

Antwerp

City in northern Belgium. On the eve of the German invasion of Belgium in May 1940, about 50,000 Jews lived in Antwerp. Of those, only 20 percent held Belgian citizenship; the rest were recent immigrants from Eastern Europe and Germany. Soon after the occupation, about 20,000 of Antwerp's Jews fled the country.

For the first few months of the occupation, daily life continued as usual. One of Antwerp's economic mainstays was the diamond industry, in which Jews were very involved. The industry was reactivated during the first part of the occupation. However, things began to change for the worse in December 1940. Based on a German decree that foreigners could be removed from certain areas of Belgium, the German military administration began expelling Jews from Antwerp who had immigrated to Belgium after 1938. Ultimately, a total of 3,334 Jews were exiled from Antwerp in this way.

On April 10, 1941 a pogrom broke out in Antwerp's Jewish quarter. The rioters were members of right-wing movements who had been spurred on by the local German authorities. They attacked two synagogues and a rabbi's home, and were not restrained by the fire department or police.

That summer, the German military administration launched an Aryization drive. During 1942, four transports of Jews were sent to northern France and from there to Nazi camps. In August of that year, the first mass arrest of Jews took place: first, Romanian citizens were taken, and soon others were rounded up. In September 1942 Jews were arrested on the streets, and only those who could prove that they held Belgian citizenship were let go. By September 1943, the Nazis began arresting and deporting Belgian nationals.

The Jews of Antwerp proactively tried to save themselves and others from the Germans. Zionist Youth Movements became very active during the occupation; in 1942–1943 they helped smuggle members into Switzerland and Spain. More than 3,000 Jews hid in the Antwerp area during the war, including about 1,000 Dutch Jews. Many Antwerp Jews, including members of the Belgian resistance, found hiding places for Jewish children and adults. Antwerp was liberated on September 4, 1944.

