “‘The Auschwitz Reservation’: Dutch Victims and Bystanders and Their Knowledge of the Holocaust,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 31, no. 3 (2017).

¹⁷ Piotrowski, *Poland's Holocaust*.

Laqueur. Breitman's work concentrates on when the Allies became aware of the Holocaust, citing the specific transcripts and decodings of radio broadcasts that the Allied Military Intelligence services possessed.¹⁸ Laqueur discusses how those outside of Germany discovered the news of the Holocaust and their reactions, mainly disbelief.¹⁹ While there have been some academic works that address aspects of what this thesis covers, none of them have covered how people in Poland, those who witnessed the Holocaust, learned about the "Final Solution."

Witnessing the Final Solution in Poland

To understand what people comprehended about the "Final Solution," I have organized the diarists by the places where they were located. First are people in small Polish towns and rural areas. This includes Jews in the countryside who managed to avoid the ghettos mainly through hiding on small farms, as well as Poles who lived in towns and farms. Next are Jews in the two largest ghettos, Warsaw and Lodz. After discussing the ghettos, this thesis moves on to understand the experiences of people in the Nazi camp system. Finally, I compare the experiences and understanding of those in Poland to the international world. This last section addresses when people in the United Kingdom and the United States became first aware of the "Final Solution."

Witnesses in Polish Towns

Diaries written by people in the towns of Poland are challenging to find in English. Of four published diaries, only three mention the camps and the years of the "Final Solution." These

¹⁸ Richman Breitman, *Official Secrets: What the Nazis Planned, What the British And Americans Knew*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), and Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: An Investigation into the Suppression of Information about Hitler's 'Final Solution,'* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980).

¹⁹ Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret*.

three diarists are Zygmunt Klukowski, Dawid Rubinowicz and Nelli Rotbart.²⁰ Klukowski was a Polish doctor at the Zamosc County Hospital in the Szczebrzeszyn region. He recorded the events of his life in his diary as he wished to create a source for future historians. Throughout his diary, Klukowski describes working to help the Jewish population in his region to the best of his ability. Klukowski joined the Polish underground in the later years of the war. Rubinowicz was a young Jewish boy who lived in the Kielce district with his family. In his diary, he describes daily life and the move his family makes to Krajno; Rubinowicz's diary cut off abruptly on July 1, 1942. It is almost certain that he was then taken to Treblinka and killed.²¹ In the Polish version of his diary, the editor notes the trains were leaving Krajno going to Treblinka. It was very likely that Rubinowicz was on the September 21 train that arrived at Treblinka on September 22 at 11:24.²² Rotbart was a young Jewish girl from Bojmie, who was sent to many ghettos throughout the war and managed to escape deportation to Treblinka. Rotbart hid with the help of sympathetic Poles until the war ended, and she eventually moved to the Soviet Union. She published her diary after she moved to Canada in 2002.

Even though there is a lack of diaries and memoirs from people in Polish towns, those that are accessible reference the impact of the Nazis and their collaborators towards the Jews and *Untermenschen*. Klukowski noted the actions of the T4 program in the Szczebrzeszyn region, as he had "been receiving alarming information about the execution of the mentally ill patients of

²⁰ There was a fourth potential diarist, Janine Phillips, a young Jewish girl who lived outside of Warsaw for a while, before she moved into Warsaw. Phillips does not address the Final Solution, as her diary only covered 1939-1940. In her diary Phillips never gave any reason for not continuing her diary. Phillips survived the war and moved to the United Kingdom.

²¹ Dawid Rubinowicz, *The Diary of Dawid Rubinowicz*, translated by Derek Bowman, (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1981), 87.

²² Jacob Boas, *We Are Witnesses: Five Diaries of Teenagers Who Died in the Holocaust*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 37.

the psychiatric ward at Chelmno Hospital.”²³ On February 18, 1940, he wrote in his diary that he had asked the “wife of an official of the Zamoyski estate [as] she had just arrived from Chelmno” about the executions, and she verified the rumours as fact.²⁴ In 1942, diarists noted the change in Nazi policies and started to doubt the real purpose of the transports. Rubinowicz recalls in January 1942 how “all Jews were to be evacuated from all the villages,” he was still in the countryside at this point.²⁵ He and his family moved to Krajno in the spring of 1942. Shortly after hearing about the evacuation, Rubinowicz notes how the mayor of Krajno visited his house and discussed with his father that “all Jews would have to be shot because they were enemies.”²⁶ Rubinowicz struggled with these discussions between his father and the mayor, mentioning, “If only I could write down a part of all he said at our house, but I simply can’t.”²⁷ As a young boy, Rubinowicz struggled with the horrors of the “Final Solution.” As he was a Jew, the details that he overheard the mayor talking about would have, possibly, terrified Rubinowicz as they could easily happen to him and his family. While Rubinowicz could not record the events that were occurring in 1942, Klukowski did.

Unlike Rubinowicz, Klukowski kept a more detailed record the horrors of the “Final Solution” because he was a witness, the murderous action did not apply. Klukowski was not Jewish, so he did not fear the Nazis as much. In April 1942, Klukowski wrote that “every day two trains, consisting of twenty cars each, come to Belzec, one from Lublin, the other from Lwow.”²⁸ On these trains were Jews who, upon reaching Belzec, “Are killed with electricity,

²³ Klukowski, *Diary from the Years of Occupation*, 76.

²⁴ Klukowski, *Diary from the Years of Occupation*, 76.

²⁵ Boas, *We Are Witnesses*, 23.

²⁶ Boas, *We Are Witnesses*, 24.

²⁷ Boas, *We Are Witnesses*, 24.

²⁸ Klukowski, *Diary from the Years of Occupation*, 191.

some with poison gases, and the bodies are burned.”²⁹ Additionally, Klukowski noted, “On the way to Belzec, the Jews experience many terrible things. [And] they are aware of what will happen to them.”³⁰ Madame Pietrya, a Pole who lived in the town of Auschwitz, also addressed the nature of the camps. She spoke, “One did not have access to the camp, but there were all the same workers who worked there, so there were leaks ... one knew what happened there.”³¹ She does, however, state that while everyone knew about the killings at Auschwitz, people did not talk about it as “it was dangerous to respond [to queries about the smell of burning bodies].”³² Rotbart’s account of the camps takes on a more questioning tone, as in the summer of 1942, she recorded that “ghettos were emptied and cattle cars rolled to Treblinka, Majdanek. [However,] we heard rumours but can’t believe them. It can’t be true.”³³ In his testimony, H. Shperling recorded that by September 1942, the Jews of Czestochowa knew about their fate, as “in September 1942, there began – what we had already begun to feel weeks earlier – the destruction of the Czestochowa Jews ... they are headed for the gas ovens in Treblinka”³⁴ For those in smaller towns, it took until at least the summer of 1942 for comprehension of the deadly nature of the “Final Solution” to set in.

The Ghettos: Introducing Lodz and Warsaw

The Lodz ghetto was “the first major ghetto in the German empire.”³⁵ On December 10, 1939, SS Brigadeführer Friedrich Übelhoer “ordered that Jewish question in Lodz be solved

²⁹ Klukowski, *Diary from the Years of Occupation*, 191.

³⁰ Klukowski, *Diary from the Years of Occupation*, 191.

³¹ *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann, (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1985).

³² *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann.

³³ Nelli Rotbart, *A Long Journey: A Holocaust Memoir and after Poland, Soviet Union, Canada*, (Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors in Canada, 2002), 47.

³⁴ Freda Hodge, *Tragedy and Triumph: Early Testimonies of Jewish Survivors of World War II*, (2018,) 88-89

³⁵ Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, 115.

‘temporarily’ through the concentration of Jews in a ‘closed ghetto.’”³⁶ With his order, the ghetto was created, and on April 30, 1940, the ghetto was sealed.³⁷ Deportations from the ghetto into camps started in the spring of 1941.³⁸ With the final deportation out of the ghetto on August 30, 1944, the Lodz ghetto was no more.³⁹ Unlike the Lodz ghetto, “ghettoization in Warsaw proceeded in fits and starts.”⁴⁰ In January 1943, Himmler visited the Warsaw ghetto, and upon seeing the vast numbers of Jews still within, he ordered relocation deportations to the camps.⁴¹ In response to the deportations, on January 18, 1943, the first ghetto uprising broke out as Jews fought back in protest.⁴² The second, and much more extensive, uprising occurred April 19 – May 16, 1943.⁴³ The uprising ended with the death of at least 7,000 Jews, and the remainder sent to nearby camps.⁴⁴

Lodz, 1942-1944

Information from Jews in the Lodz ghetto is much more limited than the Warsaw ghetto. The primary reason lies in the fact that in early 1942 many of the Jews in the Lodz ghetto were liquidated; Warsaw ghetto Jews learned of the horrific deportations from Lodz and grew wary that they might soon suffer the same fate. The first mention of the “Final Solution” in the Lodz ghetto came with the announcement of another series of deportations. Dawid Sierakowiak notes on March 21, 1942, that there “was suddenly news that another 15,000 are to be deported

³⁶ Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, 114.

³⁷ Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, 116.

³⁸ Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 329.

³⁹ Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 733-736.

⁴⁰ Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, 121.

⁴¹ Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 603.

⁴² Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 608.

⁴³ Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 610-617.

⁴⁴ Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 616-617. 7,000 Jews were sent to Treblinka, whilst 20,000 were sent to Madjanek for labour.

immediately, in groups of a thousand a day. Everyone is saying that now all the ghettos inhabitants will go.”⁴⁵ These deportations sent the inhabitants of the ghetto to the death camps, where most would be killed. In May, Jews within the ghetto noticed oddly large and frequent shipments of baggage through the ghetto. The local *Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto* wrote, “The people of the ghetto are tremendously puzzled by the arrival of these shipments, which contain clothes of all sorts and other things and which are transported here each day by trucks, including five-ton vehicles.”⁴⁶ However, these odd shipments likely contained the possessions of those Jews who had recently been deported from the ghetto. Sierakowiak notes that Chaim Rumkowski – the head of the Jewish Council of Elders in Lodz – made choices affecting the ghetto. As last year, referring to 1941, he “said that he couldn’t save everyone and, therefore, instead of having the entire population die a slow death, he would save ‘the top ten thousand.’”⁴⁷ In the ghetto, the deportations ruled everyone’s lives, with the constant threat of being sent away to a place from which few returned.

In the Lodz ghetto, the first time someone noted the events of the “Final Solution” was in the summer of 1942. Earlier entries recorded events that were tied to the “Final Solution,” but the people noting them had not yet comprehended that these events were tied to the extermination centers. The first mention of the killings was from Rabbi Jakub Szulman’s letter, given to Chaim Rumkowski in the summer of 1942. In his letter, Rabbi Szulman states, “I learned everything from him [a witness who had escaped]. The place where everyone is being put to death is called Chelmno, not far from Dabie; and they are all buried in the nearby forest of Lochow. People are killed in one of two ways: either they are shot or gassed.”⁴⁸ This first inkling of the “Final

⁴⁵ Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, Dawid Sierakowiak’s Diary, 267.

⁴⁶ Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, *Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*, 289.

⁴⁷ Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, Dawid Sierakowiak’s Diary, 270.

⁴⁸ Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, Letter from Rabbi Jakub Szulman given to Rumkowski, 490-491.

Solution” is noted from the summer of 1942, more mentions of the killings are dated to September 1942.

Both Sierakowiak and Jozef Zelkowicz mentioned the “evacuation” of the sick. At the beginning of September, “All the sick, without exception, were loaded on trucks and taken out of the ghetto.”⁴⁹ Sierakowiak recorded the panic of Jews in the ghetto, writing, “It’s no secret, thanks to people who’ve recently come from the provinces, how the Germans ‘take care’ of such evacuees. Hellish scenes occurred during the moving of the sick. People knew that they were going to their death!”⁵⁰ Zelkowicz also noted the horror, that in some cases, was slow to dawn on people, as they asked: “where will they be taken?”⁵¹ His simple response: “The answer was self-evident. And it forced itself upon each person like a blunt iron to the brain: the Jewish hospitals had already been ‘evacuated’ and emptied twice ... to this day, no news of the evacuees from either hospital has reached any of the ghetto’s inhabitants.”⁵² It was with the removal of the sick that Jews in the Lodz ghetto learned what the Nazis and their collaborators had in store for the rest of the inhabitants. Zelkowicz revealed the attitude of those in the ghetto at the time as he wrote that “those from the provinces knew what would happen and laugh[ed] gallingly at the naivete of the question ‘will it end with this?’ First killed are sick, then the children and elderly.”⁵³ By the summer of 1942, all Jews in the ghetto were faced with the realities of the “Final Solution.”

⁴⁹ Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, Dawid Sierakowiak’s Diary, 319.

⁵⁰ Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, Dawid Sierakowiak’s Diary, 319.

⁵¹ Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, Jozef Zelkowicz, 322.

⁵² Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, Jozef Zelkowicz, 322.

⁵³ Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, Jozef Zelkowicz, 325-326.

By 1944, writing about events of the “Final Solution” became very explicit. Now the remaining Jews of Lodz knew what the Nazis were planning. On May 29, 1944, Jakub Poznanski mentioned, “Letters, to be written in German, may be sent to relatives. One is not allowed to ask for packages or money. Letters to Warsaw, Vilna, and Lvov are not accepted, apparently because those cities are *Judenfrei* (Ger: free of Jews): in other words, those ghettos no longer exist.”⁵⁴ By 1944, knowledge of the “Final Solution” and the reality of the deportations was widespread in what remained of the Lodz ghetto. *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto* recorded in its June 24 edition, that “the ghetto is agitated because the railroad cars that carried off yesterday’s transport are already back at Radogoszcz station. People infer that the transport travelled only a short distance, and a wave of terror is spreading through the ghetto.”⁵⁵ The article also drew connections between the 1942 “resettlement” and the ones occurring in 1944, as shown by the sentence, “People recall[ed] the frequent shuttle of transport cars and trains during the period of the great resettlements and the alarming rumours of that time.”⁵⁶ It was during the summer of 1942 that Jews in the Lodz ghetto learned what the “Final Solution” was.

Warsaw, 1939 – early 1942

While accounts from Jews who were in the Lodz ghetto are difficult to find, the opposite is true for Warsaw. There is a multitude of diaries published by those who lived in that ghetto. Efforts were also made to create an underground archive, the Oneg Shabbath, which managed to survive the ghetto uprising.⁵⁷ These diarists include Adam Czerniakow, the Chairman of the Jewish Council, later chosen to be the Chairman of the Community and *Judenrat* - the Jewish

⁵⁴ Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, Jakub Poznanski, 415.

⁵⁵ Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*, 416.

⁵⁶ Adelson and Lapidés eds, *Lodz Ghetto*, *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*, 416.

⁵⁷ Joseph Kermish ed, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor!... Selected Documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archive “O.S.” [“Oneg Shabbath”]*, (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1986).

Council; Emmanuel Ringelblum, an academic, social historian from the ghetto who created and oversaw the Oneg Shabbath; Chaim Kaplan, a teacher from the ghetto; Mary Berg, a young Jewish girl who survived the ghetto because of her mother's – and thereby her – American citizenship; Yitzhak Katznelson, a school administrator and poet; and Yitshak Zuckerman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw ghetto underground and uprising.⁵⁸

As early as October 1939, there were premonitions in the ghetto of the horrors to come. Kaplan noted on October 18, 1939, that “the conqueror says bluntly that there is no hope for Jewish survival.”⁵⁹ However, Zuckerman notes, “It was the middle of 1940; the idea of annihilation hadn't yet occurred to us.”⁶⁰ While the idea of annihilation on a mass scale had not yet been realized – by the Nazis – in 1940, the increase in killings had already started and was being recorded by those in the ghetto. In the summer of 1941, Jews in Warsaw were aware of the Nazi plans to kill Jews as a solution to the Nazi “Jewish Question.” Ringelblum mentioned this increase in mortality when addressing the lack of children under two because of the milk shortages. He wrote, “If things continue this way, the ‘Jewish question’ will soon be resolved very quickly in Warsaw,” as it appeared that there would be no future for them.⁶¹ Before 1941, Jews were aware that the Nazis were striving to find an answer to their “Jewish Question,” even if that answer did not yet exist.

⁵⁸ With this list, the term “diarist” is used lightly, as some of the published works were written after the war, either through wartime notes war (Berg) or pieced together – more memoir-like – from interviews (Zuckerman). The majority are traditional memoirs. Also included, but not directly mentioned, is a collection of documents from Warsaw which were gathered from the Oneg Shabbath.

⁵⁹ Abraham I. Katsh ed, *The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan: Revised Edition*, translated by Abraham I. Katsh, (New York: Collier Books, 1973), 53.

⁶⁰ Yitshak (“Antek”) Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, translated and edited by Barbra Harshav, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 57.

⁶¹ Jacob Sloan ed, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum*, translated by Jacob Sloan, (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 206.

By 1941, Warsaw ghetto Jews noticed the increase of deaths. In late 1940, Ringelblum wrote that a friend of his was “sent to Oswiecim, where he died.”⁶² His friend's death was not a new occurrence, but instead grew to be a norm as “the families of a great many persons sent there [Oswiecim] have received orders to appear at the central office and remove the ashes of their dead.”⁶³ In May 1941, Ringelblum noted the mounting deaths when he mentioned that “death lies in the streets.”⁶⁴ He further writes in August how “there is a marked, remarkable indifference to death, which no longer impresses,” as information of deaths and the bodies in the street grew.⁶⁵ In writing about 1941, Zuckerman recorded that the killings and deportation were “planned and organized acts, not immediately after the occupation, but premeditated actions.”⁶⁶ In his writing, he addressed the beginning of a move towards the organized extermination of the Jews by the Nazis. He additionally wrote that while those in the Warsaw ghetto were initially kept in the dark about the horrors of Lukiszki Prison and Vilna, they did later hear about the events and details of its “organized and systematic” nature.⁶⁷ This knowledge was shortly followed by the “news about Chelmno, which came in December-January.”⁶⁸ Katznelson wrote, upon learning about Vilna, that “the mass liquidation of Jews in occupied Poland began at the end of 1941 and beginning of 1942. Alarming news about the happenings in Vilna reached

⁶² Oswiecim is the Slavic version of Auschwitz (as the Germans referred to this region). It can be assumed that every time a diarist mentions Oswiecim, they are referencing Auschwitz (the death camp). Sloan, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, 105.

⁶³ Sloan, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, 105.

⁶⁴ Sloan, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, 194 and 174.

⁶⁵ Sloan, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, 194 and 174.

⁶⁶ Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory*, 154.

⁶⁷ Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory*, 154. In Vilna there were two ghettos, one for the Jews that the Nazis could use for labour, and the second was for those Jews that the Nazis could not extract labour from. In October 1941, the Einsatzgruppen and Lithuanian auxiliaries killed the Jews in the second ghetto. Lukiszki Prison was the holding ground for Jews, in Vilna, prior to the Nazis taking them to the Ponary forest where they were killed. By 1941 at least 40,000 Jews had been killed in the forest. “Vilna,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200401015704/https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/vilna>, accessed April 1, 2020.

⁶⁸ Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory*, 154.

Warsaw towards the end of 1941.”⁶⁹ Similar to Zuckerman, Katznelson continues to mention the information that those in the ghetto learned, as in “the beginning of 1942 came tidings, grim and deathly, of events in Lodz. By mid-March, the conflagration had spread to the whole of the occupied regions. Lublin Jewry was completely wiped out.”⁷⁰ In 1941 and early 1942, when diarists mentioned the horrors of the German occupation, they often mentioned multiple events rumours of which had reached Warsaw.

From late 1941 to early 1942, the “Final Solution” started to increase in lethality. In the ghetto, around the same time that senior officials of the Nazi Party and S.S. leaders met at the Wannsee Conference to finalize the “Final Solution,” Czerniakow received hints of what was to come. This is seen in his October 1941 diary entries as he wrote, that there were “worrisome rumours emanating from Kraków regarding the fate of the Jews.”⁷¹ While the situation in Krakow required, remarkable, foresight among the Warsaw ghetto’s inhabitants to understand their future, they were warned as “on January 31, 1942, [Hermann] Probst, an employee in [Heinz] Auerswald’s office, told Czerniakow that hard times were coming for the Jews. This was a hint that a wave of destruction was approaching.”⁷² Nearing the beginning of 1942, and the official recognition of the “Final Solution,” those in the Warsaw ghetto began to record, more frequently, the increasing death count.

Warsaw: 1942

⁶⁹ Yitzhak Katznelson, *Vittel Diary: 22.5.43-16.9.43*, translated by Myer Cohen, (Ghetto Fighters’ House: 1972), 20.

⁷⁰ Katznelson, *Vittel Diary*, 20.

⁷¹ Raul Hilberg, Stanislaw Staron, and Josef Kermisz, eds, *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom*, translated by Stanislaw Staron, (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1999), 22.

⁷² Hilberg et al., *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*, 22. Heinz Auerswald was the German Commissioner of the Warsaw ghetto.

1942 in the Warsaw ghetto continued down its horrific path of starvation, the threat of mass deportation, and death. Those in Warsaw were still mostly unaware of the real horrors to come with the “Final Solution,” although those like Berg’s friend Romek seemed to feel the changing tides. On New Years' Eve 1942, Berg’s friend Romek played Chopin’s Funeral March as he stated, “I have a strange premonition on this New Year’s Day, mark my words.”⁷³ His words would turn out to be accurate; only a few who attended that New Year’s party would live past 1943. Others, however, did not want to believe the rumours about Auschwitz. Zuckerman noted that people held “the interpretation that this was the beginning of the end. A total death sentence for the Jews. We didn’t accept the interpretation.”⁷⁴ Those within the Warsaw ghetto started to learn about the horrors of the gas chambers and the “Final Solution” mainly through rumours. In a letter from 1942, possibly March sent to the Warsaw ghetto, the writer provided information on events that occurred in late November 1941. The letter states:

news spread in the towns of Kolski district that the entire Jewish population of these towns would be deported and resettled in Pinszczyzna or Eastern Malopolska ... Couriers, sent by Jewish Communities in Klodawa Izbica Kujawska, Bugal and Sempolina, to find out what had happened to the deported, could only confirm that they had been placed in the Chelmno palace whence they never exited. Local peasants tell that no food-supplies are conveyed to the palace and that several times a day a grey truck drives into the palace, then leaves in the direction of the Luborodz forest.⁷⁵

This letter is one example of how knowledge of the “Final Solution” spread from the towns to the ghetto. The trucks mentioned in the letter were transporting bodies into the forest for their burial. Even by late 1941, Jews in the ghetto were starting to receive news and warnings of the horrific times that were to come as the “Final Solution” got underway.

⁷³ Susan Lee Pentlin, ed, *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing up in the Warsaw Ghetto*, (Richmond: Oneworld, 2009), 120-121.

⁷⁴ Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory*, 154.

⁷⁵ Kermish, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor*, 683.

In early 1942, most inhabitants of the ghetto feared nothing more than resettlement and deportation, as this was the major threat at the time. The threat of deportation hovered over the ghetto's Jews for most of the spring, although, Czerniakow feared earlier deportations. As of January 19, 1942, Heinz Auerswald "had been summoned to Berlin. I [Czerniakow] cannot shake off the fearful suspicion that the Jews of Warsaw may be threatened by mass resettlement."⁷⁶ Little did Czerniakow know, but he was right to fear Auerswald going to Berlin. As the trip lined up with the Wannsee Conference, Auerswald was likely briefed on the plans for the "Final Solution," while Czerniakow was fearing deportations. Rumours continued to reach the ghetto and, in the spring of 1942, many reported that town ghettos were emptied of their inhabitants. On March 22, Kaplan wrote that "Lublin has been evacuated. About 100,000 Jews were herded into railroad cars and transported – where? Nobody knows. The Lublin community has ceased to exist."⁷⁷ The main thread of news about other towns' deportations was that the final destination was unknown or not recorded; in many cases, this occurred because the transports were not relocating the people as publicized. A diary discussing the town of Wonwolnic, described the deportation process there, as the Jewish were marched "toward[s] the nearest railway-station [sic]. There the Jews were locked up in sealed cars and sent 'to an unknown destination.' Approximately 100 Jews were left in town. Over 300 had been deported."⁷⁸ As the deportations began to occur more frequently, Jews started to recognize the signs of the "Final Solution."

As early as March 1942, Jews of the Warsaw ghetto knew what awaited those who were deported. Zuckerman wrote that in March 1942, he "opened the meeting [of the underground

⁷⁶ Hilberg et al., *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*, 317.

⁷⁷ Katsh ed, *The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, (New York: Collier Books, 1973), 304.

⁷⁸ Kermish, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor*, 116. This diary entry detailing March 22, 1942, was written May 5.

fighters] by presenting the updated information and said it showed the beginning of the total annihilation of the Jews of Poland ... at that time, Auschwitz and its crematoria already existed and we knew about that too, I hadn't yet heard the name Treblinka."⁷⁹ Although from April 1942 on, deportations from Warsaw were sending Jews to Treblinka, Czerniakow seemed to have no idea what was truly happening with the gas chambers, or he never wrote of it in his diary, perhaps given that he was focused on the daily running of the ghetto.⁸⁰ Even in mid-May, there were inklings of the murderous aspects of the "Final Solution," with the deportations ending with a short walk to the gas chambers. In the article, "The Extermination of Jews," from May 15, the author detailed the extermination of the Jews and wrote, "The mass murder of the last 12 months far exceed that extermination policies adopted by Hitler's men against the Jews in the initial period, both with respect to the enormous figure of casualties, and the forms of killing: hand grenades, machine guns, gas and electrocution."⁸¹ Ringelblum noted rumours from the Lodz ghetto surrounding the Jewish patients of Ponzanski's hospital. In his diary entry from May 1, 1942, Ringelblum recorded with terror, "It is said *they were killed* [emphasis in original]."⁸²

By June 1942, Ringelblum was fully aware of the "Final Solution. Ringelblum reveals this as, "New reports are continually arriving about the program of systematic extermination of Jewish children and old people."⁸³ Ringelblum was fully aware of exactly where the Jews of Warsaw are being sent to their death. He also mentions, "Jews from Western Europe have no idea what Treblinka is. They believe it to be a work colony ... if they knew that they were going to their death, they would certainly put up some resistance."⁸⁴ Alongside Ringelblum, by June

⁷⁹ Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory*, 172.

⁸⁰ Hilberg et al., *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*, 340-36.

⁸¹ Kermish, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor*, The Extermination of Jews (Article), 690.

⁸² Sloan, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, 169.

⁸³ Sloan, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, 293.

⁸⁴ Sloan, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, 321.

1942, Kaplan was also aware of the deadly nature of the “Final Solution.” This is shown by his entry from June 3, 1942, when he writes, “The deportees are transported as prisoners in tightly sealed freight cars under the supervision of Nazi oppressors. They are in the care of these angels of destruction until they come to the place of execution, where they are killed.”⁸⁵ Kaplan laments about those who deny the deaths of the Jews, calling them out as “optimistic fools! Where is the great community of Lublin, and the hundreds of other smaller communities? Where did their deportees settle? The Nazis created ghettos in order to annihilate us but their plan did not succeed. Now they had decided upon the ‘final solution,’ annihilation through murder.”⁸⁶ With this diary entry from June 7, Kaplan shows how fully aware of the Nazi “Final Solution” he was, even going as far as to call the policy out by name. By June 1942, many Jews in the Warsaw ghetto already comprehended the horrors of the “Final Solution” and the realities of the deportations.

By July 1942, more Jews would record their reactions as they learned about the situation in the Warsaw ghetto. Berg first grasps the horrors of the “Final Solution” when her friend says to her that “we are all doomed, the foreign citizens are being removed because the Germans do not want them to witness what they are preparing for us.”⁸⁷ This was recorded in her diary on July 15 whilst she was being held in Pawiak prison. Berg takes this issue further when writing, “The ghetto is in a state of panic. The population expects a mass deportation of three hundred thousand people ... the thousands of Jews who were sent away with the first transport vanished without a trace.”⁸⁸ This signals the start of Berg’s understanding of the horrors of the

⁸⁵ Katsh, *The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, 346.

⁸⁶ Katsh, *The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, 348.

⁸⁷ Pentlin, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, 153.

⁸⁸ Pentlin, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, 161.

deportations. For Berg, there was no denying the rumours in late 1942, as during the *Aktion* that liquidated the Warsaw ghetto, she was in the Pawiak prison.⁸⁹ According to Susan Lee Pentlin, the editor of Berg's diary, the "walls of Pawiak were transparent. She [Berg] speaks of rumours [of Treblinka] that reached them through the prison guards and Polish police."⁹⁰ Menahem Kon describes the "Final Solution" and the reality of the deportations destination, Treblinka, as he wrote on August 6, 1942, that "during the few hours of their work those bloodthirsty beasts have already expelled thousands to the square from which these are to be transported in box-carts for extermination in a place called Treblinka."⁹¹ The author of the article, "Ten Days of The 'Trans-Settlement Action' of Warsaw Jewry," opened their writing with "we have been betrayed."⁹² The article continues by stating that it had been ten days since the transports started and "each day, between 5 and 10 thousand Jews are being caught and sent out of Warsaw."⁹³ This article shows how, shortly after the deportations, people within the ghetto were aware of the deadly nature of these deportations, as the author wrote, "Old people and small children are being shot. All others are unquestionably being sent off to be either shot or gassed."⁹⁴ As soon as the deportations started in the Warsaw ghetto, Jews started to take notice of their deadly nature.

Warsaw: Late 1942- 1943

In his August 7 entry, Katznelson recorded this shift of having learned about the details of the "Final Solution." He wrote that "the 22nd [of] July, 1942 saw the beginning of the total annihilation of the Jews. Upwards of ten thousand were liquidated at a time in one place alone, in

⁸⁹ Pawiak prison, in Warsaw, was the holding place for Jews in the ghetto with international citizenship. Acquiring citizenship of a different country (than Germany or Poland) could save a Jew's life.

⁹⁰ Pentlin, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, xxx.

⁹¹ Kermish, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor*, Fragments of a Diary (Aug 6- Oct1, 1942) Menahem Kon, 80.

⁹² Kermish, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor*, 696.

⁹³ Kermish, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor*, 696.

⁹⁴ Kermish, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor*, 696.

one single gas chamber, every day! These gas chambers were erected in several places in Poland: (1) Treblinka, (2) Belzhetz[sic], (3) - - - and so on, and so on.”⁹⁵ By the fall of 1942, most Jews in the ghetto were aware of the eliminationist nature of the “Final Solution,” and some started to record their summaries of the *Aktion* and its consequences. In writing his assessment of the first year of the “Final Solution” in Warsaw, Kon recorded that “after the end of the mass-extermination, one might try to sum up the two months of the murder action, to assess the ruin of Warsaw Jewry.”⁹⁶ His writing concentrated on the population of Warsaw, as “before July 22nd, i.e. before the onset of the Hitlerite extermination and the operation of the Treblinka death-camp, Warsaw Jewry counted 390,000 souls, now – the number is about 40,000.”⁹⁷ With his diary entries from October 1942, Kon is an example of how people in the ghetto knew precisely the scale and details of the “Final Solution” and its gas chambers. By the end of 1942, few in the Warsaw ghetto would have been unaware of the vicious nature of the “Final Solution.” Some Jews might not have been aware of the exact details of the killing centers, but inhabitants of the ghetto knew that the deportations were taking people to their immediate deaths.

It took some of the ghetto’s inhabitants longer to learn of the killing nature of the “Final Solution” and record these discoveries in their diaries. One such person was Mary Berg. As mentioned earlier, Berg was held in the Pawiak prison with other Jews who held citizenship from Allied or neutral countries, as they were all waiting to be exported to their home countries. Unlike those who lived in the ghetto in the summer of 1942, Berg was held in near-isolation, and news of the deportations and their deadly end took longer to reach her. However, the information did reach her by Fall 1942. In her September 30 diary entry, Berg wrote, “We learned a number of details

⁹⁵ Katznelson, *Vittel Diary*, 96.

⁹⁶ Kermish, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor*, The Extermination of Jews (Article), 690.

⁹⁷ Kermish, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor*, Fragments of a Diary (Aug 6- Oct1, 1942) Menahem Kon, 85.

about the campaign of extermination.”⁹⁸ In the same entry, Berg recorded that “now it is generally known that most of the deportees are sent to Treblinka, where they are killed with the help of machines.”⁹⁹ Berg also mentions how those in prison were sent away. Berg addresses an incident when her block representative, Mr. S., asked the guards what had happened to the English Jews and citizens from neutral countries who were recently taken from the prison. The guards responded that they were taken to a camp in Sosnowiec. Berg wrote on October 5, “We know there are no camps around Sosnowiec, and we also know that these have been deported to a death camp together with other inhabitants of the ghetto. Mr. S. asked his question only to see how the Nazi would react.”¹⁰⁰ In October, she wrote that “many prisoners from the Pawiak are sent to the camp at Oswiecim, from which no one returned. Everyone now knows that this is a death camp like Treblinka, with the sole difference that its victims are chiefly Poles.”¹⁰¹ Yehiel Gorny noted December 16, 1942, that “a train carrying Jews from Płock drove through Warsaw today. The Jews are said to be taken to Auschwitz.”¹⁰² Some Jews took much longer to note the deadly nature of the “Final Solution” and an unknown author details why this might be in their writing from the fall of 1942:

Hardly anyone realized quickly enough what was the aim of the action called ‘trans-settlement.’ Even after three years of war, after the experiences of deportations, executions and sudden disappearances of people, such a possibility was not yet considered in the process of reasoning. People were saying: Hundreds of thousands of people cannot possibly be slaughtered. The majority would not believe that they could, and refused to be convinced of it. Today, in the Fall of 1942, we already know better.¹⁰³

The author stressed that one of the reasons it took so long for people to learn about the destructive nature of the “Final Solution” was simply denial, a point that both Laqueur and Loe

⁹⁸ Pentlin, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, 178.

⁹⁹ Pentlin, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, 178.

¹⁰⁰ Pentlin, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, 188.

¹⁰¹ Pentlin, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, 193.

¹⁰² Kermish, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor*, Yehiel Gorny, 93.

¹⁰³ Kermish, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor*, 705.

de Jong, a Dutch historian, mention. De Jong notes that “most people believe what they want to believe,” while Laqueur stated, “People could not “know” something that tested the limits of their comprehension.”¹⁰⁴ The issue of denial and limits to comprehension contributed to the Jews’ inability to accept the murderous facts of the “Final Solution.”

By 1943 news of the killings in the camps had reached much of the Warsaw ghetto, and now Jews were starting to gather more information and record the numbers of deportations and deaths. The Oneg Shabbath, with Ringelblum’s help, is a prime example of this. Ringelblum noted how in 1943, the Oneg Shabbath “began to collect material about the ‘charnel house of European Jewry – Treblinka.’ They pieced together a picture of the experience of Jews sent to Treblinka from the provinces,” so that they could understand the entirety of the “Final Solution.”¹⁰⁵ Katznelson noted on July 21, 1943, that it had been “a year since the Germans began the total annihilation of the Jews of Warsaw.”¹⁰⁶ He additionally states that “the liquidation of the Jews of Eastern Europe, Lithuania, Ukraine, and the occupied regions if Russia, started earlier.”¹⁰⁷ In his August 8 entry, Katznelson mentions, “The Jews of Lublin were gassed in the gas chambers at Belzhetz [sic].”¹⁰⁸ He wrote that “on the day that they began the total extermination of Warsaw Jewry, the annihilation of the Jews in most of the other communities in Poland had been completed.”¹⁰⁹ By mid-1943, news of the “Final Solution” had reached the Warsaw ghetto, and few within were unaware of its horrific nature.

The Camps

¹⁰⁴ Breitman, *Official Secrets*, 8 and Bart Van der Boom, “The Auschwitz Reservation,” 387.

¹⁰⁵ Sloan, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, xxi.

¹⁰⁶ Katznelson, *Vittel Diary*, 51.

¹⁰⁷ Katznelson, *Vittel Diary*, 51.

¹⁰⁸ Katznelson, *Vittel Diary*, 100 and 102. Here he is referring to the death camp Belzec.

¹⁰⁹ Katznelson, *Vittel Diary*, 100 and 102.

A small number of those Jews who escaped the death and labour camps wrote down their experiences. The issue with accessing diaries of people from inside the camps is that very few people who entered made it out alive. However, some did live to tell their tale and would write out their experience for the world to witness. The first diarist is Rudolf Vrba, a well-known camp escapee, who survived both Majdanek and Auschwitz. Vrba co-authored the 1944 Vrba-Wetzler report, which helped bring the news of the extermination facilities at Auschwitz to the Allies – including extensively detailed numbers of those killed – and warned the Hungarian government about the fate awaiting its Jews. Vrba was in the camps from 1942 to 1944. The second diarist is Josef Katz, a young man who was sent to various camps in Europe-during the war.

The experiences of those in the camps are very different from those in the ghettos. Every aspect of the camps was designed to destroy the people imprisoned there whilst monopolizing on their labour. Katz noticed this on January 2, 1942, as he records, “We realize this camp serves only for the destruction of human beings.”¹¹⁰ Vrba writes that the “future of Auschwitz was forged” on July 17, 1942, when Heinrich Himmler visited the camp.¹¹¹ Vrba commented that Himmler was not satisfied with the camp when he had toured it in mid-1942, “But it was not the appalling condition that worried him. It was the grossly inefficient methods which were being used to exterminate the Jews who were beginning to arrive in their thousands from all parts of Europe.”¹¹² In the year to come, these camp systems would become much more efficient. Vrba mentions not just the growing death toll of the camp, but also Auschwitz’s growing coffers. He writes:

¹¹⁰ Josef Katz, *One Who Came Back: The Diary of a Jewish Survivor*, translated by Hilda Reach, (Takoma Park, MD: Dryad Press, 2006), 29.

¹¹¹ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 1.

¹¹² Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 8.

one week in [K]anada taught me more about the real purpose of Auschwitz than I had learned in the three months that had passed since my initiation. It was a sickening lesson, not so much because of the sadism or the frugality or the sporadic deaths, but because of the cold-blooded commercialism of the place.¹¹³

Vrba witnessed the “Final Solution” directly from Auschwitz, where it was being acted out. The Nazis plundered the Jews that were being deported to the camps and their death and used their possessions to increase the coffers of the regime, state and Nazis themselves. With the beginning of the “Final Solution” in the camps, those who witnessed the horrors learned immediately about the murderous aspects of the “Final Solution”; later, they would learn the even more horrific aspects of the policy.

A significant point of concern for camp inmates, as in the ghettos, were the deportations. In March 1942, Katz recalled that they were given “orders to send all the sick and weak people to the ghetto to recuperate.”¹¹⁴ However, he doubted the purpose of these deportations as “until yesterday they destroyed Jewish lives with every means at their disposal, and today they warn to send us away to recuperate. Ridiculous! ... [then] the incredible happens, the transports are kosher. We know this because when the first car gets back we find a message on its floor which says, ‘have arrived safely.’”¹¹⁵ Katz and his fellow inmates believed the scratched message and were slightly relieved. They believed the message because Katz and the other Jews reasoned that the Nazis “need us as slave labour ... [as] those who recuperated are immediately sent to work again.”¹¹⁶ Vrba witnessed the opposite side of the deportations, as in June 1942 – before he was interred in the camps – others around him received letters from those who had been deported.

¹¹³ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 135-136. Kanada (written Canada in the original quote) comprised the large warehouses in Auschwitz where the Jews’ belongings were sorted and stored after taken from them directly before they were murdered.

¹¹⁴ Katz, *One Who Came Back*, 39.

¹¹⁵ Katz, *One Who Came Back*, 39.

¹¹⁶ Katz, *One Who Came Back*, 40.

They noted how “everything was fine. The food was good and they weren’t working too hard.”¹¹⁷ However, one of the letter-receivers mentioned that “her [the author of the letters] mother sent me her love. And her mother died three years ago.”¹¹⁸ This letter showed that while the Jews in the camps were forced to write letters to send, but the deportations were not ‘kosher.’ Instead, Vrba witnessed that these deportations were the opposite of what they advertised. Even those outside of the camps knew that the deportation trains were not to be trusted. On August 9, 1942, Klukowski wrote that “no one believes that the Jews will be moved to the Ukraine. They will all be killed,” these deportation trains took their passengers directly to the camps.¹¹⁹ Vrba records how he received his “first hint of the horror to come,” as in January 1943, “New railway tracks began edging their way up the broad road that lay between Birkenau 1 and Birkenau 2 ... the ramp, it seemed, was to become obsolete. Here was an operation beyond the scope of lorries, here there would be no selections, no weeding out of the young and fit; just a direct line to death.”¹²⁰ Auschwitz continued to transform into a vast killing production, as with the addition to the railway tracks in 1943, the camps became more proficient in killing.

Both Vrba and Katz experienced different sides of the Nazi attempt to keep the camp's secret. Vrba notes how on September 7, 1942, when the Theresienstadt ghetto was liquidated, the people were not immediately sent to the gas chambers upon arriving at Auschwitz.¹²¹ Instead, “kid gloves” were applied to the 100,000 new arrivals, as “in this particular ghetto [Theresienstadt] there were International Red Cross observers. The fiction of the resettlement

¹¹⁷ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 50.

¹¹⁸ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 50.

¹¹⁹ Klukowski, *Diary from the Years of Occupation*, 210.

¹²⁰ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 206.

¹²¹ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 189.

areas, therefore, had to sound like undeniable fact.”¹²² Vrba shows the efforts the Nazis went through to keep information about the exterminations quiet. However, the events in the camps were not kept quiet.¹²³ Katz witnessed the opposite situation of Vrba. As an old friend greeted him in fall 1942, saying, “Hello, Josef! Imagine finding you here! I thought you were dead! I remember you went to Salaspils, and not many return from there.”¹²⁴ Unlike the situation that Vrba witnessed, by October 1942, some people in Jungfernhof were already aware of the high fatalities that occurred in the camps.¹²⁵ In Claude Lanzmann’s documentary *Shoah*, Polish peasants from Wlodawa reflected on the camps at Sobibor.¹²⁶ One of the men had a farm 100 yards away from the camp. While tending his field, he heard the screams of Jews being killed and saw the ways that they were asphyxiated. Additionally, the train conductors who drove the trains into the camps were highly aware of the horrors of the “Final Solution.” Henryk Gawkowski drove over 200 trains of 60-80 cars each into Treblinka.¹²⁷ Although the secrecy of the camps (which started with Hitler not signing any orders, according to Vrba) existed for the earlier portion of 1942, those inside the camps could not deny the fact that these camps were killing centers. The Nazis faced no urgency in keeping the actions inside the camp a secret from the inmates, as they too would be sent to the gas chambers as many before them.¹²⁸

What the West Knew

Those within Poland slowly grew aware of the deadly nature of the “Final Solution” in the summer of 1942, but what of those outside of Europe? In some ways, the Allies, the United

¹²² Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 189.

¹²³ *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann.

¹²⁴ Katz, *One Who Came Back*, 62.

¹²⁵ Jungfernhof was a Latvian concentration camp, located near the Riga ghetto. The camp was dissolved in March 1942, and the inmates were killed and buried in the Bikernieki forest.

¹²⁶ *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann.

¹²⁷ *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann, He told Lanzmann that he made the job bearable by drinking lots of vodka.

¹²⁸ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 290.

Kingdom and the United States were aware of the “Final Solution” earlier than some people within Poland. However, the full picture was not understood by the Allies until closer to 1944. One reason why the Allies were aware of the “Final Solution” earlier, late 1941 to early 1942, is because of the surveillance conducted for the war. A more comprehensive understanding of the “Final Solution” came later, as it took months for information to be smuggled out of Poland by the underground. It is from the Polish Underground that the Allies received much of their information about the “Final Solution.”¹²⁹ What the Allies did with the information differed from report to report and from country to country.

With the constant surveillance and decoding of radio transmissions, the Allies were able, in some cases, to learn about the “Final Solution” at a very early date. As early as September 1, 1941, British Intelligence already “a basic grasp of Nazi intentions towards Jews.”¹³⁰ Even before the first extermination camps were operational, and four months before the Wannsee Conference, the British had an idea of what the “Final Solution” was.¹³¹ Moreover, while the British analysts “grasped only a fraction of the Nazis’ activities and policies in the East,” they still received and decoded “dozens of open reports of mass killings,” from the summer and fall of 1941.¹³² By May 1942, the British knew that “in Poland alone, 700,000 Jews had been murdered... planned slaughter of practically the whole Jewish population.”¹³³ On June 26, Ringelblum noted that it was an excellent day for Warsaw and the Oneg Shabbath as he wrote

¹²⁹ The Royal Air Force (RAF) also learnt about the “Final Solution” and Holocaust from the Polish Underground. At some point during the war, the RAF’s photo reconstructions units conducted soirees based on the Polish Underground reports. This information was gathered from my grandfather, Flight Sargent Alfred Tetley, who reported that after the war he learned that Sir Arthur Harris used these reports to mark the camps as ‘no bombing sites’, as they were not in built-up areas.

¹³⁰ Breitman, *Official Secrets*, 98-97.

¹³¹ Breitman, *Official Secrets*, 98-97.

¹³² Breitman, *Official Secrets*, 92.

¹³³ Michael Fleming, "Allied Knowledge of Auschwitz: A (Further) Challenge to the “Elusiveness” Narrative," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 28, no. 1 (2014): 34-35.

that “this morning, the English radio broadcast about the fate of Polish Jewry. They told about everything we know so well: about Slonim and Vilna, Lemberg and Chelmno, and so forth.”¹³⁴ He was overjoyed that the world had finally found out. Also, in June, reports from the Polish underground finally reached people in London, and their reports “raised both the death counts and the visibility of Nazi killings of Jews.”¹³⁵ Furthermore, in June, a significant news story ran in *The Daily Telegraph*, which “mentioned the Nazi use of mobile gas chambers.”¹³⁶ Whilst the Allies had ideas about the horrific policies that the Nazis were enacting on Jewish populations before 1942, the Allies did not have a confirmed account of the “Final Solution.”

By June 1942, the news of the “Final Solution” and the rising numbers of deaths in Nazi camps had spread across Poland and to the Allies. Michael Fleming wrote that “information about the annihilation of Jews at Auschwitz had reached Britain in late 1942 and through 1943 and 1944.”¹³⁷ By December 1942, a Polish report, summarised in the British weekly intelligence summaries, noted, “The German government had a policy of wiping out the Jewish “race” in Poland.”¹³⁸ The same report recorded, “Deportations exceeded in horror the worst fears, that Jews in Poland were almost completely annihilated, and that death camps existed at Belzec, Treblinka, and Sobibor.”¹³⁹ The fact that the Allies were already aware of death camps by 1942 is supported by Vrba, although he asserts that “until April 1944, the terrible secret of Auschwitz was well maintained.”¹⁴⁰ He continues, “In 1942, rumours in general terms about the mass murders of Jews in eastern Europe were being regularly reported to the British and Allied

¹³⁴ Sloan, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, 295.

¹³⁵ Breitman, *Official Secrets*, 128.

¹³⁶ Breitman, *Official Secrets*, 128.

¹³⁷ Fleming, “Allied Knowledge of Auschwitz,” 45.

¹³⁸ Breitman, *Official Secrets*, 147.

¹³⁹ Breitman, *Official Secrets*, 148.

¹⁴⁰ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 305.

governments from Jewish sources in the Nazi-controlled countries.”¹⁴¹ By 1942, the British and American governments were aware of the intentions of the Nazis and the reality of the “Final Solution.”

In 1943, further details had reached the Allies. Fleming contradicts Vrba, as, by autumn 1943, London was already aware that “468,000 Jew had been killed at Auschwitz by the end of 1942.”¹⁴² Because facts about the “Final Solution” and the destructive nature of the camps reached the Allies between mid-1942 and early 1943, historian Martin Gilbert is critical of the Allies’ inaction. Gilbert stated, “The actual name of Auschwitz, as a concentration camp, had been known in the west throughout the first two years of its operation, and even earlier. A few references to the killing of Jews at Auschwitz did reach the West. None, however, for different reasons, made any impact.”¹⁴³ It was, predominantly, in late 1942 that the Allies grew more aware of details of the killings, including the number killed, that constituted the Nazi “Final Solution.”

While many historians reference when London first received news from the Polish Underground about the “Final Solution” and the condition of Polish Jews, the United States also received similar, if not identical, reports. Cesarani states, “During the first half of 1942, information reached London and Washington about the fate of the Jews in German-occupied Europe.”¹⁴⁴ In March 1943, information on the camps and killings taking place had reached both the United Kingdom and the United States but:

Was handled very differently in British and American newspapers. On March 22 [1943], the *Washington Post*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles*

¹⁴¹ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 305.

¹⁴² Fleming, “Allied Knowledge of Auschwitz,” 39.

¹⁴³ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, 292.

¹⁴⁴ Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 574.

Times all published the most significant information: that more than half a million people, mainly Jews, had been killed at Oswiecim. The mainstream press in Britain largely ignored the press release.¹⁴⁵

Cesarani further writes that, even if the reports were being published, the “coverage was fragmentary.”¹⁴⁶ The British and the Americans acted very differently on the information they were provided concerning the “Final Solution” and the killings in the camps. The differing responses lay in each nation's different situations. The government in the United Kingdom had very few members who “felt that there was a strong reason to distribute this kind of information [about the Holocaust] publicly.”¹⁴⁷ While the British had more information that they could have acted on – or reported on – it was the Americans who gave the stories more media coverage. The United States, however, was forced to report to the public what was occurring as “American inaction ran significant political risks.”¹⁴⁸ The United States government faced months of public lobbying. Forcing the government to acknowledge the events of the “Final Solution” and to aid in “sav[ing] the surviving Jews in Europe from extinction.”¹⁴⁹ Although both governments of the United States and the United Kingdom had access to the same reports detailing the actions of the “Final Solution,” each country gave the events different media coverage.

It was not just one country that was aware of the killings of the Jews in Poland; it was the entirety of the Allies.¹⁵⁰ The Soviet Union also received reports of what was happening. However, their reports were not second hand, as they were the ones gathering evidence of the

¹⁴⁵ Fleming, “Allied Knowledge of Auschwitz,” 43.

¹⁴⁶ Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 574.

¹⁴⁷ Breitman, *Official Secrets*, 109.

¹⁴⁸ Breitman, *Official Secrets*, 198.

¹⁴⁹ Breitman, *Official Secrets*, 198.

¹⁵⁰ This included the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union.

atrocities.¹⁵¹ In their push towards Germany, the Soviet Red Army liberated death camps that had not been destroyed by the retreating Germans.¹⁵² This highlights another complication for historians, and their understanding of nations comprehension of the “Final Solution,” in that each Allied nation acted differently on the reports they were receiving.

Conclusion

In Poland, many people apprehended the horrors of the “Final Solution” – with its gas chambers to enact the Nazi policy of physical extermination – by the summer of 1942, although for some, it took till the end of 1942 to (fully) realize the destructive nature of the “Final Solution.” Saul Friedländer concluded that, within Germany, people learned that “the Jews were destined for complete extermination” by late 1942 and early 1943.¹⁵³ One major reason why some people took longer to grasp the horrific nature of the “Final Solution,” was because of rumours. The main rumour was that of the deportations, as the deportations were not relocating the Jewish population to another part of Europe, but the trains were instead taking them straight to the gas chambers. Van der Boom wrote that people denied what they were hearing because “the facts had been clear, the courage to face them had been lacking.”¹⁵⁴ Van der Boom stated that while diarists might have recorded that the Nazis were exterminating the Jews, the term “did not mean immediate killing, but the disappearance of a people in an indeterminate future.”¹⁵⁵ Van Rede, an art collector during the war, stated that “after the war we will *know*, now we can only *believe* [emphasis in original].”¹⁵⁶ This is the truth that many diarists faced if they did not

¹⁵¹ The Soviets shared the information they had gathered surrounding the Holocaust and camps; however, the United Kingdom and the United States doubted the material as the Soviet Union had a history of falsifying atrocities. *Night Will Fall*, directed by André Singer, (Angel TV, 2014).

¹⁵² *Night Will Fall*, Singer.

¹⁵³ Bart Van der Boom, “The Auschwitz Reservation,” 389.

¹⁵⁴ Bart Van der Boom, “The Auschwitz Reservation,” 387.

¹⁵⁵ Bart Van der Boom, “The Auschwitz Reservation,” 399.

¹⁵⁶ Bart Van der Boom, “The Auschwitz Reservation,” 394.

directly witness how the Jews suffered from the “Final Solution.” While the diarists in Poland might have lacked evidence of the intricacies of the “Final Solution,” they had an excellent understanding of the murderous actions by the summer of 1942.

People within Poland became aware of the destructive nature of the “Final Solution” by the summer of 1942, half a year after the Nazi efforts began to eradicate the Jews systematically through physical extermination. Poles – both Christian and Jewish – noticed that the “Final Solution” was occurring early in 1942 and were also aware of the actions leading up to the “Final Solution,” such as the creation of and operations at Chelmno. Jews in the ghettos could be divided into two groups: those who had advance knowledge of the “Final Solution,” and those who did not learn of the “Final Solution” until too late. In the Lodz ghetto, Jews knew of the “Final Solution” and the death camps by the summer of 1942. However, the actualities of the situation did not become apparent for many until the fall of 1942. In the Warsaw ghetto, the realities of death lay everywhere; in the streets, people were dying every day. Those in the ghetto comprehended the deadly nature of “Final Solution” by early 1942, as rumours of Lodz’s deportations reached Warsaw. For those in the camps, the reality sunk in much earlier, as the diarists were well versed in the deadly nature of the camps.

While I mentioned at the beginning of my thesis that Zygmunt Klukowski’s diary inspired my thesis, his diary was not a pivotal source to understand when people grew aware of the “Final Solution.” He never explicitly wrote about the “Final Solution.” Klukowski’s diary is an example that while non-Jewish Poles were aware of the “Final Solution” and its impacts on the Jews, Poles did not always write about their findings.

Scholars have studied when the Allies became aware of the murderous actions of the “Final Solution,” and some studies have focused on specific countries and their understandings

of the “Final Solution.” This thesis has worked to produce a study that documents when people in Poland learned of the “Final Solution,” the Nazi policy of the physical extermination of the Jewish people. I have shown that once the Nazis implemented the “Final Solution,” the people in Poland were aware of the horrific nature of the Nazi plan to physically exterminate the Jews. By the summer of 1942, few in Poland were unaware of the deadly connotations of the “Final Solution.”

Appendix A



Map from https://web.archive.org/save/https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/map.cfm?map_id=3432

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