

# Between life and death

**We hereby provide an article by Dr Jacek Konik from the Science and Research Department of WGM, published in the *Plus Minus* magazine – a weekend edition of *Rzeczpospolita* – to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the closure of the Warsaw Ghetto borders.**

“The smuggling of goods often took the form of a carefully planned logistic operation.” In the photo, smugglers throw bags of flour over the wall (Jewish Historical Institute).

With limited food rations, the only salvation for people in the ghetto was to sell their belongings and get involved in the black market and the smuggling of goods from the Aryan side. Without it, it would not have been possible to survive behind the wall.

“The walls are increasingly obscuring the horizon and darkening the view until finally everything – people, houses, streets, vehicles, stores – transforms and sinks into the walls.”(Stanisław Różycki, *To jest ghetto*, “The Ringelblum Archive”, vol. 33)

The metal gate opens silently. I walk under a massive roof. A wide passage leads me to a small courtyard between the houses. It is very bright, yet subconsciously I feel the darkness lurking in its nooks and crannies. It is not so much around me as it is within me. It is the shadow of the history of this place. I move on. Sienna Street 55, I am going to a meeting with the... wall, one of the last relics of the Warsaw Ghetto. The wall at Sienna Street is a small fragment of the former ghetto border, which, stretching for nearly 16 km, separated almost half a million people from the rest of the city and its inhabitants. The gradually shrinking space gathered people whose only common denominator was their Jewish origin. Major differences such as political views, social status, or attitude to faith did not matter. Their Jewishness, which some people cultivated

in different ways, while others attached no importance to it, became their collective curse and death sentence.

### **“Aryanisation” at all costs**

The establishment of ghettos was a consequence of the Nazi doctrine, which proclaimed that the Nordic-Germanic peoples, the so-called Aryans, are the best of all human races, created to rule over the others. The leader of the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler, wrote about them in *Mein Kampf*: “Aryan races—often absurdly small numerically—subject foreign peoples, and then, stimulated by the special living conditions of the new territory (fertility, climatic conditions, etc.) and assisted by the multitude of lower type beings standing at their disposal, develop capacities dormant within them.” However, while in the Nazi vision of the world there was some place for “lower class people”, because they were needed as slave labour for their Aryan masters, there was no place for Jews. They were considered a particular threat. Hitler explained it as follows: “In no nation of the world is the survival instinct as strongly developed as in the ‘chosen nation’. [...] Its proliferation throughout the world is typical of parasites. [...] It can last forever within other nations if it succeeds in creating the impression that it is not a racial problem, but a ‘religious community’.

The German Nazis believed that the Jews should be removed from the territories that were under the rule of the “Aryan” Reich. Months passed before it was finally decided how to do it. The pre-war policy of forcing Jews living in Germany to emigrate ceased to be valid after the outbreak of the war. The numerous Jewish community in Poland turned out to be a particular problem. Attempts were made to find a place for them on the eastern outskirts of the General Government (for example, Adolf Eichmann tried to organise a reservation for them in marshy areas near the village of Nisko) or to resettle them in the USSR. These activities either remained on paper or, as in the case of the Nisko plan, ended in failure. The transfer of troops and the introduction of German settlers to the occupied territories turned out to be more important than the mass transports of the Jewish population. Over time, especially after the outbreak of the Soviet-German war, the search for other solutions began. However, before that, in order to separate the Jews from the rest of the population and gather them together in one place, the so-

called residential districts were created for them. They remained locked behind the “walls” for months until the highest circles of power in Berlin made a decision about their future fate.

### **Small smugglers**

Just like in other centres, the separation of Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto was not a sufficient measure for the Germans. Many of them were robbed and others were forced to gradually dispose of their remaining possessions. The construction of the ghetto wall was financed by the Jews themselves. At the entrances and along the whole border of the ghetto, posts were established to make sure that its inhabitants did not contact the non-Jewish part of the town. Problems with the supply of basic articles, especially food, started to appear very quickly. The Judenrat, the Jewish Council appointed by the Germans to manage the ghetto, was not able to deal with this problem organisationally and financially. The activity of the Judenrat was also hindered by the occasional financial demands of the Germans against the Jews. It is estimated that from the closing of the ghetto in November 1940 to the beginning of the Grossaktion in July 1942, approximately 100 thousand people died in the ghetto. The main causes of death were hunger and diseases resulting from malnutrition and poor sanitary conditions. Jews, just like Poles, were subject to the ration card system during the occupation. However, the rations for the Jews were much smaller. A card, referred to as a voucher or coupon, had to be purchased (tax payment) and then registered in the store. Food products were allocated: bread, marmalade, sugar, grain coffee, potatoes, swedes, eggs, flour, as well as general store goods such as soap and matches. Over time, the ration cards became synonymous with life and survival. People often traded them and often also tried to keep the cards of the deceased family members, delaying the registration of their death. In this situation, with such limited food rations, the only salvation for people in the ghetto was to sell their possessions and get involved in the black market and the smuggling of goods from the Aryan side. The wall has become the symbol of smuggling – for many smugglers, it was the borderline between life and death. It is worth mentioning that food products reached exorbitant prices on the black market, making the goods appearing there inaccessible to the average ghetto inhabitants.

Various smuggling techniques were applied. For example, smugglers used streetcars passing

through the ghetto, in which they could hide, or various other means of the transport entering the ghetto. The guards were bribed to turn a blind eye to the packages thrown out of streetcars and to the people who were trying to get there. The goods smuggled were often carried in specially prepared clothes, e.g. under a slit jacket or coat lining.

Many ghetto inhabitants tried smuggling, but the real heroes of this procedure were children. It was often in their hands whether the family would have anything to eat. Only the young ones were small enough to squeeze through the small sewer holes at the base of the wall, under which additional tunnels were dug. They later came back with bags full of food, pushing them through the same holes. Each time, they risked their lives. The Archive of Spoken History of the Warsaw Uprising Museum stores numerous accounts concerning the smuggling of goods into the ghetto, including a shocking account of a witness of such an escapade of a child: "And it was then that [...] I saw this [...] a six- or seven-year-old child with bread in stockings. And this little boy run-up to this hole, he already managed to put his hand and head in there, I think. [...] And then one of these sons of bitches came up, a 1.8 metre tall, well built, tough SS man. He ran up to this child and stomped on his spine with his heel. And he kept drilling it into his spine until he killed him." It was not an isolated case. It was often the case that child smugglers were shot at. A poet of the ghetto, Henryka Łazowertówna, made a young smuggler the hero of her poem:

"Through walls, through holes, through guard,  
Through wires, through fences, through brick-bat,  
A hungry, courageous die-hard,  
I sneak, I prowl like a cat.  
At noon, at night, at dawn,  
In blizzard, foul weather and heat,  
I risk my young life on and on,  
In spite of the looming defeat".

### **On a massive scale**

The smuggling organised by older youth and adults was a bit different. For example, they took

advantage of the fact that not everywhere the wall was used as an enclosure. A witness described it as follows: “[...] the ghetto on Żelazna Street was fenced with wires, in such a way that the wires were in the middle of the road. [...] Jewish youth passed through the wires from the ghetto to Kazimierz Square, which at that time was a market square with a hall, which still remains today at Żelazna Brama – Mirowski Square. They mostly took vegetables. They loaded the goods around them, they had loose clothes and stuffed them with goods. Then, fifteen or sixteen such people gathered and waited for someone to give them a sign that the place was free of guard, that they could jump back into the ghetto. [...] Indeed, when you waved your hand, they started running, pushed the wires away and jumped in.”

The smuggling could also take the form of a carefully planned logistic operation, the whole procedure of a sort. Then, even larger quantities of goods were thrown over the wall. The account of one of the residents of Warsaw was as follows: “Once I saw some products in bags thrown from our gate at Muranowska 2 to the other side of the wall. There was a house under the pillars which, in the seventies, was still standing partially, it was only a little bit demolished, and a guy ran out from under those pillars and every now and then threw a bag onto the other side. There must have been guards there.”

The phenomenon of smuggling, of various types and scale, lasted until the very end of the ghetto. Over time, it intensified. Without it, it would not have been possible to survive behind the wall. But finally, the day came when, as a result of a decision made in distant Berlin, trains set off for the Treblinka death camp. In the closed streets, the hustle and bustle stopped, the life disappeared. All that is left is the wall, its remains. A specific border guarding the lost world. A world that is not that distant from ours. Standing under the wall on Sienna Street, I think not of the heroes fighting with a gun in their hand, but of all those silent heroes of everyday life who merely tried to survive by smuggling a loaf of bread or a bunch of vegetables through the wall.

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Photo: JHI

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