

# The World That Ceased to Exist

Displacement of Jews from Wiśnicz, August 1942. Photo 240, owned by Prof. Stanisław Fischer Museum in Bochnia.

MAŁOPOLSKA

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organizatorzy:



60+ Nowy Wiśnicz



Eighty years ago, Nowy Wiśnicz was a bi-national, bi-cultural, and bi-religious community. Then, on August 22, 1942, horrific events unfolded in the center of Wiśnicz. In the third year of World War II, the German Nazis began implementing the planned resettlement of Wiśnicz's Jewish residents (about 1,500 people, not counting Jews who had arrived in Wiśnicz at that time, considering the place relatively safe) to the ghetto in Bochnia, which eventually led to their total extermination. In an instant, half of Wiśnicz's citizens were gone. Today, the only visible trace that remains of the 326-year history of this community is the Jewish cemetery-kirkut, located in the southwestern part of the town, on a hill at the junction of Limanowska and Żydowska Streets.

With time, the memory of our Jewish neighbors is becoming increasingly blurred, and thus the amount of knowledge about the common Polish-Jewish identity of Wiśnicz. Therefore, to pay tribute to the victims of this bestial act, commemorate this tragic event, and recall and preserve the image of those days, we present an exhibition titled "The World That Ceased to Exist."



Photo 1. Nowy Wiśnicz circa 1933. Photo by Czesław Wyrwa.

The Nazi occupiers decided the Jewish population's fate in the war's first days. On September 21, 1939, by order of the head of the Third Reich's Main Security Office, Rainhard Heydrich, in the occupied territories of Poland, Jews were to be grouped in larger urban centers. Jewish communities of less than 500 people were subject to dissolution. A slow process of concentrating the Jewish community in cities with access to railroad connections began.

Further restrictions imposed on the Jewish population occurred on October 26, 1939, when the proclamation of the General Government was signed. At the time, a decree by Governor General H. Frank ordered all Jews between the ages of 14 and 60 to perform forced labor for the occupier.

In November, Jews were ordered to mark the stores they ran with a Star of David, which had to be placed to be visible from a great distance. As of December 1, by another order, the occupier forced the Jewish community to wear white armbands with a blue Star of David sign.

Initially, the Jews of Wiśnicz were used in various cleaning and construction jobs and in the winter, among other things, to shovel snow from the roads. They were also often taken by trucks to neighboring

Bochnia, where they had to perform earthworks and construction. They received only a poor meal of negligible caloric value for the work they performed. In addition, all Jewish men were required to have short haircuts, were not allowed to wear peyos, and had to remove their head coverings in front of any passing uniformed German.

However, as a provincial town, Wiśnicz was still considered one of the safer places. In the years 1940-1941, Wiśnicz began to see an influx of Jewish refugees fleeing from Tarnów, Kraków, and Warsaw ghettos that had been established. Among the many refugees hoping to survive the hard times in the small town were individuals from the uncommon Jewish intelligentsia. These were the people who were aware of their national identity.

In 1941, the Germans made their first attempt to deport the Jewish community to the strictly closed ghetto in Bochnia (in operation since March 15, 1941), which did not come to fruition. On the other hand, at that time, an occupier's decree allowed Jews to stay only in a separate district of Wiśnicz, which was not fenced, but only supervised by the Ordnungsident.

The final deportation of the Jewish population from Nowy Wiśnicz was announced a few days before the decision of the Germans. On August 22, 1942 (it was a Saturday - the day of the Jewish Shabbat), 150 horse-drawn vehicles were ordered by the Germans to appear at their disposal in the town square. The

coerced Jews, with a piercing wail, loaded bundles onto carts provided by local peasants. Terrified young children, women, and old men hurriedly took their places next to the equally frightened coachmen. The carriages moved first, and behind them, escorted by the Germans, a group of several hundred physically fit Jews followed on foot. The march went toward the Bochnia ghetto, and its participants hardly resisted. There was a breakdown of physical and spiritual health among the people. From afar, the Polish residents of Wiśnicz, almost paralyzed with helplessness, surreptitiously watched. The faces of observers were painted with sadness and trepidation. In an instant, more than half of the town's population was gone.

Those more aware of the danger began to organize secretly. A delegation of Jewish Social Self-Help (Polish: ŻSS-Żydowska Samopomoc Społeczna) was established, which was one of the two legally operating organizations at the time. The next step in the formation of covert resistance to the occupier was the establishment of the Jewish Combat Organization (Polish: ŻOB-Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa) in 1941. The Jewish members of the ŻSS delegation in Wiśnicz sent a letter to the head of the Gestapo. In the letter, they asked, among other things: "We ask that you approve for us courses aimed at the agricultural training of Jewish youth as well as grant us permission to establish a farm in Kopaliny." The Germans did not suspect that they were thus approving a Jewish combat group, which tried to gain freedom of movement and the opportunity to act. Seemingly, farm work was carried out according to official guidelines. However, the content of the lectures, which referred to the political situation in occupied Poland, differed significantly from the textbooks' content for appearance's sake.



Photo 26. Jews of Wiśnicz planted trees in Kopaliny. Front left Schoen Hall, 1940. Photo from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, United States, from the collection of Henry and Sally Schoen Wiener.

During the day, the organization's members worked while they carried out strictly conspiratorial activities at night. The main activities included preparing and distributing mail, counterfeiting documents, publishing and distributing leaflets, and, later, their newspaper, "Hechaluc-Halochem" (Pioneer in the Fight). It printed a chronicle of current events from the General Government and gave practical advice enabling, for example, the construction of earthen hiding places from the Germans. Proclamations to Jews and Poles called for "fighting the enemy and, if that is not possible, escaping, because any escape from the hands of the oppressors today is a militant act." After a few months of functioning, the ŻOB in Kopaliny, despite being underground, was dissolved by the Germans.

During the day, the organization's members worked while they carried out strictly conspiratorial activities at night. In addition to preparing and distributing mail, they forged documents, published and distributed leaflets, and published and distributed their newspaper, "Hechaluc-Halochem." This newspaper was Pioneer in the Fight, which chronicled current events from the General Government and gave practical advice, such as building a hole in the ground to hide from the Germans. Proclamations to Jews and Poles called for "fighting the enemy and, if that is not possible, escaping, because any escape from the hands of the oppressors today is a militant act." After a few months of functioning, the ŻOB in Kopaliny, despite being underground, was dissolved by the Germans.

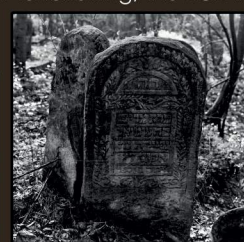


Photo 35. Preserved matzevah in the cemetery in Wiśnicz. Photo: MOK archives.

The fate of Wiśnicz's Jews was sealed in March 1942, when five cities in the General Government (Kraków, Lwów, Warsaw, Radom, and Bochnia) were designated where Jews were allowed to stay. The remaining cities were declared Judenrein, i.e., free of Jews. During this time, a group of Polish inhabitants

of Wiśnicz attempted to save the Jews. It was not easy; as of 15 October 1941, a decree by General Governor Hans Frank on the death penalty for Poles who give help or shelter to Jews was in force in the General Government. Nevertheless, Poles learned the consequences of disobeying the occupier's orders. Those who decided to offer help to Jews were aware that in the moment of failure, not only the owners of the property but all those present during the search were killed. Despite such a great danger, some Polish residents of Wiśnicz often took this risk.

In the following days, a decree was issued by Dr. Albert Schaar, then the mayor of the Krakow district, forbidding the plundering of Jewish property left behind. Attempts at looting were to be punished by death. The ordinance did not apply to German soldiers who looted anything of value. German trucks left Wiśnicz many times laden with various Jewish items.

As soon as the Jews left Wiśnicz, another of the occupier's repressive ordinances came into force. The stay of Jews outside the Bochnia ghetto was forbidden and punishable by death. Just a few days after the introduction of this ordinance, the gendarmes shot seven Jews who tried to escape the deportation from Wiśnicz. The situation repeated itself at the beginning of September. At that time, three more Jews of unknown names were killed. During the same period, a Wiśnicz lawyer, Dr. Izajasz Fragner, fleeing with his wife and sister-in-law through the forests towards Lipnica, was shot dead. A similar fate befell Akerman's marriage. According to the occupier's ordinance, bringing help to the Jews was punishable by death. However, the occupier could not completely stop the reflexes from helping. And although Wiśnicz society was initially poorly informed as to the criminal intentions of the Nazis, helping Jews began to be seen as part of the fight against the Germans. In the last days of August 1942, a 48-year-old resident of Stary Wiśnicz, Wojciech Gicala, lost his life for hiding a 3-year-old Jewish boy, Moniek Pinkesfeld, and Wiśnicz's primary school teacher, Zofia Trojan, was imprisoned for trying to rescue a Jewish girl. The priests of the Wiśnicz parish (Rev. Kozieja, Rev. Białka, and Rev. Wolanin), who, among other things, courageously exhorted in their sermons to help their persecuted brethren, also contributed to helping the Jews. The family of Władysław Łacny from Połomy Duży, motivated not only by the call of the Catholic clergy but above all by their opposition to the Nazi violence against Polish citizens, offered help to a teenage Jewish girl who had escaped from the ghetto.

Łacni for more than two years, they provided safe shelter for the girl. In conversations among themselves, they called her by the name of their daughter Irena so as not to accidentally expose her whereabouts. The girl left for the United States after the war. Among those who helped the Jews were Anna Dyląg-Florek from Leksandrowa, who gave shelter to a group of 10 Jews (the group included two women and two children), and Janina and Piotr Świątek from Nowy Wiśnicz, who helped the teenage Abusch Hirsch, who had escaped from Bochnia's ghetto. A similar risk was taken by Genowefa and Władysław Golonka from Nowy Wiśnicz, who, at the time of the deportation of the Jews of Wiśnicz, decided to take care of the daughter of their recent neighbors, the Krügers. Despite the rebuke, the arrest of the sitter and her foster daughter did not happen, thanks to the Polish police commander, Andrzej Ludwikowski. Forewarned in time, she left for her family in Kraków, where they both happily lived to see the war's end. Apart from the group of people who helped the hiding Jews by offering them the cellars of their homes, buildings, or dugouts, others, overcoming the fear of being arrested or even losing their lives, smuggled food into the ghetto.

The ghetto in Bochnia, established on 15 March 1941, was located within Kowalska, Bracka, St. Leonard, Solna Góra, and Kraszewskiego Streets, which became its southern border. On the eastern side, the ghetto ended on the bank of the Babica River. The Jewish seclusion quarter was fenced off with a plank fence and barbed wire. Due to farming, only four Polish families were allowed to remain within the segregated area. Legally, one could enter the ghetto through four gates, which the Germans guarded. Entry to the ghetto without a valid pass risked the death penalty.

Food was tried to be smuggled into the ghetto in various ways. When funds were available, attempts were made to bribe the guards guarding the entrance gates. One way was through the intermediary of the landlords left behind, such as the Płachciński family. They delivered the food products, transported them in wagons through the gate, and then handed them to the designated Jews. Mrs. Płachcińska's help did not stop with smuggling food. Dozens of Jews owe this woman selfless service in hiding them or escaping from the ghetto. Such a person, among others, is Józef Wiener, who was a teenage boy from Stary Wiśnicz when he ended up behind the ghetto fence, was taken in, got a job with her, was fed and supported during the most challenging moments of the extermination of the Jews. Thanks to Płachcińska, he survived the "hell" of the ghetto and also the war period. As mentioned earlier, Andrzej Ludwikowski selflessly helped the Jews from the ghetto in Bochnia. Including, among others, the doctor Henryk Czapnicki, whom he managed to help to get out of the ghetto with his family and then, using falsified documents, made it possible for him to leave for Warsaw, where he lived to see the end of the occupation.

The issue of rescuing Jews by Wiśnicz's resistance members was taken up spontaneously, treating it as part of the fight against the Germans. At one of the briefings, the commander of the Wiśnicz's sub-unit of the Home Army (Polish: AK-Armia Krajowa), code-named "Sum," Tadeusz Salamon (pseud. "Gil"), gave the members of the squad to help persecuted Jews, claiming that "today the occupant is threatening them with mortal danger, and tomorrow we will be the same victims." However, the capacity of the group of a dozen young men faced with the enormity of the problem was limited. Despite this, there was no passivity and waiting quietly for a 'miraculous rescue.'

The ghetto in Bochnia was a transit camp. The population who managed to avoid the frequent executions were deported by several means of transport to the extermination camps in Bełżec. The first transport occurred on 25 August 1942, when the Nazis deported 2,000 people. At the same time, about 500 people declared incapable of working (hospital patients, old people, children) were shot. They were transported by lorries to Baczków, where they were executed in the Niepołomice Forest. The bodies were buried in previously prepared pits. After a few months, several hundred people were retaken to Bełżec. The final date for the liquidation of the ghetto was at the beginning of September 1943. At that time, a traumatic slaughter took place, in which all those unable to be transported were first shot and then burnt, laying a pile of bodies stacked with wood on Solna Góra Street.

After that, the Germans took the Jews who remained alive to the labor camp in Szebnie (about 3,000 people) and to the concentration camp in Auschwitz (about 4,000 people), where they were executed. A group of 250 people was left in the ghetto to search houses under the watchful eye of the gendarmes to collect the remnants of former Jewish possessions. In February 1944, the surviving Jews were taken to the concentration camp in Płaszów. The German Nazis consistently pursued their extermination policy against the Jewish community in parallel with their plundering, looting, and devastation of cultural heritage led to its destruction. As a result, the only permanent trace left of the Jews of Wiśnicz is the cemetery.



Photo 33. Jewish cemetery 1965. Photo: Yad Vashem Archives ID 20472.