

The Final Solution

The invasion of Russia in early 1941 was followed by the *aktionen* of the Einsatzgruppen, whose job was to round up and eliminate the Jews. The Einsatzgruppen called all Jews in each town to gather at one time, then escorted them to the woods or a large field, where they would be shot. The Nazis soon realized this was an inefficient and wasteful process and they began searching for alternative ways to reach their goal of a *Judenrein* (Jew-free) Europe.

The Nazi decision to exterminate European Jews – the Final Solution - was the topic of the Wannsee Conference, held in January of 1942. Reinhard Heydrich presided over this meeting, which led to the creation of six death camps that would utilize large-scale gas chambers and crematoria to efficiently eliminate the Jewish population. These were called Majdanek, Belzec, Chelmno, Sobibor, Treblinka and Auschwitz, all located in Poland.

Deportations from the ghettos and work camps in all German-occupied territories to extermination camps began under the guise of “resettlement.” Deportation was primarily conducted by train. In the ghettos, Jews were ordered to assemble at a certain time and place with a suitcase containing items from a packing list provided by the Nazis. Most often, up to 100 people were forced into each box car, with no food or water for the duration of the trip.

Upon arrival at the extermination camps many of the deportees were dead, sometimes as many as half. If they survived the journey, they exited the train cars to a new horror.



German soldiers of the Waffen-SS and the Reich Labor Service look on as a member of an Einsatzgruppe prepares to shoot a Ukrainian Jew kneeling on the edge of a mass grave filled with corpses. Vinnitsa, Ukraine, 1941-1943. USHMM, courtesy of Library of Congress



Jews from the Warsaw ghetto board a deportation train with the assistance of Jewish police. Warsaw, Poland, 1942. USHMM, courtesy of Zydowski Instytut Historyczny Instytut Naukowo-Badawczy

“Well, at one point they rounded us up all and they had lines... “you stay here, you stay here, you stay there.”... If somebody looked well to them enough to be transported to work—which I thought was work— [they were] in one line...Elderly parents were in another line. The people that looked too sick to them, they just took care of them right away. Like my parents were, at that time, really very bad looking, and they just shot them right then and there. And not only my parents but a lot of them. I was in line and I tried to run out to help but I was pushed back. You couldn’t do anything.”

Raszka Galek Brunswic

1989 interview, describing a roundup in the Warsaw ghetto

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Notice from the Erfurt Branch Office of the Central German District Office of the Reich Association of Jews in Germany (Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland), dated 10 September 1942, containing “Changes in Packing Regulations of 4 September 1942.”

Important Notice concerning Changes in Packing Regulations from 4 September 1942

To be followed precisely!

In accordance with the last directives, it is permitted to take the following:

(1) A knapsack or suitcase with the following equipment, no unwieldy items, including complete outfits, to consist in detail of:

For men: 3 sets of underwear, 2 suits (including the one you are wearing).

For women: 2 summer and 2 winter dresses (including the one you are wearing).

For all: a coat, 2 pairs of shoes in good condition (including the pair you are wearing), 2 sets of bed linens, towels, and the like. Also sweaters, socks or hose, warm gloves, warm caps, and the like.

Everything is to be limited in quantity.

If possible, everything is to be stamped with full name or marked in ink with laundry marks.

EVERYTHING MUST BE IN GOOD CONDITION!

(2) Bedding, consisting of a blanket rolled together with pillows in a cover.

(3) Provisions for three days, a dinner plate or pot with a large and small spoon.

Everything is to be packed in a bundle or satchel.

All pieces of luggage are to contain identification tags, on which the exact address is listed.

One suitcase key should be attached to the suitcase itself, the second key is to be retained by you.

The one piece of luggage can only be as large as can be easily stored in a luggage rack above the seat in a railway car.

We are informing you in advance that dwellings must be left in clean condition. Perishable foodstuffs are not to be left behind.

Translation of a packing list from Erfurt, Germany, September 10, 1942. USHMM, courtesy of Hans Nussbaum

