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The taste of life in the ghetto. „Czyste” Hospital Wards – Leszno 1

We invite you to read another article by Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych's in a 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 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 of 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.

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After the establishment of the ghetto, the building at 1 Leszno Street – which used to house the Spirits Monopoly right before the war – was designated for three surgical wards, otolaryngological ward, and an x-ray room of a modern and excellently equipped Jewish hospital, which operated in Czyste district, at 17 Dworska Street in the pre-war years. The hospital, which was partly moved to Leszno at the turn of 1940/1941, experienced many hardships: inappropriate housing conditions, lack of modern medical equipment, which the hospital was not able to fully move to the ghetto, lack of staff, and – maybe above all – constant, everyday, and painfully experienced shortages of medicines, fuel, and food. The last one is – as we know – one of the prerequisites for quick and efficient recovery after a period of illness, right next to medicines and professional medical care.

In the hospital at Leszno, besides famous doctors, such as: Aleksander Wertheim MD, Dawid Amsterdamski MD or Ignacy Borkowski MD, there was a number of young people, including doctor Noemi Wigdorowicz, later Makowerowa, who had the chance to observe the everyday life of the hospital. After the war, she wrote about this otherwise formative experience, bringing

attention to the problem of hunger, even among the patients who were under the hospital's care and need food the most: „Each patient alone is a separate, closed chapter in a medical chart. It is just as if each bed is a separate apartment, and simultaneously a separate world of pain, concerns, and dreams. ‚Nurse, I'd like to ask for an additional food ration for Rozenfeld,‘ says the medical director. I already know these orders and I know that they are no use. Ward Sister Aldszuld – full-bodied, energetic, and spirited – begins her everyday speech: ‘Director, we only have additional rations for ten people a day, and the doctors prescribed them to thirty people. How am I supposed to get them? Besides, I'm short on underwear. Recently, the ward service has been stealing it, it's an organised gang, underwear is constantly disappearing on its way from the laundry. Yesterday, I learned that marked hospital underwear was being sold at Kercelak. I really can't handle all of this and I'm asking for your help. Utility manager started an investigation, but to no avail. We don't have enough bandages and lignin, the pharmacy sent only a small part of our demand. The nutrition of the sick is getting worse. Bread is like clay, and they don't even give us enough of that. The soups' are watery, the sick are starving, and these diarrhoeas...’” (Miłość w cieniu śmierci: Wspomnienia z getta warszawskiego).

The inability to provide their wards with sufficient amount of food was the fate of the majority of care facilities in the Warsaw Ghetto. The same problems were faced by orphanages, children's kitchens or refugee shelters, which were hopelessly trying to perform the miracle of feeding the multitude. Sometimes, they directly asked for the support of the richer residents of the ghetto, organised collection actions or established patronages (or even matronages as in the case of the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital, whose branch was located at the intersection of Leszno and Żelazna Streets), aimed at supporting people who remained under the care of such facilities. However, all the efforts, endeavours, social work, and sometimes even wide ranging propaganda for the sake of the hospital's patients could not replace bread, kasha, milk, meat or sugar.

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