

The Taste of Life in the Ghetto #20. Britania Hotel – Nowolipie 20

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.

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Britania Hotel – Nowolipie 18

Apart from food distribution points, peoples' kitchens and mid-range restaurants, establishments of a slightly different nature – more expensive and sophisticated ones, where the new financial elite of the confined quarter would meet – also existed in the Ghetto. They were written about as follows: *“there are people among them [...] with sources of income unknown to anyone. And they live well, in abundance, at a pre-war level”* (Archiwum Ringelbluma. *Getto warszawskie*. (Ringelblum Archive. *Warsaw Ghetto*), v. 5, Warsaw 2011, p. 71.). This new social class emerged mainly from the people smuggling goods from and into the ghetto, police officers of the Jewish Ghetto Police, but also officers of the Group Thirteen. These people would meet at the ghetto establishments to discuss their business. Stanisław Różycki was one of the writers who wrote about it: *“Some of them used to be cabbies or porters. [...] Others – from the same circles – the young ones – are already bold, have a lot of nerve and are even open-handed. [...] They can be met mostly at Arizona. A small bar and café in the basement of the Britania Hotel where the richest inhabitants of the ghetto live, having lost their former places of residence. Yes, the rooms are expensive, but you have electricity, [...] bedclothes, breakfast, dinner, and supper on the spot. Along with pleasures and entertainment, too. You do not have to walk out into the dirty street to spend the day in a decent and pleasurable way, away from the spectre of the war and the*

ghetto. Because here you have a bar, a café, and a restaurant. You can play cards, dance, drink, and enjoy the company of women. You name it, you got it. "Heaven on Earth." Music, singing, a positive frame of mind, and wit add amusement to the bleak boredom of the life of a smuggler." (Ibid.)

The Britania Hotel mentioned here was an investment dating back to the pre-war period. Even though it was not as prestigious as the Bristol, Polonia or Europejski, it was considered relatively decent. Thus, it is not surprising that those who had to move to the Ghetto, and could not find suitable accommodation, decided to move in there – provided, of course, they had enough money to do so. The hotel itself advertised in a licensed newspaper, "*Gazeta Żydowska*", announcing that it was offering long-term rentals, with amenities such as central heating, to name just one. (*Gazeta Żydowska* 1941, no. 3, p. 10).

Stanisław Różycki's description of the atmosphere at 18 Nowolipie was quite unenthusiastic. The guests who visited the establishment were – in his eyes – people dressed in exquisite clothes, fresh and perfumed. The beverages served to the tables were mainly alcoholic drinks, such as "*liqueurs, wines and cocktails*" (Ibid.), and the food included: "*oranges, lemons, apples [...] cakes, lemonades, mayonnaise, fish, chicken and sardines*" (Ibid.). A special guest, whom Różycki calls "*the king of intermediaries*", allegedly ordered dishes that the residents of the nearby streets could only dream about: "*goose breast with matzo, honey, onion with liver and slivovitz*" (Ibid.). Różycki's observation regarding the establishment was, however, pretty grim: "*it is, in fact, a hole, a hive of the worst dregs of society, unscrupulous and shameless people, mostly uneducated boors, trying to act as lords. [...] forget about orgies, forget that it's a brothel and a gambling spot, forget about dancing, scoffing, carousing. Forget about the fact that money here is thrown away as easily, as it is ripped out of pauper's pockets.*" (Ibid. p. 72.). It is a daily scene, however – as Różycki assumed – it could be different from what was happening at the establishment during the curfew hours when no one could visit the Britania officially. "*The waitresses, other women, and music are available all night long [...]. Vodka, wine, pastries, meat, mayonnaise, fruit— none of it will run out.*" (Ibidem). Compared to the crowded, grey streets of the Ghetto, this place must have made great impression. It was confirmed by Rode, first name unknown, who visited the Britania right after he had left a refugee shelter. Years later he recalled

the establishment at Nowolipie as follows: *“taxi dancers in evening gowns, servants, orchestra, tables, dinners with liquor, trailing smoke from cigarettes and cigars. [...] The orchestra is playing, there’s dancing, laughter and fun...”* (Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute, Ref. 302/129), namely everything that was nearly unattainable for an average, severely impoverished resident of the ghetto.

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Photo: Nowolipie, junction with Karmelicka and Mylna during World War II. From the left: ruins of 24 Nowolipie tenement house, corner of Karmelicka 11, 12 Karmelicka tenement house, corner of Nowolipie, gable wall of 20 Nowolipie tenement house, 14a Nowolipie, 14 Nowolipie and 12 Nowolipie tenement houses visible further down the street. Side façade of 17 Nowolipie tenement house and tenement house at Mylna visible ahead (mortgage no. 7346). (Foundation of Warsaw 1939, source: photo scan sent by Tomasz Lerski)

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