

began. New laws were passed that reduced the freedom of movement for Jews, one decree at a time, to an absolute minimum. Then the borders closed, and Helga's dream of a journey to England was shattered.

One year later—Helga had just completed the third grade—Jewish children were expelled from public schools. Once again her family found it necessary to send Helga back to Brno, this time because the Jewish school there was now the only type of school she was still allowed to attend. In order to ensure that Helga got the best possible care, her family placed her in the local Jewish orphanage, where she met a good many other children in a similar situation. Helga's uncle delivered her to the orphanage shortly before the school year started.

"It was a nightmare. No one was there to receive me, no counselor, no office or service employee, no one at all. I slept in a large, dark room surrounded by about forty empty metal beds. Many children, I learned later, were in the hospital with scarlet fever; others were still on vacation."

After a few days the children returned. But Helga's situation did not improve. "We didn't have much to eat. To get anything in the morning you had to run to the kitchen, where two serving girls doled out bread. That was all we got, dry bread, and maybe, if you were among the first, a little marmalade. Sometimes my cousin Joši, who by then was also attending school in Brno, waited for me after classes to give me a little wedge of cheese. I couldn't stand it in that orphanage. I wanted out no matter what."

Helga got her way and eventually found shelter with a couple who lived near the Jewish school. The woman took care of her young boarder lovingly, and Helga soon felt comfortable there, especially because Ruth Steiner—a girl her age, the daughter of an ophthalmologist—lived nearby. She became Helga's first friend.

Then came the spring of 1941, and with it a decree that made it illegal for Jews in the Protectorate to travel. Without asking anyone, Helga packed her things, went to the train station, and bought a ticket to Kyjov. It was still light when she arrived at her relatives' home toward evening. Her aunt was feeding the chickens in the yard and was astonished when she suddenly saw Helga standing in front of her, clutching her suitcase. "Here I am again," she said.

In the spring of 1941 Otto Pollak was still living in Vienna. His café had been Aryanized and his assets confiscated. He had been forced to give up his beautiful home on Mariahilfer Strasse, along with its valuable furniture, and to move to another place. He had witnessed the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 9–10, 1938, when forty-two synagogues and small houses of worship in Vienna were set on fire and plundered, and countless Jewish businesses and homes were confiscated or destroyed. Of the 6,547 Viennese Jews arrested that night, approximately 3,700 ended up in the Dachau concentration camp; some were murdered on the spot.

The Nazi terror triggered a mass exodus of Jews from Austria. By May 1938, one hundred thousand had fled the country, many of them escaping illegally to neighboring countries. With the outbreak of World War II, Jews still living in Germany and Austria found that almost all their escape routes had been cut off.

Meanwhile, Poland, with its Jewish population of more than three million, quickly became a laboratory for the Nazis' anti-Jewish policies. Early experiments in uprooting Jews throughout the country evolved into a strategy of forcing them into ghettos established in towns and cities. By late 1941 the Nazis were experimenting with ways to get rid of the weakest and, for them, least productive Jews in these ghettos. They perpetrated the first murders of such people—using gas, in specially adapted trucks—in December 1941 in Chelmno, not far from the large ghetto in the city of Lodz.

At the same time, an even more threatening new type of Nazi anti-Semitism had begun with the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Mass shootings of Jewish men and boys of military age were now commonplace, and soon expanded to include women and children. Hundreds of thousands died in this way within months. By the fall of 1941, the Nazis had begun deporting Jews from Germany by train to the ghettos and the new killing fields of the East. A war of conquest and annihilation unprecedented in history would leave twenty-seven million Soviet citizens dead and come very close to bringing about the realization of Hitler's "Final Solution."

Otto Pollak barely escaped deportation in the summer of 1941. He had received no transport order, but was simply seized on the street by the SS and forced onto a transport that was about to depart. Still, his luck

held. At the last moment, a storm trooper who had frequented Otto's café pulled him off.

After this experience, Otto redoubled his efforts to leave Vienna for Kyjov. On September 2, 1941, the Viennese police granted him rare permission to resettle in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. A week later, he arrived in Kyjov. "I was tremendously happy," Helga recalls. "We were already living in very close quarters, since by then a great many Jewish children were residing in Kyjov. All the Jews from the neighboring areas had to resettle there. But we managed somehow."

People were forced to share their homes with other families. Apartments that had housed one family now sheltered several. The house on Market Square was no exception. In one room Helga's cousin Trude, who had married and was expecting a child, was living with her husband, Hermann. Another room was occupied by a family named Tausig. Joši slept in the kitchen. The third room was shared by Aunt Marta and Uncle Fritz and, separated only by a folding screen, Helga and her father.

On September 19, 1941, a decree was issued ordering all Jews above the age of six living within the German Reich to wear a six-pointed yellow Star of David with the word *Jude* ("Jew") inscribed in black. "It is the Führer's wish," Heinrich Himmler wrote to SS *Obergruppenführer* Arthur Greiser, the Nazi governor of the Wartheland region, in a letter dated September 18, 1941, "that both the Old Reich and the Protectorate, moving from west to east, be emptied and freed of Jews as quickly as possible."³

Far from Kyjov, in Prague's beautiful old Hradschin castle, SS *Obergruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich, the newly appointed *Stellvertreter Reichsprotektor* (deputy Reich protector), had set up his offices and convened a secret conference. At the first meeting, the participants, among them Adolf Eichmann and Karl Hermann Frank, discussed actions to be taken regarding the Jewish population in the Protectorate. The minutes from the October 10, 1941, meeting include the following:

Concerning the possibility of creating ghettos within the Protectorate: . . . In Bohemia one option . . . is the occupation of Theresienstadt by the Central Office for Jewish Emigration. After evacuation from

this temporary assembly camp (whereby the Jews will have already been severely decimated) to the East, the entire area could be expanded to build a model German settlement. . . .

The transport to Theresienstadt would not require much time, two to three trains with 1,000 persons each could be sent to Theresienstadt per day. . . . As well-tested methods have shown, the Jew can carry up to fifty kilos of nonbulky luggage and—in order to ease matters for ourselves—food for fourteen days and up to four weeks. Straw will be strewn in the empty rooms, because the installation of beds would occupy too much space.

The larger apartments in the good buildings are reserved solely for the Gestapo, the Jewish Council of Elders, the Food Storage Office, and, of course, the guard units. The Jews will have to dig their own quarters in the ground. . . .⁴

At a second meeting, on October 17, 1941, the following measures were agreed upon:

Concerning the Jewish Question:

. . . In the meantime, Jews from Bohemia and Moravia are to be collected in a provisional camp for later evacuation. . . . 50,000 to 60,000 Jews can be comfortably accommodated in Theresienstadt. From there the Jews will be sent to the East. Consent has already been obtained from Minsk and Riga for 5,000 Jews each.

After total evacuation of all Jews, Theresienstadt will be settled by Germans, following a precise plan and thereby becoming a core of German life. It is a very favorable location for this plan. Thus it will become yet another vanguard, perfectly modeled according to the ideas of the Reich Führer SS, as Reich Commissar for the Strengthening of the German People's National Identity.

Under no circumstances can even the slightest details of these plans reach the wider public.⁵

Also brought up during the discussions was the issue of creating a second temporary holding center, in addition to Theresienstadt, in order to evacuate the Jewish population of Moravia. "The expansion of an existing Jewish village into a ghetto for Moravia is quite possible and would present no great difficulties." It was Kyjov that they had in mind.

But this measure soon proved unnecessary, given the speed at which transports of Jews from Theresienstadt were rolling eastward.

Deportation to the East, extermination through hard labor, the creation of regions free of Jews—these were the initial cornerstones of a Nazi program that ensnared the Jewish population of Central Europe in its deadly grip. After October 23, 1941, Jews within the Nazi sphere of influence were officially prohibited from emigrating. There was now almost no chance to escape.

In early December 1941 the Soviet Army's counteroffensive put an end to German hopes of a quick military victory in the East, and the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor led to Germany's declaration of war on the United States on December 11, 1941. What was planned as a European blitzkrieg expanded into a war on a global scale. The moment for Hitler to rage against "the Jews" for conspiring to entrap Germany in a world war had come. The very next day, as Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels recorded in his diary, Hitler made it unmistakably clear to the party's senior representatives that as regards the "Jewish question," he was resolved "to make a clean sweep."

He had prophesied to the Jews that if they ever brought about a world war again, they would experience their own annihilation. That was no empty phrase. The world war is here, and the annihilation of the Jews must necessarily follow. This question is to be regarded without sentimentality. We are not here to have sympathy with the Jews, but only with our German people. If the German people sacrifice the lives of another 160,000 men on the Eastern front, those who have caused this bloody conflict will have to pay for it with their own lives.⁶

Shortly thereafter, on January 20, 1942, a now-infamous secret conference took place in a villa in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee. Its purpose was to coordinate the efficient implementation of the Führer's wish for a "final solution to the Jewish question." The host was Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office, the central office overseeing the entire Nazi security and police apparatus. The invited guests, high-ranking SS officers and civilian officials in charge of the German

Reich and its occupied territories, proved to be willing executioners. The entire Jewish population of Europe was now fated for extermination.

In the Czech lands, beginning in September 1941, Reinhard Heydrich had swiftly crushed a growing resistance. Four thousand Czechs were taken prisoner, and 402 were executed in the first few months of his rule. The Czech government in exile in London, the Czech resistance back home, and the British secret services agreed on a daring retaliation. On May 27, 1942, Czech fighters attacked Heydrich's official car as it made its way into Prague. Heydrich was fatally wounded and died on June 4, 1942. After Heydrich's death, Hitler ordered brutal revenge. It fell upon a village ten miles west of Prague called Lidice, whose inhabitants were accused of helping the assassins. The buildings in Lidice were demolished, all the men were shot, and the women were sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Most of the children were murdered in Chelmo.

The search for the conspirators expanded in all directions, including into Kyjov. "After Heydrich's assassination, all the residents of our house in Kyjov were ordered out into the courtyard late in the evening," Helga recalls. "It was already dark, and most were in their pajamas. The SS from the concentration camp at Svatobořice, where Czechs were imprisoned, searched all the apartments and beat up several people, including an aunt of my father's, Frieda Freud, who was handicapped and could barely walk, and thus brought the rage of the SS down on her."

By this point, Adolf Eichmann was presiding over the Jewish section of the Reich Main Security Office. He had already ordered the deportation of fifty-five thousand Jews from the territory of the Reich, which included "Ostmark," as Austria was called after its annexation, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Starting in March 1942, forty-five trains (twenty-four from Germany, six from Vienna, and fifteen from Theresienstadt), each carrying a thousand people, headed for ghettos that had been established in Lublin, Poland. The systematic deportation and murder of Jews was well under way.

The Jewish population of Kyjov had so far been spared in these transports, but everyone felt a sense of foreboding. They prepared themselves and took comfort in the thought that, as Czech Jews, they would most likely be resettled or, in the Nazis' official language, "evacuated" to the Theresienstadt ghetto. At least, they reasoned, it was a town in



This photograph shows Helga (second row, first child on the left) with her teachers and other pupils in her class in Kyjov. It was taken sometime during the second half of 1942, after schooling for Jewish children had been prohibited and could take place only secretly in homes. Next to Helga is Jiri Bader (1930–1944), the son of a prominent Jewish family and a friend of Helga's. Like most of the people pictured here, he did not survive the war.

their native land, less than forty miles from Prague. With a little luck, they would be able to wait out the war there.

On July 27, 1942, the education of Jewish children was officially outlawed, and private instruction was secretly organized throughout the Protectorate. Helga and her friends were able to continue their education, and, despite the shadows cast by these dismal events and a sense

that the walls were closing in on them, she still led something resembling a normal life. But this was not to last much longer.

In the winter of 1942–43, Helga opened for the first time the diary her father had given her and began to make entries.

Sunday, January 17, 1943

I've spent my last day in Kyjov, a day of hectic activity. We've packed our food in bread sacks and shopping bags. I doubt that my aunt has sat down for a single second today (she doesn't sit down anyway, even if she's not preparing to travel). I'm now sitting at my desk. I am very tired. But that doesn't matter! This is my last day at home, so I have to write about it! Within twelve hours the whole house will be deserted (I will not hang my head; I'm going to leave my home with head held high!). Now I'm going to sleep. I have to get up very early in the morning. I'll lie down with my clothes on, since I don't have anything left to cover up with.

Two days later, when Helga and her family arrived in Uhersky-Brod, she continued her account:

Tuesday, January 19, 1943

It was a miserable trip. I got up very early, but only just in time to get ready. I had so many clothes on I could hardly move. We used the sled to get to the train, with Uncle Karl, Maria, and me pulling, and with Papa, Aunt Trude, and Lea sitting on it. So much snow had fallen, we were glad just to make it to the train. We hastily searched for our luggage. Amazingly, there was little commotion. I thought everyone would be a lot more out of control. There wasn't enough room on the train to sit. My father fell trying to board. Frau Dr. Schönthal (who's not Jewish) helped him get up. She was sobbing.

As the train pulled out, we started to sing patriotic Czech songs. A policeman standing beside the train was very touched and walked the whole length of the train wishing every one he knew a safe and happy return. An hour and three quarters later we arrived in Uhersky-Brod. I didn't have to carry my rucksack there. We loaded it onto a truck. Papa, Trude, and Lea rode along, too.

By the time we arrived at the high school where we were quartered,

I thought I'd collapse. Frau Webschovska brought me to my aunt. We're lying on mattresses.

Helga was feeling more and more miserable. The last days in Kyjov, the rigors of a trip in the cold and snow, and the conditions at the assembly camp had completely exhausted her. "It is awful here, probably even worse than in Theresienstadt," she noted on January 20. "The food makes you want to throw up, and I have a sore throat today. I saw the doctor and he gave me a powder to make me sweat."

Helga's condition grew worse. Early on the morning when they were to travel from Uhersky-Brod to Theresienstadt, her temperature reached 102.2 degrees and the doctor diagnosed tonsillitis. It was in this same condition that Helga arrived at eight o'clock on the morning of January 23 in Bohušovice, from which point they had to march to Theresienstadt, forty-five minutes away. "If the walk had lasted fifteen minutes longer," she later wrote, "I'm certain I would have collapsed."

In Theresienstadt, Helga and her family were assigned to an attic in the Hamburg Barracks, where the exhausted girl was finally able to stretch

out on an old mattress on the cold floor. Her eyes closed immediately. She could not and did not want to see anything more that day. After that dreadful journey, here was the terrible reality of the ghetto: ugly old barracks, blocks of unfriendly, virtually indistinguishable buildings, streets laid out in a grid pattern, ditches, trenches, and barricades. And there were so many people—sick, hungry, and emaciated, young and old, all living in miserable quarters.

Where had she ended up? What was happening to her? And why?



Jews arriving in Theresienstadt: Like these deportees, Helga Pollak had to complete the last part of her journey from Bohušovice to Theresienstadt on foot.