

# The Taste of Life in the Ghetto #18. Femina Theatre – Leszno 35

**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

### Femina Theatre – Leszno 35

Apart from the longing for nutritious food, the vast majority of people enclosed within the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto felt another kind of hunger. It was a desire to participate in cultural, literary and social life. The cultural institutions operating in the ghetto partly fulfilled this particular need. Among such institutions there was Femina Theatre, located in the ghetto at Leszno 35. That theatre, headed by Jerzy Jurandot, was opened on 20 June 1941. Its auditorium could accommodate approximately nine hundred spectators. It represented a high artistic level, with outstanding Jewish actors, songsters and dancers performing on its stage. Femina Theatre held over ten premieres during its existence in the ghetto. They were reported, among others, by "Gazeta Żydowska", which was licensed by the Germans. As early as on 4 July 1941, which is less than three weeks after the opening of the theatre, one could read in an advertisement placed on the pages of a collaborationist rag that the performance entitled "Batalion humoru" ["Battalion of Humour"] arouses widespread admiration, while the auditorium where the performance is staged is "the coldest in the district" (Gazeta Żydowska 1941, no. 54, p. 6.).

Also, Femina Theatre organised meetings of a fundraising character – their aim was to collect

funds for the ghetto inhabitants who needed support (including food). In the early autumn of 1941, several events of that type were held for the occasion of the Children's Month action. Hence, in "Gazeta Żydowska" one can read: *"Last Saturday, the Femina Theatre hosted the inaugural gala of Children's Month, a social campaign for poor children, orphans and homeless street children. The great importance of the aforementioned campaign is evidenced by the fact that the inaugural academy was attended by the most prominent social activists in the Jewish district of Warsaw. The presidium of the academy sat on a stage adorned with beautiful flowers. At the presidium table one could see, among others, engineer Mr Adam Czerniaków, Mrs Czerniaków, the chairman's wife and councillors: Wielikowski and Zabłudowski. [...] The gala was opened by the Tarbut kuchen children's choirs run by the Centos. Under the baton of Professor Szklar, they sang a number of songs in Hebrew. The whole performance was excellent. In his brief speech, delivered after the singing, Counsellor Wielikowski emphasized the lofty goals of the organisers of the Children's Month campaign. The President of the Jewish Council, engineer Czerniaków was the first to deliver a speech. As the one responsible for the lives of the quarter's inhabitants, he called on the numerous representatives of Jewish society in the quarter who attended the event to make a sacrificial effort for the benefit of the youngest citizens, who needed this help more than anyone else. The President himself pledged his warmest support for helping Jewish children. On behalf of the Jewish Council, he promised one hundred thousand zlotys. (Gazeta Żydowska 1941, no. 90, p. 5).*

*"The commemorative speeches dedicated to calling our society for help were also given by Adolf Berman (who is said to have read a report on the lives of thousands of the poorest children in boarding schools, points, asylums, common rooms, feeding centres and camps organised by Centos), Felicja – the wife of Adam Czerniaków, Abraham Gepner – the chairman of the Department of Supply, Icchak Giterman – the director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and others. This great inaugural gala of Children's Month met with a great excitement in the Jewish quarter of Warsaw, also due to the lofty goals it was devoted to, as well as because of the fact that it was the first social event of this kind since a very long period of time". (Ibidem.).*

As Adam Czerniaków wrote about the event in his diary, his wife, Felicja, was the most successful,

"judging by the applause" (*Adama Czerniakowa dziennik z getta warszawskiego (The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow)*, ed. M. Fuks, Warsaw 1983, p. 216.). Information on how the funds collected for Children's Month, inaugurated with great fanfare in Femina Theatre, were distributed among starving children could be found in the articles in subsequent issues of "Gazeta Żydowska".

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*Photo: Femina Theatre – Leszno 35, 1939. (Office for Construction Dimensions)*

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