

The Taste of Life in the Ghetto #9. Courts – 53/55 Leszno Street

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

Courts – 53/55 Leszno Street

The construction of Magistrates' Court located at 53/55 Leszno Street began in 1935 and came to an end in mid-1939. This monumental complex was designed by Bohdan Pniewski. It was the grandest court building in the entire Europe, and its corridors were believed to be fifteen kilometers long. The building was composed of an Appellate Court and the Supreme Court. Once the Warsaw ghetto has been built, this particular public facility was incorporated by the ghetto, although, to some extent, the complex was considered extraterritorial, which means that it served both Jews and Warsaw residents remaining outside of the enclosed district. Among the documents gathered by Emanuel Ringelblum's associates, there is an account of a peculiar situation of this complex and the way it was actually used: „We found it both mysterious and surprising when after the closure of the ghetto the Court from Leszno Street was still open to Jews, which in essence meant that the Court became a venue for Jews living in the ghetto and outsiders who wanted to see them. In front of the Court there was a police checkpoint with two police officers: one Jew and one Pole. The Jewish policeman would verify whether the person entering the Court had any business in the Court or the Tax Office that was also situated in the complex. The other policeman in navy colors would check for, God forbid, bootlegging. In essence, both of them were expecting a bribe. At the beginning, we thought that it would be

difficult to enter the Court, [...] but [...] it turned out shortly after [that] going inside the judicial complex is actually easy. [...] There were two or three pat-downs in the building. I haven't seen one, nor do I know who did it. At any rate, the searches were not a deterrent; the meetings and bootlegging prevailed" („Ringelblum's Archives. The Warsaw Ghetto", vol. 5, Warsaw 2011, p. 431-432).

Using this smuggling channel was indeed an opportunity for undernourished ghetto residents to prolong their life. The people knew this very well already at the time of war. Here is a written account anticipating the future: „Future Jewish history researchers will have to describe the phenomenon of bootlegging in the Jewish ghetto and its various forms. It is worth mentioning a court bootlegging. It is not common knowledge that at 51/53 [53/55] Leszno Street there is a grand court complex which borders Ogrodowa Street and Biała Street from the Jewish side. As it happens, the Aryan side begins from Biała Street, and the Jewish side (ghetto) – from Leszno Street. The court building is naturally a place where you see big business going on. There is one entrance for Jews, another for Christians. Smugglers take advantage of this fact by carrying out extensive bootlegging. They smuggle superior goods. Usually it involves transactions between Jews and Poles regarding trade and smuggling of all kinds. And all this under the auspices of justice of <<Temida>>" („Ringelblum's Archives. The Warsaw Ghetto". Part 2, v. 34, Warsaw 2016, p. 148).

Apart from smuggling, the court area was also a venue for departed families and friends. They would often exchange small items. It was common knowledge, to the extent that at one point the traffic at the Court was subjected to intense scrutiny. According to the Jewish Newspaper: „Pursuant to the ordinance, entry to the Judicial Complex at 53/55 Leszno Street is granted only to Jews who produce a summons or payment order. While entering the Courts, it is prohibited to carry any parcels, whereas files must be used for storing important documents only. The Judicial Complex, in addition to relevant courts, also houses the offices of Tax Authorities no. 12 and 15 and the Agency of Stamp Duty Department" („Gazeta Żydowska" 1941, no. 36, p. 3). Despite these restrictions, a valuable food made its way to the ghetto through judicial corridors practically throughout their existence.

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