

The taste of life in the ghetto 6

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 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 a syphon. A simple thought about a piece of swede is enough – suddenly your teeth tear 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.

Department of Provisioning and Supply – Leszno 12

The Germans, occupying Poland, decided that the Jews would not be fed according to a general – otherwise starvation – plan intended for the conquered country's entire population, but would receive food quotas intended exclusively for them. In Warsaw a special unit was established to this end, the so-called Transferstelle, which regulated importation of food to the ghetto from beyond the wall and exportation intended for the "outside". To distribute food transferred to the capital city's closed district, the Judenrat was ordered to establish the Department of Provisioning and Supply (Jewish Historical Institute [ŻIH] Archives, file no. 302/240). It was established in December 1940, while its headquarters were located at 12, Leszno Street.

Stanisław Gombiński (Jan Mawult), who worked in the Jewish Ghetto Police, i.e. the so-called Jewish Police, described this institution in a quite unflattering way: "In this great whirlwind of people, affairs, interests, and endeavours, in an indefatigable multitude of thousands of small streams, paving their way with toil and fierceness, a few large centres were established, small streams swirled around them, heading for them, and leaning on them. Separate mansions with their dignitaries and lackeys, coteries and fights, prizes, and benefits. At the forefront were the departments of trade, industry, and victualling, in the houses at 12 and 14 Leszno Street, there

were the Department of Provisioning and Supply, the Coal Department, the Trade and Industry Department, and the <> under the name of Kohn & Heller, an enterprise with extraordinary interests and possibilities, starting from importation of fish and ending with importation of people” (Stanisław Gombiński, *Wspomnienia policjanta z warszawskiego getta* [Memoirs of an Anonymous Warsaw Ghetto Policeman"], Warsaw 2010, p. 261.).

The head of the Department of Provisioning and Supply was the widely respected Abraham Gepner, a pre-war entrepreneur and president of the Trade Union Central Office, associating medium and large trading enterprises in Poland, and in the ghetto also a member of the Jewish Council. Stanisław Gombiński, despite the obviously not the best opinion about the Department of Provisioning and Supply, wrote about its president in glowing terms. “His words and his character invigorate the heart just like wine: of a small posture, with a beautiful, intelligent face, his grey hair thrown back, an eagle nose and big moustache, wise and young eyes, [...] always with energy and temperament, always full of faith in the future, he always heartens and makes one more optimistic, here is one of the righteous, here is the one who is worth believing – if not for his age, if not for his seventy years of age, which makes him unable to keep the leaders in his hand, makes him unable to hold the reins, makes many impersonate his signboard, hiding many small businesses, many privacies...” (Ibidem, p. 244.). Stefan Chaskielewicz, who for some time was employed by this institution, recalled it after the war as follows: „At the end of 1940, my relative, attorney-at-law Tadeusz Teszner, who was then the head of the Department of Food Stamp Control in the Department of Provisioning and Supply of the Jewish District in Warsaw, seeing the hopelessness of the work I was doing, offered me to move to his department. The Department of Provisioning and Supply was an independent institution that was legally subject to the Chairman of the Jewish Community. I took advantage of this proposal, and for a few months I would visit the apartments and check whether food stamps for non-existent people had been collected. At that time, tens of thousands more food stamps were distributed compared to the number of inhabitants. I have seen utterly unthinkable misery” (Stefan Chaskielewicz, *Ukrywałem się w Warszawie* [I was hiding in Warsaw], Krakow 1988, p. 13).

In addition to its basic activity, i.e. the distribution of basic food products, such as: bread, flour, or potatoes, the Department of Provisioning and Supply also dealt with the distribution of... sweets.

On August 1, 1941, "Gazeta Żydowska" ["The Jewish Newspaper"] informed that as part of its work [the kitchen] "will distribute 50 grams of candy for adults and additionally for children" (Gazeta Żydowska 1941, No. 66, p. 5).

For the residents of the ghetto, the Department of Provisioning and Supply was probably one of the most well-known agencies of the Jewish Council, at the same time worshipped and cursed, identified above all with the possibility of satisfying as much as the hunger which accompanied people every day. However, the impossibility of responding to all the needs of the ghetto's population meant that it was held totally responsible for the woeful food situation, and its employees were generally considered to be feeding on the misery of other residents of the closed district.

Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych – cultural anthropologist, Hebraist, sociologist, in recent years curator at the Museum of Warsaw, researcher of Janusz Korczak's life and legacy. She cooperates with the Forum for Dialogue Foundation and the Centre for Yiddish Culture. She is the authoress of texts on "the final matters" – the final journey of Korczak and his charges, the final performance given by the wards of the Jewish Orphanage, and the final notes in Korczak's Diary.

Prepared by: Anna Kilian

Publication date: 2019-04-23

Print date: 2022-09-21 18:59

Source: <http://1943.pl/en/artykul/the-taste-of-life-in-the-ghetto-6/>