

# The Taste of Life in the Ghetto. The House Committee – 24 Leszno Street

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**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.**

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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.

The House Committee – 24 Leszno Street

One of the places where the coordination of illegal smuggling of food to the ghetto and the export of various items from the Jewish district onto the so-called Aryan side was taking place, was among others, the tenement house at 24 Leszno Street. In Jerzy Winkler's study on the struggle of the ghetto with economic slavery, in the part concerning the private market, we may read that in the house at 24 Leszno Street: “the <<headquarters>> for exporting various articles from the ghetto to the private Aryan market was located. Horse carts are stationed there, the owners of which have passes, for example, for transporting paper or rags. Underneath the paper parcels, various goods from notebooks to hairpins pass. Even the big company of the Jabłkowski brothers uses relations with the Jews because, after all, it pays off. Because it is characteristic for the Polish craftsman to prefer to deal with food smuggling as more profitable than to deal with small-scale manufacturing. It is rather the Polish member of the intelligentsia that is starting to deal with the <<folk industry>> in the scope possible to them, who is becoming a competitor to

the Jew. However, the Jew remains the mass supplier to the Polish merchant remains – the Jew” (“Archiwum Ringelbluma. Getto warszawskie” [The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto], vol. 5, Warsaw 2011, p. 364).

One of the many ghetto House Committees was also active in the tenement house at 24 Leszno Street. The task of this organisation, of a completely social character, was to support the building’s inhabitants in need, often people who had to move to the ghetto, losing the opportunity to work and most of their possessions. Thanks to the existence of the House Committees, formally associated under the aegis of Jewish Social Self-Help, it was possible to create and implement different forms of support implemented in a micro-scale: from feeding, to organising care for the children who – due to constraints imposed by the occupant – did not have the possibility of attending schools. Due to various needs, smaller, more specialised agendas, or departments were created as part of the House Committees, such as, for example, Ladies’ Circles or Youth Circles.

Among the documents collected by the collaborators of Emanuel Ringelblum, fragmentary records of the meetings of the meetings of the House Committee of the building at 24 Leszno Street, operating there even before the creation of the Jewish closed district, have been preserved. And so, we learn from them, among others, that already in July 1940, the House Committee adopted a resolution to appeal to the wealthier tenants, to declare that they would regularly invite Paweł Goldberg, who lived in the building, for dinner (“Archiwum Ringelbluma. Getto warszawskie”, part 2, v. 34, Warsaw 2016, p. 274). On the day of the official closing of the ghetto, that is on Saturday, 16 November, 1940, at the meeting of the House Committee of the tenement house at 24 Leszno Street, it was agreed that: an internal Sanitary Committee should be established to ensure the bathing of some of the house’s residents, regardless of the official commitments, the residents would be taxed for the Loan Fund and to take steps to create an own House Healthcare Fund, and in particular to turn to the internist, Dr Mieczysław Goldman, who lived in the building at Leszno Street, with a request for his support of the project with his knowledge and competences (“Archiwum Ringelbluma. Getto warszawskie”, part 2, v. 34, Warsaw 2016, p. 276). Three weeks later, at an extra meeting of the House Committee, which took place on 6 December, 1940, “in connection with the suspension of the issuance of dinners

by the folk kitchens” (“Archiwum Ringelbluma. Getto warszawskie”, part 2, v. 34, Warsaw 2016, p. 276) it was resolved that five families living in the building, i.e. a total of seventeen people, would receive basic food products from the warehouse. In total, it was eighteen kilograms of potatoes, less than a kilogram of kasha and just over half a kilo of lard (“Archiwum Ringelbluma. Getto warszawskie”, part 2, v. 34, Warsaw 2016, p. 279). On average, one person would receive about three hundred and fifty grams of potatoes, a little over one and a half decagrams of kasha and a little more than a decagram of lard a day. The calorific value of this “package” oscillated around a thousand kilocalories.

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

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