

The Taste of Life in the Ghetto #17. Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Leszno 32

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

Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Leszno 32

Three Roman Catholic churches were located in the Warsaw Ghetto. One of them was the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary built in the years 1682-1732 as a temple adjacent to the monastery of the Order of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, commonly known as the Discalced Carmelites. The first service was conducted here on 8 September 1682, in the chapel arranged in the acquired property, in front of a painting by an unknown author depicting the Virgin Mary. This painting was later placed in the main altar of the church. Next to it a monastery was built, which was later converted into prison.

The church at Leszno Street together with the All Saints Church, located at Grzybowski Square, were functioning in the Warsaw Ghetto "in the old style". This means that within the walls of these two buildings regular services were conducted for Jewish Catholics who, according to the occupant's order, were also to stay behind the walls of the enclosed quarter. In addition to the celebration of Sunday masses, various activities were also organised for people under the care of the church. Moreover, weddings were organised there too. Ruth Cyprys was invited to one of them (Ruth Cyprys, *Skok dla życia: pamiętnik z czasów okupacji Polski (A Jump for Life: A*

Survivor's Journal from Nazi-occupied Poland), Warszawa 2000, pp. 31-32.)

The baptised Jews weren't held in high esteem among other ghetto inhabitants. They were often considered conformists who, taking advantage of the possibility of getting baptised, try to get special care from the Church, and in particular from Caritas operating within its structure. The fact is that this institution supported its followers. One of those who received help and who were closely connected with the community of All Saints Church at Grzybowski Square, was Professor Ludwik Hirszfeld. He wrote about his link with this place: *"In August 1941, we received our own apartment in the presbytery of All Saints Church [...]. Unlike the church at Leszno Street, where only priests lived in the parish house, in this parish house all rooms and flats, with the exception of the prelate [Marceli] Godlewski's apartment, were given to the parishioners. [...] This was a strange life. I've never had such close contact with the Church as when I stayed in the enclosed quarter. [...] On Sundays all Christians, not only Catholics, attended Holy Mass. Everyone was there: doctors, lawyers, those for whom baptism was an expression of faith and for whom it was a national symbol, and those who got baptised for business"* (Ludwik Hirszfeld, *Historia jednego życia (The Story of One Life)*, Warsaw 2000, p. 363.).

After the war, Hirszfeld recalled the existence of a soup kitchen for Christian Jews run by Caritas at All Saints Church: *"The inhabitants of the parish building [...] differed from the rest of the ghetto inhabitants due to fact that their housing situation was better. A Caritas soup kitchen using the rations of the Jewish Social Welfare Society and the Supply Department operated within the area of the parish. The soup kitchen intended for impoverished Jewish Catholics and their families served, however, also the Jewish poor without making any difference"* (Archiwum ŻIH, file no. 301/4151.). Emanuel Ringelblum also wrote in September 1941 about this broad – regardless of religion – activity of Caritas: *"Neophytes [...] are served as many meals as they want, even the wealthy are served meals. [...] The Neophytes have recently done us a favour: their Caritas welcomes Jewish consumers. They also receive more products from others. Recently four or six kilograms of sugar each"* (Emanuel Ringelblum, *Kronika getta warszawskiego (The Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto)*, Warsaw 1983, pp. 317-318.). It is said that, as Ringelblum wrote, some of these donations were also sold to other ghetto inhabitants in need (*Ibidem*, p. 229.).

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Photo: Leszno Street 32, Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, before 1939 (Gazeta Wyborcza)

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