

“We are excluded and separated from the world..”

As part of the celebration of the 80th anniversary of the closing of the Warsaw Ghetto borders, WGM and Next Stop History Janusz Kurtyka Educational Center of the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw organised a webinar for teachers. Here is an account of this seminar

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The 16th of November marks the 80th anniversary of the closure of the Warsaw Ghetto borders. In the historical perspective, 80 years is not much. From the perspective of an individual person – it is a lot, sometimes the person’s whole life. Once something has passed, it disappears from memory, details are lost, dates and facts are wrong.

But there are events that we must not forget, that we should not forget, even though we have not witnessed them. Such events include the tragic history of the Jewish community during World War II. In Warsaw, it began with the creation of the so-called “*closed Jewish district*”. Jews – defined not by their religion, but by their nationality, as specified in the so-called Nuremberg Laws, were forced to live there.

In Warsaw, it was approx. 350 thousand people; their number increased to 450 thousand after a year of the ghetto’s existence. Among them were women, men, and children. Orthodox followers of Judaism and a large group of non-religious Jews, as well as a small community of people following other religions. Shopkeepers, craftsmen, traders, artists, art collectors, scientists, doctors, lawyers, financiers, bankers. It is impossible to tell the story of each of them, but we can try. Such an attempt was made by the employees of WGM: Dr Martyna Grądzka-Rejak, Dr Jacek Konik, Dr Wiesława Młynarczyk, and Dr Halina Postek, who on 14 November took part in a

seminar for teachers and educators entitled "*We are excluded and separated from the world, banished from human society*", organised on the Zoom platform, in cooperation with the "Przystanek Historia" ("Next Stop: History") Educational Center of the Institute of National Remembrance.

Dr Grądzka-Rejak presented the history of women forced to live in the ghetto and showed how their situation differed from that of their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers. It was the woman's responsibility to ensure that the family functioned relatively normally: preparing meals, taking care of cleanliness, clothing. At the same time, the financial situation forced her to take up paid employment. If she was religious, she was obliged to fulfill all the requirements for a woman, sometimes even impossible to fulfill in the ghetto conditions, such as monthly visits to the mikvah. In extreme situations, she was exposed to the greatest danger. As weaker and less useful, she and her children became the first victims of German orders. This is proved by a terrifying statistic showing the ratio of the number of men to women in the ghetto after the so-called Grossaktion Warsaw. The problem of unwanted pregnancies, forced sexual services, rape, prostitution – these are the topics that await reliable research, all the more difficult since we have very few documents that can be helpful in such research.

Dr Jacek Konik told the stories of Jewish art collectors, forced inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto and their collections, some of which they took with them to the ghetto. Some of the works of art in their possession are only found several decades after the war, such as the painting "Portret czytającego mężczyzny" ("*Portrait of a Reading Man*") by Pieter de Grebber, belonging to the famous pre-war antiquarian Abe Gutnajer. He, his household members and those present in the apartment, the doctors called to a case management conference, Dr Pollak and prof. Raszeja, were shot by the Gestapo during an action organised to steal, among other things, this painting. The Mortkowicz and Sakiel families, also ghetto prisoners, handed over their antique shops and galleries to their Polish friends, who transferred the income generated in these establishments to the ghetto. Aleksander Enholc, Rafał Scherman, Julisz Klejman, Abe Gutnajer, Andrzej Rotwand, Natan Sakiel – these are only some of the names mentioned by Dr Konik.

The list of names presented by Dr Wiesława Młynarczyk, who talks about cultural life in the

Warsaw Ghetto, is much longer. Actors, singers, musicians, writers, painters, sculptors. Known and less known. Entrenched in the Jewish culture or assimilated to Polishness. Their fate was similar: poverty, hunger, performance of work that did not match their skills or provide the means of subsistence. Their lives also ended similarly – in Treblinka. Few managed to get out of the ghetto and survive the war. These were, for example, Władysław Szpilman, Wiera Gran, Jerzy Jurandot, Stefania Grodzieńska, Diana Blumenfeld. Władysław Szlengel, Marysia Ajzensztadt, Gela Seksztajn, Hersz Danielewicz, Izreale Sztern, Artur Gold, Szymon Pullman, Abraham Ostrzega and many, many others died.

The majority of Christians living in the ghetto – a minority of over 2 thousand people – did not manage to survive either. Their situation in the ghetto was best described by Piotr Matywiecki, who wrote that: *“for the Jewish community in the ghetto, they were what the Jews were to non-Jews in the world of racial prejudice.”* The history of the stay in the ghetto of *“neophytes”, “converted Jews”, “converts”* was presented by Dr Halina Postek. *“Foreign to this nation. Rejected by the crowd as a Christian,”* wrote Professor Ludwik Hirszfild, a bacteriologist, immunologist and discoverer of the laws of inheritance and blood groups, in the *“The Story of One Life”*. Professor Hirszfild was one of 219 people whose names were on the so-called Ronikier’s list. Presented to the Germans, it was supposed to exclude a group of Jewish Christians from the repressions imposed on Jews. Unfortunately, the promise made by the Germans turned out to be a trap, and all the listed converts, who rendered great service to Poland, found themselves in the ghetto in the winter of 1941, just like other Jewish-Christians. Greeted with wariness, they were not very much liked not only because of their renunciation of faith and tradition. They were accused of aversion to Jews, sometimes even of anti-Semitism; the privileges they enjoyed in the ghetto were often pointed out, people were jealous of the high positions they held in the ghetto administration. Their fate was the same as that of the rest of the Jewish community in the ghetto: Umschlagplatz and Treblinka. Only a few survived.

The seminar was rated very highly by the participants and was attended by 53 teachers and educators from all over Poland.

Dr Halina Postek, Head of the Education Dpt.

Photo: JHI