

The Taste of Life in the Ghetto #19. Branch of the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital – junction of Leszno and Żelazna Streets

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

Branch of the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital – junction of Leszno and Żelazna Streets

In the summer of 1941, a branch of the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital was established in the building at the junction of Leszno and Żelazna Streets – near one of the gates leading to the ghetto. The branch was set up through the efforts of Anna Braude-Heller, the Director of the Hospital, who made sure to increase the capacity of the facility due to a geometrically increasing number of people in need. Before that, the building housed a refugee shelter for several months of World War II. That cutting-edge and modernist building erected in 1937 was intended for educational purposes in the city. Before World War II, it had been home to four universal schools, each of them occupying one floor. The lowest floor had been for common use, it accommodated

student cloakrooms, showers, a canteen with kitchen facilities, and doctor's offices for all schools. The building presented a somewhat different picture when the refugee shelter was closed down and the children's hospital was moved there during World War II. Adina Blady-Szwajger, a doctor at the hospital, wrote about the place: *"It was a grim, three-storey building right next to the wacha – a gate in the ghetto wall. The Arbeitsamt building and the quarantine building for those affected by epidemic typhus were located across Żelazna Street and connected with the ghetto by a bridge"* (Adina Blady-Szwajger, *I więcej nic nie pamiętam* (I remember nothing more), Warsaw 2019, pp. 49-50.).

Doctor Anna Braude-Heller became the director of the branch, appointing Doctor Anna Margolisowa as the director of the parent hospital on Śliska Street. Adina Blady-Szwajger, who started her paediatric career in 1940 on Śliska Street, was also employed in the branch. Thanks to her notes, among other things, we can now get an inside into how the hospital operated. One of the topics explored by Adina Blady-Szwajger was hunger at the facility affecting both young patients and hospital staff. In her post-war memoirs, she wrote: *"The lack of food – even the starvation rations – was becoming increasingly common. There was a day when ravenous older children – as thin as a rake – rushed towards a soup kettle, knocked it over pushing a nurse away, and then picked up the spilled soup from the floor and gulped it down, snatching pieces of rotten swede from each other's hands"* (Ibidem, p. 49.). The sight of starving children was relived by Adina Blady-Szwajger for years to come. She wrote: *"On plank beds laid terribly skinny children or big swollen bodies. Their eyes were the only thing alive. Those who have not seen such eyes, such faces of ravenous children with their blackened mouths open, and wrinkled parchment skin cannot know what life can be like"* (Ibidem, s. 52.).

Also on Żelazna Street, a study on hunger was conducted. The aim of the project initiated in February 1942 by Doctor Israel Milejowski was to obtain the clinical picture of starving people and observe biochemical changes in them. Special "hunger rooms" were established. The first one was for conducting research on adults, while the other was for children. The subject of the study included typical cases, which, as it was assumed, did not have any additional complications, or anything that could affect research results. Doctor Israel Milejowski, Doctor Emil Apfelbaum, Doctor Teodozja Goliborska, who was the only one to survive World War II, and

Doctor Anna Braude-Heller were among doctors, scientists, and authors of texts. The latter wrote about what she experienced at the branch of the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital on an everyday basis, that is about the clinical picture of hunger in children. In a manner characteristic of the medical papers of that time, she presented the situation of patients under her care, methodically recapturing the consequences of chronic hunger. In addition to apathy, weight loss, growth inhibition, hypothermia, skin lesions (bruising, increased pigmentation, inflammation), she described further stages of chronic hunger, which included swelling, muscle spasms, reduction of skin laxity, pulmonary emphysema, and pleural effusion. Concluding her research, she argued that in the vast majority of cases hunger swelling in younger children was irreversible and ended badly. How else could it possibly have ended?

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Photo: building with four universal schools, in which the branch of the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital was located during World War II, 88 Żelazna Street, corner of 80/82 Leszno Street, before 1939 (“*Architektura i Budownictwo*” by Czesław Olszewski)

Publication date: 2020-05-06

Print date: 2023-04-18 11:54

Source: <http://1943.pl/en/artykul/the-taste-of-life-in-the-ghetto-19/>