

The Taste of Life in the Ghetto #25. Umschlagplatz

Episode 25 is the last one of “The Taste of Life in the Ghetto” series by Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych that we started to publish in March last year, in which the author discusses the issues concerning food for ghetto residents, activity of provisional feeding points for the starving ghetto inhabitants, kitchens providing food for children and infants, and 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

Umschlagplatz

In 1940, the railway siding of the Warszawa Gdańska station, including the cargo handling yard with the loading ramp and warehouses, was taken over by the Transferstelle, which was an institution coordinating the flow of goods between the ghetto and the outside world (Jacek Leociak, *Spojrzenia na warszawskie getto*. Stawki, Warsaw 2011, p. 21.). It was the main route of delivering official food supplies to the closed district of Warsaw. These supplies were then distributed between the ghetto residents through distribution shops. However, the place achieved notoriety when in July 1942 it became a yard for handling not cargo but people who, according to official information, were transported to the east to work.

In the first period of deportation, those who volunteered to leave were promised food for the journey – bread and marmalade. For starving people, whose future in the ghetto looked bleak, it was a very convincing argument, making it easier to decide to pack up the most necessary things and go to the Umschlagplatz to wait for transportation to work. On the one hand, the vision of bread, which they had neither seen nor eaten for a long time, gave people a deceptive feeling that hunger could be satisfied at least for a moment and, on the other hand, it was an

illusory promise that the Germans would take care of those who were leaving and – most of all – that they would not let so much food go to waste. However, there were some who did not believe in the propaganda promises. Henryk Makower wrote years later: “In those horrible times, that promise resulted in the disturbing phenomenon of people volunteering to leave for a loaf of bread and a kilogram of marmalade. Those people thought they were going to a labour camp and had high hopes for survival. I saw those desperate people with bundles (they could take fifteen-kilogram luggage but if someone’s luggage weighed more, they could still take it; those bundles were later taken away) going alone to the Umschlagplatz; there were sometimes entire families going there, beguiled with bread and marmalade. A heart-breaking sight. [...] The number of those people, however, was rather small. The vast majority of the poor and the rich, the old and the young, the healthy and the sick were terrified of the possibility of deportation and made every effort to save themselves” (Henryk Makower, *Pamiętnik z getta warszawskiego [Diary from the Warsaw Ghetto]*, Wrocław 1987, p. 58.). Today, perhaps, thoughts may cross one’s mind that those who voluntarily went to the Umschlagplatz made an unwise choice, that they could have saved their lives if they stayed in the ghetto for some more time and then somehow were able to leave it, or that the promise of getting food for the journey deceived them and made them lose their ability to look realistically at the situation they were in. However, it is difficult to judge decisions made by others when one does not suffer from chronic hunger or long for even a slice of stale bread.

After World War II, Marysia Szapiro wrote about bread being worth its weight in gold: “I came [home] but no one even looked at me, said anything, or asked me anything about what I brought home even though I had two loaves of bread. After all, a loaf of bread was all the luck in the world at that time but they were not happy at all. I realised that they were mourning mom’s [recent] death so I put the bread on the table and started crying with them. Each of us was peacefully awaiting death” (Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute, file no. 301/6545.). Having managed to take her younger siblings past the ghetto walls, Estera, the oldest sister of Marysia Szapiro, decided to go to the Umschlagplatz alone and on her own will. No longer feeling responsible for her family and wishing to finally satisfy her hunger – even just for a moment – with the bread promised by the Germans, she and other Warsaw Ghetto Jews decided to be deported to Treblinka.

Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych – an anthropologist of culture, Hebraist and sociologist. A valued researcher of life and legacy of Janusz Korczak, cooperating with the Forum for Dialogue Foundation and the Center for Yiddish Culture. In December 2019, she received the KLIO Award, in a contest for the best historical books, for her book *“Mniej strachu. Fakty i mity o ostatniej drodze Janusza Korczaka i jego podopiecznych”* [*“Less fear. Facts and myths of the last road of Janusz Korczak and the children of his orphanage”*].

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