

The Taste of Life in the Ghetto #24. The Smocza Bazaar

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

The Smocza Bazaar

Residents of the Warsaw Ghetto could obtain food from a few sources. Besides distributive shops where ration stamps could be redeemed, the trade also took place on the streets, in the backyards and at the bazaars. It was mentioned in the postwar memoirs of survivors, such as Mary Berg: "In the vegetable wagons in the streets one sees only dirty turnips and last year's carrots. Next to them are wagons full of stinking fish – tiny little fish in a state of decay. A pound of them costs one zloty. These fish now constitute the most important article of food in the ghetto. It is the only one that the Germans allow to be sold freely. Of course, meat, chicken and even a real carp for the Sabbath are to be had. [...] Kosher meat and fish are even more expensive; only those who have a large cash reserve can afford such luxuries" (Mary Berg, *Dziennik z getta warszawskiego* [*The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing up in the Warsaw Ghetto*], Warsaw 1993, p. 64.).

Besides buying products from the street sellers, people also visited marketplaces. One of the most famous and most often visited bazaars in the Warsaw Ghetto was the one located at Smocza Street. Sellers and merchants often simply exchanged goods, determining the value of

products on an ongoing basis. Sometimes, the Varsovians from outside the ghetto came to the bazaar too – the Jews selling their goods usually offered much more favourable prices than the ones prevailing at the so-called Aryan side.

Housewives who could afford shopping and preparing exquisite dishes known from the pre-war times did not have to make particular savings nor make use of the popular “hunger” recipes. Quite a large number of such savings recipes was printed on the pages of “Gazeta Żydowska”, a Jewish newspaper licensed by Germans, in the column titled Guidebook for housewives. A few of them is worth mentioning. For instance, the first recipe, which was published in “Gazeta Żydowska”, was a recipe for cookies, that were allegedly “great and cheap war macaroons, which can be obtained from porridge, sugar, margarine, baking powder, flour and almond oil” („Gazeta Żydowska” 1940, no. 17, p. 5.). Other suggestions for savings included the following advice: “Many housewives think that in order to get potato purée, you need to cook peeled –potatoes. Not necessarily. Potatoes can be boiled with peels, and they can be skinned and mashed afterwards. Peel them with a sharp edge of the knife and the peels obtained are only a one-tenth– of what we would receive when peeling raw potatoes. The potatoes cooked in their skins (peels) exquisitely suite various salads (with curd, herring) and they can be fried as well, after cutting them into slices” („Gazeta Żydowska” 1940, no. 43, p. 5.). Somewhere else, the readers are advised to “best store heads of cabbages in the cellar in the following way: tie a thick rope between two walls and hang cabbage heads on it, at quite far distance from each other, with their stumps strapped using a string. Make sure that cabbage heads do not touch each other because otherwise they can rot easily” („Gazeta Żydowska”, 1940, no. 27, p. 5.). Naturally, a question immediately comes to mind how many people at the time could afford to buy several cabbage heads at once and store them in their own cellar, suitably prepared for that... Interesting is also the fact that in the spring of 1941, a while before Pesach, the readers of “Gazeta Żydowska” were provided with a full set of recipes for festive meals. The list contained, for example, dumplings made of matzo flour, a cake of potato flour, fried cookies, crepes, sponge and an omelette made of matzo flour, borscht and two recipes for dishes with liver – matzo balls and potato dumplings („Gazeta Żydowska” 1941, no. 28, p. 5.). All comme il faut, like in the old days.

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Photo: The Smocza Bazaar – 29 Smocza Street (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-134-0782-24/ Ludwig Knobloch)

Publication date: 2020-05-07

Print date: 2021-08-18 02:20

Source: <http://1943.pl/en/artykul/the-taste-of-life-in-the-ghetto-24/>