

The Taste of Life in the Ghetto #13. The Quarantine – 109 Leszno Street

We invite you to read the last article by Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych in a series entitled “The Taste of 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.

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The Quarantine – 109 Leszno Street

We can read in the documents collected by the collaborators of Emanuel Ringelblum that the post-school building located at 109 Leszno Street, which in 1940 was dedicated to serve as a quarantine for Jews awaiting entry to the ghetto, had all sanitary facilities and over thirty classrooms (The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto. Part 1, v. 33, Warsaw 2016, p. 188). A woman working there on behalf of the Patronat organisation wrote about this special place in the following way: "The Quarantine at 109 Leszno Street is the ghetto's threshold. Everything that comes and goes out of the Jewish district of Warsaw passes through this institution" (The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, vol. 5, Warsaw 2011, p. 134). People living there are, among others, refugees displaced from their hometowns, people suffering from typhus and separated from society for health reasons, those going to and returning from forced labour camps, Warsaw Jews who had run away from the ghetto, were captured and sent back again...

It is worth paying attention to the fact that the quarantine located in the building at 109 Leszno was outside the ghetto walls. People staying in it – in accordance with the applicable law – were not allowed, even despite the financial resources they had, to purchase anything on the so-called

Aryan side. The inevitable effect of this situation was the increasing hunger with each passing moment. The woman working at the Patronat organisation wrote about this situation in the following way: "Cases of passing out due to exhaustion are permanent. Every couple of days there is a rebellion. Recently, some women have come to see us screaming and crying that people had been fainting and asking for bread. So, we sliced the bread, all that we had, and we brought 100 slices of bread and marmalade for the 218 quarantined. We didn't have any more" (Ibidem, p. 145).

The hunger of the people staying in the quarantine, cut off from the world, dependent on irregular supplies, and in some sense left to themselves, without hope for any signs of change, resulted in a whole spectrum of destructive behavioural disorders: from apathy, through helplessness, to rage. In extreme cases, there was even insanity, which the member of the Patronat organisation mentioned: "There is a sudden movement in the corridor. Some cries, blended and more and more numerous can be heard coming from the first floor. And a cry. A horrible scream. And voices. I open the office's door. I look out. One of the male nurses is standing in front of me. I ask him what is going on <<I don't know – he answers – there is something going on, but I don't know what>>. And he smiles vaguely. <<A woman has gone mad – he adds – It's no surprise. Of hunger>>" (Ibidem, p. 147). Those people who had just a little more strength tried to change the situation they had found themselves in. Their bitterness and despair was expressed in collective revolts, one of which fell at the end of March 1941. It was then that the "Quarantined women stood on the window sills holding their children and wanted to throw them and themselves out onto the street" (Ibidem, p. 149). According to an account of a person who was observing this event, the Polish people, coming from the working class, gathered in front of the building and began to express their solidarity with the starving Jewish mothers and their children, and started to utter shouts of outrage at the quarantine board and throw stones at the building's windows (Ibidem).

The fact that the quarantine was located outside the ghetto's borders caused that knowledge about its existence and dramatic situation did not reach the residents of the capital city's closed district. Reportedly, "only individual people who accidentally found themselves in the quarantine later constantly showed their interest in it" (Ibidem, p. 168). Often unable to provide food, they

gave other goods to the people staying in this special place of seclusion. An example of such a person was, for instance, “Józef Ajzenberg, who being invited had [the opportunity] to meet the people in the quarantine, and offered soap and soap waste in such a great quantity that numerous crowds of the quarantined and people going to and coming back from forced labour camps used them for several months” (Ibidem).

In September 1941, the quarantine operating in the building at 109 Leszno Street was turned into a hospital for infectious patients, which was a department of the former Jewish Hospital in the Czyste district, continuing in some ways the tradition of isolating its patients from the rest of society. The people who had been staying in the quarantine were supposed to be moved to the Great Synagogue at Tłomackie Street and the building of the Main Judaic Library located nearby (The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto. Part 2, v. 34, Warsaw 2016, p. 144).

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Photo: 109, Leszno St., 1939 (Referat Gabarytów)

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