

The Taste of Life in the Ghetto. The Public Kitchen – 40 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 Public Kitchen – 40 Leszno Street

Luckily, the building located at 40 Leszno Street was not destroyed during Warsaw's first wartime bombardments. Preserved in a relatively good condition, it became a place where already in October 1939 a folk kitchen was located. The premises intended for the kitchen's activity were located on the first floor and it was – for its time – well-equipped: the place where soup was cooked was large and had a hall, which was entered from the outhouse using the kitchen stairs. The kitchen was linked by the hall with the front part where dinners were served.

This place was commonly referred to as the writers' kitchen, although other ghetto residents were also dining there, including Abraham Braxmeier, a sportsman from Karlsbad. Deported to Zbąszyń as a Polish citizen, he had been interned at Dachau earlier. Finally, he was transported to Warsaw and placed in the ghetto.

Rachel Auerbach, a pre-war writer and journalist, was the director of the kitchen from the very

beginning of its existence. On the one hand, she was supposed to manage this institution, and on the other hand, at the order of Emanuel Ringelblum, Warsaw ghetto's chronicler, to document its existence in literary form. Initially, she wanted to be able to feed all those in need, and even, if possible, additionally help those people who were especially praiseworthy. It was impossible, so – as she recalled after the war – she had to become more and more unbending towards requests and even attempts at extortion. However, this situation was particularly difficult for her since Auerbach felt that someone else's life might depend on her decision. She wrote with reproach about herself: "How many times I was unkind, tough, or angry because of my helplessness. For I knew all too well that it was impossible to allocate to everyone. How many times I had to withstand the storming of starvelings, in such or other form. The Directors of the Joint (i.e. the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which subsidised the kitchen) are unavailable, surrounded by janitors, sheltered in the depths of halls and vestibules, but the kitchen's director is also part of the Joint and it is easiest to take out on her one's anger, resentment over the world's injustice, pain, hopelessness, and the whole weight of the historical cataclysm in each individual variant" (Rachel Auerbach, "Pisma z getta warszawskiego" ["Letters from the Warsaw Ghetto"], Warsaw 2015, p. 220).

Rachel Auerbach also wrote about what was happening not only "in the front" but also in the back of her kitchen. She recalled that one day: "a bunch of children once sneaked into the kitchen hall and holed up in a dark corner in a strange silence. It turned out later that there was a basket with cabbage leaves there, and so I admired the healthy instinct of these kids. Just like young rabbits they seized and scoffed down, scoffed down, as fast as they could, before they would be driven away, they crunched with their teeth – they packed their bellies with slightly grubby and muddy vitamins" (Rachel Auerbach, "Pisma z getta warszawskiego" ["Letters from the Warsaw Ghetto"], Warsaw 2015, p. 223). Kitchen waste was perhaps the only available food for them at the time.

The kitchen at 40 Leszno Street was active without interruption practically throughout the entire period of the ghetto's existence. After the liquidation action, which ended in September 1942, it served another clientele, namely the employees of Walter Többens' manufacturing plants, which were located nearby.

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