

Ghetto Child Survival During the Holocaust: Adapting to Location

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Faculty Introduction

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Andrea's paper, "Ghetto Child Survival During the Holocaust: Adapting to Location" breaks new ground in Holocaust history—a difficult thing to do—by comparing two large ghettos in Nazi-occupied Poland (Warsaw and Łódź) in their local Polish contexts, rather than just to other ghettos. Her extensive primary source research on a number of Polish-Jewish children trapped in these ghettos indicates that the proximity to and relationships with non-Jews in the cities outside, made or broke, survival possibilities for young people. Though there is extensive research on the Holocaust and especially the Warsaw Ghetto, most of it has focused on the behavior of non-Jewish Poles and on phenomena like rescue and betrayal. Andrea reframes the topic by asking what practical options were available to Jewish children trying to survive, returning the focus to Jewish agency. This creates an innovative and interesting piece of writing that deserves a wide audience.

Abstract

Many of the 1.5 million children who lost their lives during the Holocaust were forced into ghettos, segregated districts created by the Nazis, where they suffered extreme conditions. The following paper examines how location played a vital role in the ghetto experiences of Jewish children by comparing two major ghettos, Łódź and Warsaw. The comparison includes assessing the physical space of each ghetto as well as their geographic locations within the Third Reich, and how these factors influenced the ways in which children tried to overcome their ghetto's harsh environment. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's database, in addition to outside literature, was used to retrieve primary source materials used to explore first-hand accounts and insights. This paper claims that the methods children used to endure ghetto life was dependent on the locations of the ghettos themselves; and further suggests why location should be considered a major feature of Nazi persecution that was used to try to devastate the Jewish people.

During World War II, a time of suffering, conflict, and change, the Jewish people of Europe were victims of immeasurable persecution that devastated their communities. During the fall of 1939, Poland was invaded by the German army and conquered in less than six weeks. The Jewish population was immediately targeted following Poland's surrender and were persecuted by antisemitic policies. Initially, the Jews were required to wear armbands with the Star of David as a way to identify their non-Jewish neighbors. However, the armband was the tip of the iceberg. One of the major phases of Nazi torture and dehumanization used to devastate the Jewish population was ghettoization. Beginning in October 1939, Nazis forced Jews into areas known as ghettos, developed districts within their communities used to separate them from the rest of the world. Two of these ghettos were Łódź (1940-1944) and Warsaw (1940-1943).

Although it was a fight to survive for everyone who lived in ghettos, children were especially at risk. They were smaller, weaker, had less life experience, and many lost their parents who were their sole providers. Children had to quickly learn to adapt to the challenges of ghetto life in order to live another day. Yet, not all children had similar

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experiences, as different ghettos brought different dangers. Many factors such as the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council), Jewish police, Nazi guards, and the ghetto inhabitants themselves all played

a part in shaping the experiences of these children. However, the location of the ghettos within the urban communities of which they were a part also played a role in how well or long children were able to survive. This paper will compare the Warsaw and Łódź ghettos to examine how their respective locations played a part in the survival of children who lived in the ghetto and prove that it impacted how they were able to endure ghetto life. To do so, this argument will include an examination of how both ghettos were set up: where they were blocked off from the rest of their cities, how their isolation or proximity impacted ghetto life for children, and how each ghetto was affected by their location within the Nazi Empire.

Łódź

Before World War II, Łódź was the second largest Jewish community in Europe with a Jewish population of approximately 233,000.¹ There was also a considerable ethnic German minority (*Volksdeutsche*) that made up around ten percent of the overall population.² The city was also “Poland’s textile center and many Jews worked within this industry” creating clothes and linens.³ This large economic and cultural center began to unravel with Germany’s 1939 invasion of Poland.

The ghetto of Łódź had distinctive qualities that made it “the most isolated and oppressed ghetto in all of Nazi-occupied Europe” and that made survival an even harder challenge for Jews who were incarcerated there.⁴ The ghetto “was completely surrounded by walls and barbed wire on [April 30], 1940” trapping 164,000 Jews inside.⁵ Contact with the outside world was almost impossible, and the city itself was part of the territory “annexed by the Reich and incorporated into Germany proper” in the fall of 1939.⁶ This meant it was deep within the Nazi empire, making escape difficult because of the heavy Nazi presence that surrounded it. There was no sewage system, running water, electricity, and no one could receive “mail, newspapers, or packages from the outside,” there was no “telephone or telegraph contact, ... the possession of a radio was a capital crime.”⁷ All inhabitants, but especially the children of Łódź, had difficulty trying to survive with both pressures of living in the annexed German territory and the intolerable physical living conditions brought on by its isolation.

¹ Yad Vashem, “The Łódź Ghetto-Historical Background”, *Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center*, Retrieved from <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/the-lodz-ghetto-historical-background.html>.

² Yad Vashem, “The Łódź Ghetto-Historical Background.”

³ “The Łódź Ghetto-Historical Background.”

⁴ Rywka Lipszyc, Alexandra Zapruder, Malgorzata Markoff, and Ewa Wiatr. *Rywka’s Diary: The Writings of a Jewish Girl from the Lodz Ghetto, Found at Auschwitz in 1945 and Published Seventy Years Later*. (San Francisco: Jewish Family and Children’s Services Holocaust Center, 2015) 47.

⁵ Leonard Tushnet. “Health Conditions in the Ghetto of Lodz.” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 18, no. 1 (1963): 64-73. Accessed October 24, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24620089>. 64.

⁶ *The Writings of a Jewish Girl*, 51.

⁷ *The Writings of a Jewish Girl*, 56.

To further assure its detachment, the “Germans demolished all the houses around [the ghetto], leaving a treacherous no man’s land between the fence and the ‘Aryan’ side.”⁸ Additionally, two of the main roads in Łódź, Zgierska and Limanowskiego Streets, had wooden bridges that were built 25 feet above the ground for Jews to use as they were forbidden on the streets.⁹ This ensured that no Jew could escape and made their isolation visible. To adapt and overcome the challenges brought on by the ghetto’s geographic location, children resorted to a variety of methods to survive. For example, because there was no way to smuggle anything in and out of the Łódź ghetto, due to its disconnect from the urban center, children resorted to “coal mining.” Children were not actually working in coal mines; instead, according to a diary entry by ghetto chronicler Josef Zelkowicz, children would dig through “fly-infested heaps of trash...burrowing in the muddy soil, plumbing its innards, rummaging, sifting, [and] sorting” in order to find materials to sell as fuel for fireplaces.¹⁰ It was difficult work, with children hunching over for hours at a time, shoveling through mud and waste in order to find things they could sell to fellow ghetto inhabitants, such as pieces of wood, rocks, and cloth.¹¹ With the money they made, often just a few *pfennigs*, they bought food. However, for many it would not be enough to avoid starvation. Limited resources and a low demand for these items meant that “coal mining” was not always enough to find a meal in Łódź.

Children would work in factories and the ghetto became “one of the biggest industrial centers of the Reich.”¹² This was in large part due to its already available factory buildings and the Chairman of the Łódź *Judenrat*, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, who believed “that the sole chance of survival...was for the Jewish population to make itself useful to the Germans.”¹³ Unlike other ghettos where factory work took place outside the perimeter, “ghetto Jews were only able to hold jobs in the

⁸ Jewish Historical Institute, “Łódź Ghetto-The Largest Slave Labor Camp”, *Jews Outside of Warsaw*, February 08, 2018. Accessed September 28, 2020.

⁹ Jewish Historical Institute, “Łódź Ghetto-The Largest Slave Labor Camp”.

¹⁰ Josef Zelkowicz, Diary Essay, 1941, in *Documenting Life and Destruction Holocaust Sources in Context: Children During the Holocaust*. (Rowman & Littlefield in Association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2017), 119.

¹¹ Zelkowicz, In *Children During the Holocaust*, 119.

¹² “Łódź Ghetto-The Largest Slave Labor Camp”.

¹³ *The Writings of a Jewish Girl*, 56-57.

ghetto” itself.¹⁴ This ensured no Jew could escape and that they remained under Nazi control at all times.

Children who could not work in factories or get food from “coal mining” resorted to stealing. They would take from their neighbors and peers. However, some children would take food from their own families when there was no other option. An anonymous diary entry written in 1942 by a teenage girl reveals that she ate some of the food stores in her family’s apartment while her parents and siblings were at work. Her March 11, 1942, entry reads, “I ate almost all the honey. What have I done? I am so selfish.”¹⁵ She felt terrible guilt for the inevitable suffering she caused her family and sent herself to bed early with no dinner. Yet, this did not stop her from sneaking

more spoonfuls of food **Łódź’s extreme isolation and restrictions brought on by its location forced children to find ways of overcoming difficulties...**

when her parents were not looking. This young girl is just one of the many who would pilfer food from their own hardworking family members. Without the possibility of smuggling goods into the isolated ghetto to satisfy the continuous gnawing of starvation, there was only so much young a child could do. Łódź’s extreme isolation and restrictions brought on by its location forced children to find ways of overcoming difficulties, such as starvation. Without communication with the outside, lack of resources, and no way to leave undetected, children had a difficult time enduring ghetto life because of the lack of access to the rest of the city.

Warsaw

As the children in Łódź tried to adapt to challenges brought on by their ghetto’s location, children 80 miles east in the ghetto of Warsaw were faced with their own hardships. Prior to the start of the war, Warsaw was the largest cultural and religious center for the Jewish people. With a Jewish population of approximately 350,000 people, they made up about one-third of the city’s prewar residents. On November 15, 1940, the Warsaw ghetto was established.¹⁶ Almost half a million Jews from

¹⁴ Tiedens, “Optimism and Revolt of the Oppressed,” 59.

¹⁵ Anonymous, Diary entry, March 10-11, 194, in *Documenting Life and Destruction Holocaust Sources in Context: Children During the Holocaust*, Doc 4-10, 135.

¹⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Warsaw”, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw>. Accessed November 20, 2020.

Poland and other parts of Europe were crammed together into less than two square miles. They were forced to room with strangers, endure harsh labor, suffer malnourishment, and live in horrendous conditions that would lead to disease and starvation. There were ten-foot walls built around the ghetto's perimeter, checkpoints at every exit, and armed guards that roamed the perimeter.¹⁷ The city went from being a place to celebrate Jewish life to an area imprisoned because of it.

The Warsaw ghetto's restrictions to the outside world were meant to hurt the Jewish people's morale and keep them living in deprivation in this new space, especially for the youth. These "emaciated skeletons, children swollen with hunger... [were] already grown-up at the age of five" and did not understand why this relocation had happened to them.¹⁸ They lost their childhood and instead had to think about survival and where their next meal would come from, as many lost their parents and were

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made to take on the role of provider. Even though the living conditions were inhumane and incredibly difficult to endure, the location of the ghetto

forced children to find new approaches to surviving captivity within the walls of Warsaw.

During confinement, Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum (1900-1944) founded an underground group of chroniclers that documented accounts of what life was like in the Warsaw ghetto. The group was named *Oyneg Shabes*, which means "Sabbath rejoicing" in Hebrew, and by the time the Warsaw ghetto was liquidated in 1943 they had gathered thousands of artifacts and testimonies from Jewish inhabitants.¹⁹ One of these artifacts was a 1942 written account of a conversation between an unidentified *Oyneg Shabes* member and an eighteen-year-old boy named David Briner, that provides valuable information about the lengths some children, or young adults, would go to in order to survive in the Warsaw ghetto. Briner lost his entire family: his parents, five sisters, four brothers-in-law, three

¹⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Warsaw", *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.

¹⁸ Doris L. Bergen. *War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Crane Library, 2017) 112.

¹⁹ Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-1940: The Years of Extermination* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 106.

nephews, and a brother, all of whom were deported to the Treblinka death camp while he was away doing forced labor.²⁰ He was left with no living relatives and no way to afford enough food to survive. Using the proximity of Warsaw to his advantage, Briner turned to stealing valuables to sell for a profit. In this account, Briner provided specific details of his looting system which included street names and the types of places he would break into, such as cellars, attics, and apartments. He also includes details about how he used the streets to evade police capture and what goods he was able to afford. Without Briner's personal account of his experience in Warsaw, the lives of other victims like him would be harder to understand or lost altogether.

While looting was an effective method of obtaining food for older youth, younger children used their smaller stature to smuggle items in and out of the ghetto. These children, typically ten years old or younger, were able "to slip through small gaps and holes in the ghetto walls and escape to municipal districts" where they could buy, steal, and sell goods.²¹ Other ways children went in and out of the ghetto was through the sewer system or scaling the ten-foot wall. Those who risked their lives to bring home food for their families, or the highest bidder, wore "clothing with concealed inner pockets... [returning] with half their weight in potatoes, bread, and other commodities" back into the ghetto.²² This became a vital method for surviving as food became more scarce each day, and as early as "1941, 184 calories were allocated for Jews" a day which is less than one percent of the daily caloric intake a child needs. One of these child smugglers was Jurek Erner, he was able to "cross the ghetto border a few times a day every time bringing in about twenty [kilos] of food" to sell.²³ This means of acquiring food did not come without challenges and risks. Many children would be stopped at checkpoints or exits of the ghetto to be searched for contraband, and those who were caught

²⁰ Anonymous, memoir, December 1942, in *Jewish Responses to Persecution, 1933-1946: A Source Reader*. Doc 3-31, edited by Jürgen. Matthäus and Emil Kerenji. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield in Association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2017), 121.

²¹ Patricia Heberer, *Documenting Life and Destruction Holocaust Sources in Context: Children During the Holocaust*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield in Association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2017), 340.

²² Heberer, *Children During the Holocaust*, 340.

²³ Barbara Engelking-Boni, "Childhood in the Warsaw Ghetto". in *Children and the Holocaust: Symposium Presentations* (Washington D.C: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004), 33.

were either arrested or simply shot on sight. The Warsaw ghetto's close location next to a busy city center provided more ways for children to obtain goods that would prolong their survival.

Although smuggling was effective for some children, others had to find different ways to get food. Factories that produced materials and equipment for the Wehrmacht used child labor. One of the advantages of factory work was the labor opportunities outside of the Warsaw ghetto, as workers were permitted to leave daily for their job.²⁴ This is in contrast to Łódź, where Jewish children could not leave the ghetto for any reason, even factory work. With work being outside the ghetto, it gave some children the ability to escape or smuggle goods. The work was not any less strenuous than work inside the ghetto. It was still dangerous, and the pay was low, but for those who could not sneak to the “Aryan” side for food, this was how they made a living. Erwin Baum, who lived in the Warsaw ghetto from 1940 to 1942, was around nine years old when he began working in a factory to provide food for his family. He was in and out of an orphanage where he received daily meals, but instead of always taking the free food he chose “to work so [he] could get some cash to buy bread and smoked fish” for his siblings.²⁵ Children like Baum were put into parental roles that came with enormous pressure to provide in a ghetto where everything was against their survival. Through Warsaw ghetto's connection to the “Aryan” side, opportunities to work outside the ghetto, and available city infrastructures, like the sewer system, children had a larger variety of ways to endure ghetto life. Warsaw's closer proximity to the rest of the city helped children better survive the struggles that came with ghettoization such as starvation and disease.

Nazi Zones of Occupation

Even with similar challenges like starvation and disease, the experiences of children in both Warsaw and Łódź differed in severity due to their locations within the Nazi empire. Warsaw was inside the *Generalgouvernement* led by Governor General Hans Frank. The Warsaw ghetto and others like it

²⁴ Larissa Z. Tiedens, “Optimism and Revolt of the Oppressed: A Comparison of Two Polish Jewish Ghettos of World War II,” *Political Psychology* 18, no. 1 (1997): 45-69. Accessed October 1, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3791983>. 59.

²⁵ RG-50.030.0016, Oral history interview with Erwin (Froim) Baum, Oral History interviews in the Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Washington, DC.

in the General Government did not receive the same treatment as those who were in Łódź. Łódź was not a part of the General Government; instead, it was in the western portion of Poland that was annexed into Germany proper in 1939 called the *Reichsgau Wartheland* (*Wartheland*), which was immediately Germanized. Holocaust survivor Jacob Lubliner, who was just four years old when the war broke out, recalled leaving his hometown of Łódź to move to Piotrków Trybunalski (Piotrków). He shared that his father, who had kept in touch with family in Piotrków, determined that “conditions in [Łódź] became harsh much sooner than they had in Piotrków” because of the large ethnic German population that settled around Łódź and the Nazis’ desire to expel Jews from Europe.²⁶ Lubliner revealed that even though he was put into a ghetto in Piotrków, “when the time came to purify the German Empire of Jews, of course the [Nazi] priority was applied to what was considered Germany proper.”²⁷ The decision to leave Łódź did not mean he did

not encounter other **Part of understanding how location impacted children’s abilities to adapt to ghetto life is knowing who lived in locations that surrounded the cities.** difficulties, but it gave his family the chance to stay together for the time being. The increased threat

of a quicker demise and harsher conditions for Jews in the *Wartheland* compared to others in the General Government, is evident in Lubliner’s testimony.

Part of understanding how location impacted children’s abilities to adapt to ghetto life is knowing who lived in locations that surrounded the cities. Since the Łódź ghetto was in the Warthegau, there were few willing to help the Jewish people escape or provide supplies. The surrounding population was made up of an “influx of Reich Germans and *Volksdeutsche* [ethnic Germans], most of whom were known to be enthusiastic Nazis” and would rather sell out than aid a Jew.²⁸ The location of the Łódź ghetto within the Nazi Reich impacted how well Jewish children were able to survive as they had nowhere to go or no way to tell the world of their suffering.

²⁶ Oral history interview with Erwin (Froim) Baum.

²⁷ RG-50.477.0860, Oral interview with Jacob Lubliner, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection.

²⁸ Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 104.

The Warsaw ghetto's location, with networks to the "Aryan" side of the city, gave children an opportunity to escape or get smuggled out of the ghetto. It was risky and not a guaranteed safe way out, but it was all some

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children had in hopes of survival. There were multiple ways that some went about escape, such as using the same routes through

the walls and sewers as the youth food smugglers. Jewish allies, many Christians or other non-Jewish civilians living outside the ghetto, would use contacts from the inside to arrange hidden transport for Jewish children. Frances Zatz was just eleven years old when her mother had her smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto. Her mother had vast connections to the outside, and knew the Warsaw Uprising of 1943 was going to take place, so she "made arrangements...to be taken out of the ghetto and taken by Poles" to escape the violence that would soon start.²⁹ Zatz and her sister were able to sneak out of the ghetto through a checkpoint in a Polish merchandise transport truck, and went to the home of a local Christian family.³⁰ This family took care of Zatz for a few months, under the condition that she convert to Christianity while with them, before she was moved to another location. Without the connections her mother had outside the ghetto in Warsaw, she would not have had the chance to escape the ghetto or the revolt. This shows that some children in Warsaw had better chances of escape because outside the walls of the ghetto "gentile' Warsaw was on all sides... [helping Jews] blend in with the bustle of those who lived outside the ghetto."³¹

However, this did not mean that they were surrounded by a large number of sympathizers. According to historian Jan T. Gross, many Poles took their own opportunities to exploit Jews who went into hiding by "becoming professional blackmailers of Jews" called *szmalcowniki*.³²

²⁹ RG-50.233.0144. Oral history interview with Frances Zatz, Oral History interviews in the Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Washington, DC.

³⁰ RG-50.233.0144. Oral history interview with Frances Zatz, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection.

³¹ Tiedens, "Optimism and Revolt of the Oppressed: A Comparison of Two Polish Jewish Ghettos of World War II," 59.

³² Jan T. Gross, "Polish-Jewish Relations during the War: An Interpretation," *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes De Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie* 27, no. 2 (1986). Accessed November 21, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23999261>, 210.

These people threatened to expose hidden Jews unless they gave them money or property, and when the Jews who had little to their name could not pay, the blackmailers would sell them out to the Nazis. This shows the danger that Jewish children faced even outside the ghetto and the antisemitism they experienced within Poland. These non-Jewish Poles saw an opportunity to profit off the suffering and vulnerability of Jewish children, who looked for a way out of the ghetto.

Conclusion

The location of ghettos created by the Nazi regime impacted whether children were able to endure ghetto life. For better chances of survival, children needed to be in a closer vicinity to an urban area that had access to the outside. With these connections came opportunity and ways to endure the difficulties of ghetto life. In Łódź, this was a major issue because of the Nazis' extreme segregation and the ghetto's inaccessibility to the outside. On top of the spatial shortcomings, the different geographies of the Warsaw and Łódź ghettos within the Nazi empire added new pressures to children in both locations, especially when it came to the surrounding populations.

In conclusion, the ways in which children adapted to ghetto life was dependent on the locations of the ghettos themselves. Whether it be how interconnected or isolated to a city they were, or their location in the Third Reich itself, to ignore the impact that geographical location played in survival and the ability for children to live in both Warsaw and Łódź, would be overlooking a major factor of their struggle. To fully understand the challenges Jewish children faced in ghettos and the reasoning for how they faced the hardships brought on by ghetto life, one must be cognizant of each feature of torture brought on by the Nazi regime. The Nazis' systematic torment and destruction of a group's existence was planned out in detail and that included how to use location to their advantage. ■

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Student Biography

Andrea Wagh graduated *summa cum laude* from Sam Houston State University with a Bachelor of Arts in History minoring in secondary education in May of 2021. As an undergraduate, she had an interest in World War II and the Holocaust, and had the opportunity to explore these topics further during a senior seminar course led by Dr. Jadwiga Biskupska. In this course, Andrea researched the Nazi persecution of European Jews, looking specifically at the experiences of Jewish children. She will be continuing this research in a graduate program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.