

Legal regulations imposed on Jewish population in General Government¹ of Third Reich

In the very first weeks of the occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany, the Polish society was made to understand that times ahead were not to be marked by respect for the law. The Germans committed crimes against civilians; the cities and villages were burnt, filling everybody with horror. The devastation of the synagogues set on fire brought pain and suffering to the Jewish population. Side by side with acts of vandalism and humiliation of the Jews beaten and forced to labor heavily, and who were deprived of ritual garments and brutally shorn in public by the German army ruffians, an unprecedented event occurred in the Podkarpacie region. By the end of September 1939, Germans had ordered the deportation of thousands of Jews who lived in the areas next to the River San across the river, in order to move the Jews to the Soviet occupation zone. It was an unexpected operation, executed swiftly, with no means of transportation provided to the Jews amassed on the river bank and ordered to swim to the other side. Those who had resisted were shot, many lost their possessions and the packages they carried along with them, while many others drowned when crossing the river.

From the start of the General Government on October 26, 1939, the German nazis introduced a number of regulations which limited the rights of every

¹ General Government was the Nazi name for a Third-Reich dominion encompassing core territories of Poland conquered by Nazi Germany in September 1939 and occupied for five years that followed (translator note)

category of population on the occupied territories of conquered Poland. Racial segregation rooted in Nazi ideology and exercised through pseudo-legal measures, laid out in the Nuremberg Laws, divided the population into the Aryan population (sub-divided along ethnic categories) and non-Aryan, which included Jews. The Jews who found themselves within the borders of the General Government of the German Third Reich were deprived of the right to conduct free commercial and business activities, they were banned from offering craftsmen services, running shops and keeping money savings in banks. School attendance was banned for Jewish children and youths, Jewish denominational schools were closed, and religious practices of the Jews in public were forbidden; these were impossible anyway because of the demolition of synagogues and the temples' furnishings.

In December 1939, Jews were ordered to wear badges showing the Star of David on their outer garments. Later, the German Nazis banned Jews from public transport, from walking on pavements (as they were ordered to walk in gutters) and from staying in central and important big city areas. Jews were also banned from making purchases in public pharmacies, the use of hospitals, swimming pools, parks, and other publicly available facilities. All these acts were meant to reinforce the gradual isolation of the Jewish population as intended by the German Nazi occupiers. The ban on conducting commercial activities hit the Jews the most, as it banned contact with the Aryan population and made it impossible to win family upkeep by the Jewish shopkeepers. The Germans also introduced daily food allowance regulations for all categories of population inhabiting the General Government, with the lowest food rations allocated to Jews. They also introduced forced labor: every Jew of both sexes and between 14 and 60 years of age was obliged to be employed and work. For Poles, this obligation started at the age of 16.

In 1941, the German Nazis ordered the launch of secluded ghettos for the Jewish population. The ghettoization process as such was extended in

time. The first ghetto enclosure was organized in the town of Piotrków Trybunalski, as early as October 1939. The German nazis launched 650 ghettos altogether in the areas of occupied Poland. Most of the ghettos were located within small townships, where the nazis forcibly concentrated the Jewish inhabitants of the town and the areas surrounding the town. Unlike the biggest ghettos of Warsaw, Łódź, Krakow and Nowy Sącz, there were no walls erected around small-town ghettos, as these were fenced off with barbed wire, or marked with signposts informing outsiders that trespassing into the ghetto carried the risk of losing a life. All ghettos had been strictly controlled by the Nazi *Sicherheitsdienst und Sicherheits Polizei* and were overseen by gendarmeries of *Polnische Polizei* and *Juedische Ordnungsdienst*.

Up until October 1941, the entire German regulations related to limitations of the possibility of unhindered existence of the Jewish population covered Jews only and had no unconditional consequences for the members of the Aryan population.

This changed with the ruling of General Governor Hans Frank, dated October 15, 1941. The above proved the most important ruling that had been introduced for the two populations living in the occupied territories in the first two years of the German Nazi occupation of Poland. The goal of the ruling by General Governor Hans Frank was to limit the possibility of leaving the Jewish ghettos by the ghettos' inhabitants and to coerce into submission the Polish population, who could wish to assist the escaping Jews. Governor Frank's ruling of October 15, 1941, stated the following:

1. The Jews, who decide to leave the district assigned to them without permission are subject to the sentence of death. The same death penalty will be meted out to the persons, who consciously provide shelter to such (escaping) Jews.

2. Instigators and helpers are subject to the same penalty as the perpetrators: an attempt at an act will be treated as a done deed. In lighter cases, heavy prison or prison may be ordered.

In reality, it entailed intimidation of all the people who tried to help the Jews and forced the Jews to resign from their plans of escaping the ghettos. The above measures allowed for the separation of two socio-religious groups that naturally co-existed before the war by dividing them with a barrier of death and fear. Any form of assistance extended to Jews by Poles could have led to immeasurable consequences, making the majority of the Polish population passive and reserved. The goal of the Germans was to intimidate the Poles as well as the Jews. However the latter, while conscious of the penalty they would face, opted for a chance of being rescued through illegally fleeing the ghetto rather than perishing in the course of deportation operations.

The German occupation regulations in the General Government made for a system of repression and penalties extended to all ethnic categories of persons subject to these laws. These nazi laws did not favor the Poles at the cost of the Jews, as the laws entailed identical penalties for the Poles when the German police ascertained the help the Polish neighbors provided to the persecuted Jews. When jointly caught in such a situation, all the victims, be they Jews or Poles, suffered the same punishment: death.

Marcin Chorązki

Marcin Chorązki (Ph.D.) is a historian at The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in WWII. Dr Chorązki also works for the Regional Historical Research Bureau of the National Memory Institute (OBBH IPN) in Krakow, Poland.

