

From the pages of the city's history. The Destruction of the Bielsk Ghetto

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Bielski Jews Remembrance Square at Kazimierzowska Street (Bielsk.eu)

Before the Second World War, the Jewish population of Bielsk Podlaski constituted about 38 percent of the population. Soon after the occupation of Bielsk in June 1944, the Germans created a city ghetto at the turn of August and September.

About 5-6 thousand Jewish inhabitants of Bielsk and surrounding towns were imprisoned in the ghetto. It covered a large part of the city center, located between today's Mickiewicza, Jagiellońska, Kopernika and Kazimierzowska streets. At the latter there was a main gate. The ghetto was surrounded by a three-meter wooden fence with barbed wire.

The creation of the ghetto

The erection of the fence was instructed to the Jews themselves, who were also to provide materials for its construction. When there was a shortage of wood, furniture and other household appliances were used to build the fence.

"The entire Jewish population was grouped in several streets, which they themselves had to fence off from the "Aryan" side. Having no material, they dismantled their furniture and various equipment. In this way, a fence was erected separating the Jewish quarter from the rest of the city (...) The cramped space was terrible, there were not enough not only houses, but also pigsties. [People] slept in the streets, in the rain, in the mud. Diseases began to spread (...) On November 2, 1942, on a beautiful evening, the ghetto was surrounded by SS men and gendarmerie, it was illuminated all around. Anyone from the ghetto approached the wires was immediately shot. There were cases of escape, but it didn't work. Those shot were thrown back

over the fence into the ghetto" - says Sonia Gleicher's account collected by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

The repression increased gradually. At the beginning, the ghetto was open, Jews could leave it and the Christian population had access to it. Over time, this has also changed. After the ghetto was closed, the Germans imposed a high monetary contribution on the Jewish population. Religious practices were also banned. Jews were forced to collect objects of worship - Torah scrolls, religious books, tables - and burn them in public. In addition, the occupiers introduced the obligation to provide work for the Third Reich.

Jews were sent to work digging peat, cutting down forests, but also in carpentry workshops and cleaning work in the city. It was m.in the Jewish population who dug a pond in the area of today's King Alexander Jagiellon Park, and they carried the selected land to raise the Castle Hill.

Liquidation of the ghetto

The liquidation of the ghetto began on the evening of November 2, 1942. The area was surrounded by SS and gendarmerie units. Any attempts to leave the ghetto or even approach its borders were punishable by death. At the same time, the Germans brought Jews from the surrounding towns, m.in Boćki, Brańsk, Orla to Bielsk Podlaski. The arrival of more people worsened the already catastrophic living conditions.

A few days after the ghetto was closed, the Nazis began deporting. The Jews were taken to the railway station, from where they were transported (1000 people each) to the gas chambers of the Treblinka death camp. Some of the Jews, shoemakers and tailors, were transported to the ghetto in Białystok. During the deportation action, the Germans carried out numerous, summary executions. The liquidation of the ghetto lasted until November 11, 1942, when the Germans shot the last 78 Jews in the hospital, including two women in advanced pregnancy.

A witness to the liquidation of witnesses to the liquidation of the ghetto in Bielsk Podlaski was the later priest Eugeniusz Zbigniew Beszta-Borowski, then an 11-year-old boy, who, as he wrote in his memoirs, despite the fence over two meters high, had a view of the ghetto area from the window at the top of the house.

"About nine o'clock . . . I heard a dry crack that resembled volleys from submachine guns. This sound came from the direction of the ghetto. Then, out of curiosity about what was happening there, I climbed on the beam connecting the rafters. In the attic, I reached a window from which I could see the open space of the ghetto. I saw gendarmes in green uniforms standing in a large circle. They had submachine guns on their backs and were quietly smoking cigarettes. At some point, I saw something that scared me. Two men, as it turned out to be Jews, were carrying what looked like a huge octopus in a ladder cart. When the wagon drove closer to the Germans,

I saw that they were arms and legs that were sticking out through the rungs of the ladder wagon. Arms and legs moved in various uncoordinated ways. As it turned out, they were, as I later realized, old Jews laid on top of each other, unable to move independently. When the cart reached the Germans standing in a circle, they parted on one side and two young Jews began to throw the Jewish old men alive into a huge pit. I didn't see the bottom of this pit. (...) Then, on the officer's order, the Germans removed the submachine guns from their backs and began shooting at the old Jews lying at the bottom of the pit. After a few rounds, they hung their submachine guns on their backs again, and the commander of this firing squad with an ordinary pistol walked around the pit, shooting every now and then. Apparently to the Jews who were still alive. The Germans smoked cigarettes again. And so the gruesome scene happened many times, maybe ten times. Certainly, there were over a hundred Jews murdered in this way. Perhaps even one hundred and fifty. After the last batch of Jews had been brought and shot, I saw the gesture of the commander of the execution group ordering these two young Jews to lie down on the corpses of those who had been murdered earlier. One of them knelt on the edge of the pit, and the other tried to put his hands around the officer's legs. Evidently, he begged not to be killed. Both were shot by this officer, shooting them in the head" - wrote Fr. Beszta-Borowski.

Commemoration of Jews

There was almost no trace of Jews left in Bielsk Podlaski. Only a few survived. Most of them were those who were thrown to the Soviet Union during the war, including those forcibly deported as part of deportations. Of those who survived, most emigrated to Israel or the United States after the war. Today, the Jewish community in Bielsk is commemorated by a monument with fragments of the matzevot found, funded in 2019 by the Foundation for the Protection of the Heritage of the Bielsk Region at the Jewish cemetery on Brańska Street, and a commemorative plaque at Kazimierzowska Street, erected in 2010 thanks to the efforts of the "Museum of the Little Homeland in Studdziwody" Association in 2010. It is located opposite the Wodnik swimming pool. The plaque was placed in the place where the gate to the ghetto used to be. Since 2017, a small square in front of the swimming pool has also been called the Bielski Jews Memorial Square.

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