

The Taste of Life in the Ghetto #12.

“L’Ourse” Café – 58 Leszno Street

We invite you to read another article by Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych in a series entitled “Life in the Ghetto”, in which the authoress writes about such issues as problems with feeding the residents of the ghetto, the activity of meal points that were organized on an ad hoc basis for its starving residents, as well as kitchens dedicated to children and infants, Transferstelle.

The author talks about the buildings of Courts that served as trafficking points for food smugglers, Janusz Korczak’s efforts to obtain help for the Main House of Shelter, the so-called house committees, about people and institutions which had to face a nearly impossible task: feeding and saving people from starving to death. The articles are published on our website every week. We invite you to read these uneasy accounts, based on diverse and solid sources.

Bogdan (Dawid) Wojdowski, born in Warsaw, was placed in the Warsaw ghetto as a teenager. He portrays the hunger that accompanied the life of the residents of the closed district in a dramatic novel entitled “Bread for the Departed”, based on facts and his own experiences: “The first days of hunger are the worst, then it becomes bearable. First comes the weariness, your arms and legs feel heavy, each word becomes a painful noise ringing in the ears. The colours do not bring joy to the eyes, the light hurts them. (...) You feel constant thirst; chapped lips dry out. The jaws clench of their own accord and you feel pain behind the ears at the sight of a tin spoon abandoned on a table. Then, thoughts about food start; terrible, exhausting daydreams. The stomach works like a syphon. A simple thought about a piece of swede is enough – suddenly your teeth tear the stringy pulp apart with a crunch, and the juice resembling black turnip, milder and sweetish in taste, flows down your throat and wets the swollen tongue, leaving a tart residue in the mouth. (...) The thought separates itself from swede and floats high above. – When will they bring the bread?” (1971, pp. 24-25).

Bread – the object of desire of dozens, hundreds of thousands of people crammed in a small,

designated area of the so-called North District. People, the vast majority of whom died of hunger, illness, exhaustion, during displacement actions, and in the Treblinka death camp. Food: in the ghetto, next to people who were craving bread and dreamed about swede, there were those who ate at the L'Ourse café, and "Gazeta Żydowska" ["The Jewish Newspaper"] informed on August 1, 1941, that the kitchen at 11 Leszno Street „will distribute 50 grams of candy for adults and additionally for children.” This does not change the general picture of the place in which acquiring food was a matter of great importance – necessary for, but not a guarantee of survival.

Prof. Konrad Zieliński, Head of the Scientific and Research Department at the Warsaw Ghetto Museum

“L'Ourse” Café – 58 Leszno Street

Among the ghetto cafés, the “L'Ourse” Café, located at 58 Leszno Street, was considered one of the prettiest. It was located in the same building in which, before 1902, the capital city's Emergency Ambulance Service operated under the auspices of the Emergency Medical Assistance Association. The “L'Ourse” attracted customers for a number of reasons, primarily due to its spaciousness, convenient location in the ghetto's central part and the fact that it was regularly visited by a relatively “better” clientele. Stanisław Różycki described this place and the ambience prevailing in it as follows: “When you get inside for the first time, you really get the impression that it is as before the war. Apart from the armbands, there are no signs of war, captivity, and the ghetto. The faces are not at all cadaverous, on the contrary, normal, and well-fed” (Stanisław Różycki, Images of the ghetto, [in:] The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto], vol. 5, Warsaw 2011, p. 69).

This is surprising for him, because the picture of the café's customers is fundamentally different from the picture of the people in the ghetto's streets. He writes about the customers of the “L'Ourse” as follows: “When I sit in the middle of the largest room, surrounded by overflowing

tables from all over, I begin to orientate myself more and more closely in the type of public. It is mixed, usually richer, but not uniformly. You can see the owners of grocery stores, policemen, some physicians, a lot of young people, the bourgeoisie, maybe not dealing with business, but living on capital. It is certain, however, that the vast majority are relatively rich and well-fed people. Many eat two or three cookies, here and there you can see an apple, a ham sandwich, some kind of alcoholic drink on the table” (Ibid, p. 70). Różycki, whose aim is to write the most reliable text, tries to gather as much information as possible about the café’s regulars: “I find out that there are guests who come every day, have a coffee, sit in silence, sadness, or indifference. The waitresses do not know who they are, but they have found out about some of them that they are the rich, very rich speculators” (Ibid, p. 71).

The regulars at the cafés at 58 Leszno Street certainly did not fully reflect the social cross-section of the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto. Those who could afford even a glass of tea from a café or another drink served in one of the ghetto’s food outlets constituted not so big percentage of the whole population of Warsaw’s Jews. Their presence and often quite ostentatious behaviour in many cases aroused the aversion or criticism of the other inhabitants of the ghetto. All the more that in the capital’s closed district there were also premises of a fairly suspicious provenance and fame. One of them, as one of the inhabitants of the ghetto wrote about, was the Britannia Hotel, where the ghetto’s dance bar operated, among others. We can read about it that it is: the “headquarters of the <<Thirteen>>, hostesses in their evening dresses, servants, orchestra, tables, dinners with alcohol, the cigarette and cigar smoke floating around. Men, not only members of the Thirteen, there are also their guests from the other side, Germans and Poles. The orchestra is playing plays, there is dance, laughter, and entertainment...” (Jewish Historical Institute, ref. no. 302/129). This description, quite incompatible with the popular image of the ghetto, built largely on the basis of well-known street photos depicting people dying (or already dead...) from hunger, on the one hand is puzzling and maybe even shocking, on the other it is proof that even in hell one could find places where there was laughter and music was playing. However, these places were not available to everyone.

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