Although **Aktion Reinhard** was organized mainly against the Jews living in the **Generalgouvernement**, people from Germany, Austria, Böhmen und Mähren, and Slovakia were among the victims as well. From **March until June 1942** around 27,000 Jews from abroad were deported to Izbica (17,000 persons), Piaski (5,000 persons) and Rejowiec (5,000 persons). Transit ghettos (organized by the headquarters of **Aktion Reinhard**) were also installed in Opole Lubelskie, Deblin, Zamosc, Chelm, Wlodawa, and Miedzyrzec Podlaski.

All these places were located close to the main railway lines heading for Belzec and Sobibor (Miedzyrzec Podlaski on the way to Treblinka).

According to several testimonies by survivors and Polish witnesses, deportees were sure that the purpose of the deportations was sending them for work somewhere in the East. Therefore, in many cases they asked the local inhabitants for the allocated factories in which they had to work. Even when they were already in the transit ghettos, nobody knew about the existence of death camps. Most of them were elderly along with women and children. In many instances, young men, still capable of working were selected from these transports in Lublin and sent to the Majdanek concentration camp. In the transit ghettos there was no work for the deportees (the Lublin district was never industrial). Only a small number of people were sent from Izbica to Augustowka and Bzite, two small forced labour camps of the *Wasserwirtschaftsinspektion (WWI)*.

The condition of life in these small provincial Polish towns was very primitive (lack of water and food, old and mostly wooden houses, destroyed during the deportations of their owners to the death camps). These places were not prepared to absorb thousands of people at any given time. Therefore the ghettos were overcrowded (10 - 20 persons per room) with many starving and dying of malnutrition. The situation in Izbica (**Photo of Ghetto Houses**) or Piaski (one of the towns having a closed ghetto) can be compared with the **Warsaw Ghetto**, but in a micro scale. Among the deportees were many doctors, but there was no real possibility in helping people due to the lack of hospitals and drugs. In the memoirs of the witnesses from Izbica there is mention of many victims succumbing to the typhus epidemic. The conditions in Izbica, Piaski and Rejowiec can be described as **vestibules for the death camps.**

Very early on, most of the deportees lost contact with their relatives and friends back home. According to a special order by the **RSHA** (Reichssicherheitshauptamt) from end of May 1942, they were not even allowed to
send letters to areas outside the Lublin district. The prohibition of correspondence combined with lack of contacts to Polish Jews and local Poles (language barrier and cultural differences with Polish Jews) caused a deep conflict between themselves and Polish Jewry who were resistant to difficult life conditions. For Jews from the west, conditions in the transit-ghettos were a culture shock from which their letters home conveyed. The conflict between Polish and foreign Jews was used by the SS to organize more effective deportations. Very often German and Czech Jews, speaking German fluently, were members of the Judenrat (see e.g. the Judenrat in Piaski) and Jewish police in the ghettos. In Izbica for example, the local Gestapo chief and local mayor had his own private Jewish police squad, recruited from Czech Jews. These men participated in the round-ups. Especially in Izbica, Jewish policemen from western countries selected mainly Polish Jews for deportation. On the other hand policemen being recruited from Polish Jews rounded up mainly Jews from the West.

In the Izbica transit ghetto, double Jewish institutions were installed: two Judenräte (one for the Polish Jews, the other for those from the West), two committees of social welfare and two Jewish police units. Izbica was the largest transit ghetto located between Belzec and Sobibor. Except from German, Czech, Austrian and Slovakian Jews, about 4,000 Jews from Zamosc and some groups of Polish Jews from nearby small towns and villages in Krasnystaw county were relocated to Izbica during the final phase of the ghetto liquidations in the Lublin district. The Izbica Ghetto was not closed because its location in the valley, surrounded by hills and a river, facilitated the separation of the victims.

Rejowiec were concentration sites too for Polish Jews. Exact information regarding the number of victims having gone through these ghettos is not available. According to testimonies, the SS killed around 2,000 Jewish victims in the course of Izbica's last execution (early November 1942) at the local Jewish cemetery. Before the extermination, people had to spend several days in the overcrowded fire-station building. Many died from lack of fresh air or water. In Piaski 1,000 - 2,000 persons were executed during the final liquidation of the ghetto. In Rejowiec, hundreds were killed on the market square and on their way to the railway station when the ghetto was liquidated.

The exact death camp, to which people were sent, is nearly impossible to pinpoint. Transports could be sent from Izbica to Belzec or Sobibor. According to testimonies and literature the first two deportations from Izbica (on 24 March 1942 and 8 April 1942) were sent to Belzec. Most of these victims were Polish Jews. They were deported due to the SS requiring space for deportees from western countries. The transport of 14 - 15 May 1942, during which German and Czech Jews were rounded up, went to Sobibor and Majdanek (young men, fit for work were sent to this camp) other deportations were sent to Belzec and Sobibor. Research should be carried out regarding the camp in Trawniki. It was not only a work camp but also a transit camp for many 1942 transports. Many were deported to Sobibor from Trawniki.

Photos: Edward Victor *

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