

The taste of life in the ghetto 4

The taste of life in the ghetto. Café Sztuka – Leszno 2

We invite you to read another article by Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych's 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 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 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.

Café Sztuka – Leszno 2

Leszno Street (today's Solidarności Alley, and after the war, up to 1991 – Gen. Karol Świerczewski Alley) was undoubtedly one of the busiest streets of the Warsaw Ghetto. It was also the location of many places that were important to its residents – offices, cultural institutions, as well as various venues, service and catering points. We have to remember that despite the difficult war conditions which materialised within the walls of the Jewish quarter in their harshest form, cultural life did not completely die down, but rather changed its character. The same as before the war, the favourite meeting places in the ghetto were cafés and restaurants. Their standard, and consequently the prices were of course varied, but the very presence of such places shows that despite the physical oppression in the prison – as the ghetto was sometimes, quite literally called – people yearned for spiritual freedom and cultural life, which consisted also of participation in various artistic events.

Before the war, at 2 Leszno Street, there was a famous Warsaw restaurant owned by Izaak Gertner. For a time, it also housed also a small „Era” cinema in the yard of the building. After the establishment of the ghetto, it became the location of one of the most famous ghetto cafés –

Sztuka, which offered its customers both a selection of dishes and an ambitious artistic programme. This is how Stanisław Różycki wrote about the context of the functioning of this venue, while still in the ghetto: „Gertner’s restaurant at Leszno was taken over by Sztuka, most of the cafés are located in offices, institutions or private apartments, but except for five or six of them, all venues are small, one- or two-room. The interior décor is quite pleasing almost in all of the cafés, and in Sztuka and L’Ourse or Arizona even at the level of pre-war cafés. [...] Here [i.e. in Sztuka], the one’s who call the tune are mechesi, educated bourgeoisie, ghetto’s high life, proud that they were rich also before the war. In Sztuka, their longings are set free. Ms. Czarnecka, the co-owner (christened, her husband works in the Community) proudly walks around the tables, examining if everything is all right, tending to her little herd. Ms. [...] hosts as if she is an ambassador’s wife at her own parties, although consumption costs eleven zloty. The waitresses are educated, from high society, appropriately incompetent and with appropriate chutzpah, they service the clients with bad grace and often get their bills wrong” (Stanisław Różycki: Study entitled „Kawiarnie” in: Archiwum Ringelbluma. Getto warszawskie, vol. 5, Warszawa 2011, p. 73)

The deficiencies mentioned by Stanisław Różycki were balanced out by an attractive entertainment programme and interesting artistic performances. In <>, you can meet famous Jewish performers such as Pola Braunówna, Diana Blumenfeld, Leonid Foksański, Marysia Ajzensztadt, nicknamed “the ghetto nightingale”, pianists Adolf Goldfeder and Władysław Szpilman or poet Władysław Szlengel, as well as an artist who was very well known already before the war – Dwojra Grynberg, performing under the name Wiera Gran. The latter was under no illusion that the offer of the café was available to everyone. After the war, she wrote: “Regular visitors <> were a small percentage of lucky people who could afford the luxury or those who denied themselves food to forget sit over a glass of coloured water for two hours and forget about the surrounding hell”. (Wiera Gran, Sztafeta oszczerców. Autobiografia śpiewaczki, Paryż no data, pp. 20-21).

The prices of dishes and drinks offered in the café, although not exorbitant, were still completely unattainable for the majority of people. The decision on whether to listen to music over a cup of coffee or buy bread for one’s family for the same price was, in fact, not that difficult.

Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych – cultural anthropologist, Hebraist, sociologist, museum adjunct in the Museum of Warsaw, researcher of Janusz Korczak's life and legacy. She cooperates with the Forum for Dialogue Foundation and the Center for Yiddish Culture. Author of texts on “the final matters” – the final journey of Korczak and his children, the final play of the pupils of the Jewish Orphan House, and the final notes in Korczak's diary.

Prepared by: Anna Kilian