

Lodz Ghetto Chronicle on the Arrival of German Jews from Hamburg (May 7, 1942)

Abstract

Germans created ghettos not only to isolate Jews from “Aryans” (both German and Polish) but also to extract as much as possible from them in terms of labor and residual valuables. The hardships endured by the 160,000 Polish Jews in the Lodz Ghetto were exacerbated when some 20,000 German, Austrian, Czech, and Luxembourgian Jewish deportees arrived in the fall of 1941. Newcomers to the ghetto were often seen as too German or too foreign by the locals, and the stigma of Germanness persisted until they were deported again the following spring, this time to death camps. This source from 1942 documents the arrival of a transport of seemingly affluent German Jewish deportees from Hamburg.

Source

Marginalia on the Resettlement of the Hamburg Transport^[1]

Barely half a year ...

Barely half a year has passed since they came to the ghetto ...

Back then, long rows of predominantly well-dressed people moved through the ghetto; their outward appearance was so different from our own local misery. Elegant sports suits, fine shoes, furs, and the multi-colored cloaks worn by the women caught our eye. One often got the impression that these people had come for a recreational trip or rather for winter sports, since most of them wore ski suits. The appearance of these people did not exactly bear witness to the war, and since they walked without coats, despite the palpable cold, in front of the accommodations for their “transport,” and even through the city, it was quite clear that their layers of fat provided excellent protection from the cold.

With peculiar disgust—perhaps not unfounded—they reacted to the exceptionally poor sanitary conditions under which they were housed; they yelled, got agitated, and accepted no explanation. They were not interested in the fact that their arrival had brought the modest transport apparatus to a standstill and that, as a result, the vegetables allocated for the entire winter season froze in Marysin. They did not concern themselves with the fact that the accommodation of some 20,000 newcomers in such a cramped ghetto area could only have come at the expense of the established population. In truth, no sufficient solution to this problem was subsequently found and it became the greatest evil; but one must readily admit that solving this problem—even under the best conditions—would have taken some time. But they were very impatient and cursed for all they were worth!

Somewhere someone had misled them ... They had not been told where they were going and what would happen to them. They had heard that they were going to some industrial center where each of them would find suitable employment, so they were disappointed when they discovered completely different conditions. Some even asked if they could live in some sort of hotel. There were certainly arrogant and rude people among them, but they basically seemed small and helpless on account of their disorientation. On departure they were only allowed to carry 50 kg of luggage per person (which was not the case everywhere!), but hardly anyone followed this rule, so the transport department was busy for weeks, transferring their luggage from place to place.

Almost all of them brought food supplies with them and those who had not been able to, for some reason, encountered a wide range of bread, margarine, and other products offered for sale by the established population. The new clientele was a rich market, which daily absorbed all the goods on offer. Prices rose by the hour and the price of a loaf of bread rose in a short time to 25 Mk., while under previous conditions, a price of 10 Mk. had seemed astronomical.

They saw the misery of the local population, and they knew that thanks to their financial superiority they had a chance to rip the last bit of bread from the mouths of their Eastern brothers; that did not shock them, however. A number of people sold their rations at ridiculously low prices in the market stalls—in the beginning, for a few dozen pennies. With disgust, they eyed the soups that were brought to them; there was hardly a transport in which one could find arrivals who—at least initially—consumed the food from the communal kitchens. They passed it on to the most wretched among us in exchange for various services and favors.

A portion of the Hamburg transport was housed in the building of the cinema “BAJKA,” ul. Franciszkańska 33. This happened on Thursday evening, November 20, and on Friday morning the head [of the Jewish Council of Elders] came to greet the guests. They had made themselves comfortable on the floor; they were sleeping on their bundles and elderly people and women were sitting on chairs against the walls.

On request, they stood up and the head [Elder] addressed them with a short speech—perhaps the shortest ever in the ghetto. It was only a few sentences, but it was so warm and heartfelt that not only the women but also many serious men wiped away tears of emotion. It was a genuinely fraternal greeting with the assurance that he would share his humble roof and bread with them.

That same evening, the finely dressed newcomers from Hamburg prepared the Friday service. Amidst many lit candles, their first prayers to God were uttered in an especially eerie silence and a reverential mood. Those who had long since strayed from Judaism, and even those whose fathers had already rejected any attachment to their forefathers, were shrouded today in sincerity and reverence, seeking comfort and salvation in prayer. And when they entered the hall at the end of the prayer, the same phrase rose from many a mouth: “Now we see that we are all the same, all sons of the same people, all brothers.”

It was flattery, perhaps a compliment to the established population, or perhaps just a premonition of the not-so-distant future.

The events progressed faster than time; the people changed visibly, first externally, later physically, and finally, insofar as they did not completely disappear, they moved like shadows through the ghetto ...

The rutabagas and turnips that they had initially despised they now bought at high prices, and the soups they had once spurned became the highpoint of their dreams. Just as others had done before, they now roamed the city with small pots or cooking utensils tethered to them and scrounged for soup from others. And conditions changed enormously in this short time; kitchen soup has become a luxury, the price of such a soup has risen to 15 Mk. and no one likes to give it away even though these soups are not as good as the soups of half a year ago. They sold their remaining possessions to secure themselves a tolerable meal, in which they saw their last salvation from ruin.

And yet it was only half a year, only six months, that proved an eternity for them! Not even in one's wildest dreams could one have imagined such a metamorphosis for some of them.... Shadows, skeletons with lumps on their faces and limbs, ragged and emaciated, are now going on another journey, but this time they aren't even allowed to take a backpack.

Everything that was reminiscent of the deceptive European splendor was torn from them, and only the Jew remained, the eternal wanderer. ...

Their premonition on that first Friday in the ghetto was not wrong. ...

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NOTES

[1] This report refers to the deportation of the Hamburg Jews and is taken from the daily chronicle from May 7, 1942 (entry: the 4th day of the resettlements).

Source: "Marginalia on the Resettlement of the Hamburg Transport" [This report refers to the deportation of the Hamburg Jews and is taken from the daily chronicle of May 7, 1942 (entry: the 4th day of the resettlements)]; reprinted in the *Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto/Litzmannstadt 1942*, edited by Sascha Feuchert, Erwin Leibfried, and Jörg Riecke. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007, pp. 160-62.

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