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The taste of life in the ghetto. Wacha – intersection of Leszno and Żelazna streets

We invite you to read Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych's column, belonging to the series entitled „From life in the ghetto”, in which the author writes about such issues as problems with feeding the residents of the ghetto, the activity of meal points that were organised on an ad hoc basis for its starving residents as well as kitchens dedicated to children and infants, Transferstelle.

The author writes 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 was born in Warsaw and placed in the ghetto as a teenager. This is how 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 a constant thirst, chapped lips dry out. The jaws clench of their own accord and you feel a 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 syphon. A simple thought about a piece of swede is enough and suddenly your teeth tear apart stringy pulp 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 death camp in Treblinka. Food: in the ghetto, next to people who were craving bread and dreamed about swede, there were those who ate at café L'Ourse, and Jewish Newspaper informed on 1 August 1941 that the kitchen at 11 Leszno Street „will distribute 50 grammes 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 Scientific and Research Department at the Warsaw Ghetto Museum.

Wacha – intersection of Leszno and Źelazna streets

Smuggling at the ghetto's entry gates took on various forms, which can probably be best summed up as: wholesale, semi-wholesale, and retail. Large amounts of goods were transported into the ghetto, smaller ones were brought in hands or backpacks. This is how the procedure was described by Halina Aszkenazy-Engelhard: „You could easily recognise a smuggler by their high boots, jacket, and a confident gaze. They were divided into 'little' and 'big' smugglers. One of the smugglers was little Icek from our house, a fifteen year old boy who would sneak through a hole in the wall or walk over the roof to the neighbouring street located on the Aryan side. Another one was Mr. Kranc, whose Polish acquaintance with a pass used to bring him boxes of pencils, rubbers or thread. These were, however, the 'little smugglers'. Large scale smugglers bribed German military policemen and transported goods in cars through the gates of the ghetto,,.

A large part of the painstaking work was performed by several year old kids, who brought in anything they could hide under their clothes. Trying to cross the gate unnoticed, sometimes even several times a day, they often fell prey to the military policemen who guarded the gates.

Smuggling also took place at the ghetto gate located at the intersection of Leszno and Żelazna Streets. The exact same gate was the workplace of one of the cruellest Germans, whom the residents of the ghetto nicknamed Frankenstein. He shot people with sadistic pleasure.

Maybe he is the one being described in the following account of a nameless witness: "Today, between two and three in the afternoon, a gendarme at the exit of Leszno-Żelazna Streets shot an eight year old girl, who wanted to cross the gate and bring in several kilogrammes of potatoes. The girl was taken to the hospital in a rickshaw, with the despairing mother walking by her side,,. This was most likely one of many such incidents, which often ended in death at the scene.

Henryka Łazowertówna was one of the ghetto poets. She also cooperated with the Jewish Social Aid and wanted to note, appreciate, and commemorate the actions of children smugglers by dedicating them a poem entitled The Little Smuggler, which reads as follows:

*Past walls, past holes, past guards
Past wire, past rubble, past fences
Starving, daring, stubborn
I sneak, I dart like a cat.*

*At noon, at night, at dawn
In a blizzard, in the rain, in the swelter
I risk my life a thousand times
Risking a child's neck.*

*A coarse sack under my arm
Worn out rags on my back
Young, swift legs
And eternal fear in my heart.*

*But one needs to suffer through it all
And endure all of it
So tomorrow you can eat bread
to your heart's content.*

*Past walls, past holes, past guards
At night, at dawn, in the light of day
Daring, starving, cunning
I move quietly as a shadow.*

*And if the hand of fate touches me
Suddenly in this game,
It is a just a life's trap,
Mother, do not wait for me anymore.*

*I won't come back to you
My voice won't reach you from afar
Street dust will bury
A child's lost fate.*

*And just one plea
Froze in a grimace on my lips
Who will bring you, Momma,
Tomorrow's bread.*

The singular "war margin" that you had to add to the bread bought outside the ghetto and brought in from beyond the walls was the price of a young smuggler's life. Hunger and responsibility for loved ones were often greater than the fear of a deathly bullet shot by a gendarme guarding the gate.

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