

The taste of life in the ghetto

The taste of life in the ghetto. **Wacha – intersection of Tłomackie and Leszno streets**

We invite you to read Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych's article, the first 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 writes 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, however, 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.

Wacha – intersection of Tłomackie and Leszno streets

One of the entry gates which connected the ghetto with the „external world”, the so-called „wacha”, was located a short distance from the Great Synagogue at Tłomackie Street, the largest Warsaw Jewish temple, which opened in 1878, i.e. in the vicinity of today's Jewish Historical Institute. And although, the Jews in the ghetto did not generally have the right to leave it, the gates were unofficially one of the ways which could be used, with appropriate efforts, to smuggle people and goods – in both directions.

Organised smuggling through the gates was one of the ways to supply products to the residents of the capital's closed district. The Jews closed in the confines of the ghetto walls did not have the possibility to participate in regular trade in the same way they did before the war, and the occupation food rations did not cover the daily caloric intake, even in the minimal degree. Hastily created agencies, such as the Supply Section operating under the auspices of the Jewish Council, were to coordinate the transfer of food to the ghetto, but due to various reasons, they were unable to fulfil their function.

Furthermore, the Jews in the ghetto had neither the conditions nor the semi-products to make their own food to a degree that would suffice to feed all of its residents. Therefore, it is not surprising that it was necessary to obtain resources „from behind the wall”. It was possible because the walls surrounding the „closed Jewish quarter” were somewhat semi-permeable thanks to the flourishing corruption among the services that guarded the ghetto: German military policemen, the Polish Blue Police, and the Jewish Ghetto Police, which allowed for smuggling goods.

The most frequently smuggled product was of course food. Official food-ration coupons were far from enough, and buying additional food available in the ghetto was often beyond the financial capacity of its residents. The prices on the so-called Aryan side were relatively lower, and so, for many people it was practical to sell the goods they possessed or produced in ghetto workshops, or to exchange them for basic food products, which were cheaper but sometimes completely unavailable in the ghetto. However, after obtaining them outside the closed Jewish quarter, it was necessary to transport them through the wall.

Among the materials saved from the Warsaw Ghetto, there is a report of an anonymous man who had the opportunity to observe an action of transferring goods with his own eyes. Under 7 June 1942, he wrote: „At 1 pm, I went to 9 Przejazd Street. There is a wall along the street, separating the ghetto from the Aryan side of the city. Opposite house number 9, smugglers hacked away several bricks in a hole, creating something that resembled stairs, which made it easier for them to climb the wall and carry contraband from the other side of the ghetto. Many times, I have seen how young Polish women, probably from around Warsaw, and Polish smugglers handing each other milk churns and other articles over the wall at this very same spot. They usually took certain precautions, because while they were climbing the wall, their partners always looked out for approaching Polish or German policemen. This time, apparently, the watch failed. As I was approaching the gate of the house at 9 Przejazd Street, I saw a Polish boy, maybe twenty years old, climbing the wall up the hacked bricks and seemingly trying to get to the other side. He leaned out halfway over the wall and wanted to look around to check if he could safely cross it or if he needed to back away. The same moment, he was struck by a well-aimed shot and, in the blink of an eye, hit the ground, where he fluttered for a moment, and then

died. The shot came from a German military policeman guarding the exit of Tłomackie-Leszno Streets,,.

The scene described by a nameless witness is one of many tragic images seen at the gates of the Warsaw Ghetto. People who wanted to survive and were trying to fight the pervasive hunger were often met with such a sudden death.

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