The journals of Emmanuel Ringelblum chronicled three years of Polish Jewry’s persecution by the Nazi occupying forces in Poland. *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* relates, in human terms, the systematic demoralization and destruction of the Jewish population in Warsaw. Many of Ringelblum’s journal entries related atrocities committed throughout Poland, Russia and Europe. Ringelblum compiled three years of heart wrenching accounts of brutality, humiliation, murder, torture and betrayal. The Jewry of Warsaw was treated worse than animals by the Germans, and by members of the Jewish community, as well. The Nazis invaded and subsequently occupied Poland in 1939. The journal entries compiled by Emmanuel Ringelblum relate consistent themes of corruption, humiliation, inhuman conditions and cruelty.

The Nazi’s inhumane treatment of the Warsaw Jews was a calculated process. The Germans began the occupation of Warsaw by exerting total control over the entire population. They instilled fear and dread on Christian Poles as well as Jewish Poles. The Christian Poles were “seized, at home, in the street, in café’s” (26). They would wear Jewish armbands to avoid being sent out of Poland. They thought the Jewish were treated better in work camps inside Poland (25).

The overwhelming barbaric treatment was centered on the Jewish population. The cruelty and demoralization started with decrees to deprive the Jewish people of possessions, homes, money, food, dignity, and ultimately, the hope of survival. Decrees were enacted to force the Jews to register all their possessions, furniture was confiscated and homes were requisitioned (11, 15, 18). The Jewish population was not permitted to use public libraries or travel by train (16, 17). The Germans were progressing toward herding the Jewish population into a Ghetto for total control to facilitate the destruction of the entire population of Warsaw Jews.

The Ghetto was closed after the 25th of November 1940. Jewish people who made their living outside the Ghetto boundaries were left without a source of income (88). The Jewish people were forced to give up their homes as a means of survival and access to markets. They were expected to pay for food supplied by the Germans with gold and foreign currency (90). The food rations the Jewish people were permitted inside the Ghetto were so meager they could not survive. According to the editorial comments of Jacob Sloan, “The average food ration contained some 800 calories. It consisted of bread, potatoes, and ersatz fat only” (97). Ringelblum states that people were falling dead in the streets (143).

Emmanuel Ringelblum went on to show great despair about the beggars, especially the children. Many of the journal passages told of the doom of these poor souls. One passage states, “children as emaciated as skeletons, barefoot and naked, who put out frozen-blue hands for alms – in vain” (225). One hundred and fifty people were starving to death daily by the middle of May 1941, and the rate kept increasing (181). The people starving in the streets would beg for a while, realize they were doomed and silently wait to die (207). The aid that was provided by the House Committees would never have been enough. Whole neighborhoods and entire families were dying from hunger (138, 205, 207). Ringelblum relates, in January of 1942, men women and children lay on the ground begging near every house (249). The German’s process of eliminating the Jewish population by starvation was cruel, inhuman and, unfortunately, effective.
The Jews of Warsaw were forced to live under deplorable physical and mental conditions. They had to live with the constant threat of death or injury. Ringelblum writes of many occasions where innocent people were beaten or killed for simply being Jewish. Germans would see Jewish people in the area and beat them. It did not matter if they were men, women or children (88, 115). There are entries of acts against Jewish men and women purely to cause degradation. A woman was forced to wash the pavement with her panties and a man was told to kneel on the ground and be urinated on (17, 91). There was a constant shortage of coal for heat and electricity (235). The crowded living conditions in the Ghetto made the rampant spread of disease impossible to control (219). People were seized on the streets and forced to go to work camps. Many times passes to be exempt were ignored (161, 167). Living in the Ghetto was a continual mental and physical battle for survival. Most would lose the battle. Ringelblum concedes in June of 1942 “only a miracle can save us: the sudden end of the war” (291).

The extensive smuggling of food into the Ghetto provided a major source of survival for many inhabitants. Smuggling was a lucrative, albeit perilous, occupation. The smugglers may have profited, but without their operations, the Jewish population would have starved to death much sooner (111, 216). Ringelblum notes in a journal entry in June of 1942, putting an end to the smuggling operations the “general plan to exterminate the Jews...through a policy of systematic starvation” (293). On June 10, 1942, the smugglers were slaughtered, forcing the population to exist on 7.5 dekos of bread a day (292-293). The Germans were bringing to fruition their calculated plan to exterminate the Jewish population (291).

The journal entries documenting the corruption and brutality of the Jewish police and the Jewish Council are many. The zeal with which the Jewish police carried out the demands of the Nazis is horrific. The Jewish Council betrayed the members of their own community they were supposed to represent. The Nazi’s plan included this demoralization. The Jewish people had to fear the Germans and the Poles, but also members of their own community.

The Jewish Council consisted of unsavory men responsible for meeting quotas for the work camps (107, 154). The rich could buy passes from the Jewish Council to avoid the work camps. The poor were sent to the work camps because they could not afford to pay for the passes. The people were left to starve to death because they could not pay for ration cards (41, 49). The Jewish Council favored the rich and let the poor carry the burden of taxes while the rich paid no taxes at all (235, 246). Ringelblum writes, “The entire work of the Jewish Council is an evil perpetrated against the poor that cries to the very heaven” (235).

The Jewish community despised the Jewish police. They formed “press gangs” to meet the work camp quotas. They would seize anyone off the street and demand a bribe to be released. Those who could not pay were sent to the work camps. Ringelblum stated, “Generally speaking, the Jewish police are fearfully corrupt” (154-155). The Jewish police showed no mercy during the resettlement. They even seemed to enjoy sending the members of their own community to their deaths (330). The Jewish police made a profit from the smuggling operations until the smugglers were stopped. The Jewish police were put in charge of halting all smuggling over the Ghetto wall in June of 1942. The smuggling was the source of food in the Ghetto and the Jews were made to starve themselves (302). According to the editorial comment, the brutality and service of the Jewish police did not save them from deportation. Two thousand Jewish police and their families were deported on September 26, 1942 (307).

Emmanuel Ringelblum was mortified with the little resistance the Jews of Warsaw exerted while being “led like sheep to the slaughter” (310). There were no German forces casualties during the relocation (310). The people even showed little aggression toward the Jewish police as they were herded to the “Unscharplatz” where they would be sent to their deaths (311, 333). The population’s psychological state was completely controlled by the Germans. They were so conditioned to fear the German forces that the people left after the resettlement blamed the Jewish police for the slaughter. This was of course true, but the overall blame was the Nazi’s. The Jews could not kill Germans, so they exacted a small measure of revenge on members of the Jewish police force (206, 333). The police chief, Lejkin, was killed, and the remaining Jewish policemen were hated and remonstrated by Jews, Poles and Ger-
mans (333-334). They betrayed their own people to save
their own lives and were despised by everyone (330).

Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto chronicled the
mass murder of over 300,000 Jewish people (337).
The three years leading up to the final extermination
were a fight for survival with the outcome already de-
termined by the despicable Nazi regime (291). The
Jewish people of Warsaw existed the best they could
under inhuman conditions. The resettlement process
from June to September 1942 was carried out with
indiscriminate callousness. The rich, the poor, the
intellectuals and those who served the Nazis were
chosen at will to die in extermination camps. Some
who could still afford the bribes may have survived,
but most did not survive (314, 335). Ringelblum and
his family were executed on March 7, 1944 (347).

Reading Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto was an
illuminating experience. Emmanuel Ringelblum and
the other contributors of the journals were brave and
honorable people. Their tenacity and dedication un-
der such horrible circumstances has left for readers pas-
sages filled with misery, cruelty, despair, and a truthful
depiction of the horrifying plight of the Jews in Warsaw
and all of occupied Europe. My perspective of the ex-
termination of Jews during World War II is now more
realistic. Often, I learn about historical events with
emotional detachment. The mental pictures created by
the journal passages elicited an emotional response for
me as a reader. The dreadful experiences the Jewish
people were subjected to cannot be read without sad-
ness and regret. The human factors of these accounts
of cruelty, degradation, murder and destruction have
changed my emotional detachment. This is a book all
students should find a worthwhile and educating read.
Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto provides more than mere
words. These horrible things happened to real people
and are not just facts and figures in history books.

Work Cited

Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto. Ed. Sloan, Jacob. New