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The taste of life in the ghetto. Children's kitchen – Leszno 11

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.

Children's kitchen – Leszno 11

When talking about the ad hoc feeding points for the starving residents of the Warsaw Ghetto, it is worth highlighting that there were also kitchens especially dedicated to children. In addition to their basic task, i.e. feeding the youngest ones, the establishments also had to fulfil additional childcare functions, including strictly educational activities. The children's kitchens that operated in the capital's closed quarter conducted educational or supplementary education activities, although, they were obviously irregular and not always conforming with the pre-war curriculum. People's kitchens gave Jewish children that had no access to systematic school education an opportunity to take part in general development classes organised especially with them in mind, even if only for a couple of hours a day.

In Janina Neudingowa's project – who was a pre-war psychologist employed by Centos (i.e. National Society for the Care of Orphans and Abandoned Children) – which concerned the children's kitchens, we can read that the education activities that accompanied meal distribution should be organised as efficiently as possible. Besides strictly hygienic matters, she proposed that the children who use the services of individual establishments should be divided

into smaller educational groups to maximise work efficiency, each one having specific, designated hours for consumption and learning. What is more, she suggested that the “kitchen educators” should make sure that the particular groups of children act as a unit and participate in the kitchen’s work. She also wrote that, in addition to learning and cleaning, the curriculum should include short talks about current topics (with a special focus on health-related issues), reading fragments of books adjusted to the group’s participants age and level, performances of children with acting abilities, as well as – additionally – performances by adult artists (Archiwum Ringelbluma. Kolekcja Hersza Wassera, vol. 14, Warszawa 2014, p. 190).

Neudingowa also proposed that the venues used by children’s kitchen, and stood empty outside the meal hours should be turned into day-care centres in the afternoons. She believed that: “Each consumer of a children’s kitchen must necessarily become the kitchen’s pupil, which means participating in one of the educational groups. In addition, some of the consumers, illiterate children in the first place, will be able to attend day-care centres, where they will receive systematic education” (Archiwum Ringelbluma. Kolekcja Hersza Wassera, vol. 14, Warszawa 2014, p. 190). She assumed that: “with good organisation, the educational work during meal times could cover around twenty thousand children, the day-care centre – around five thousand” (Archiwum Ringelbluma. Kolekcja Hersza Wassera, vol. 14, Warszawa 2014, p. 190). Unfortunately, she did not write anything about the schedule of such activities, and it is difficult to imagine that one establishment could service several thousand pupils at the same time. Moreover, it is not possible that she was talking about all children who used the ghetto’s kitchens and day-care centres. Because their number was much higher.

A special type of kitchens dedicated to the youngest residents of the ghetto were kitchens for infants. One of them was located at 11 Leszno Street and boasted older, pre-war origins, when it functioned as Mother and Child Care Station operating under the auspices of the Children’s Friends Society. After the war broke out, it did not suspend its activities, and before the establishment of the ghetto, it serviced even around four hundred people a day (Archiwum Ringelbluma. Żydowska Samopomoc Społeczna, vol. 27, Warszawa 2017, p. 275). In a report of November 1940, we read that there were nearly six hundred children under the care of all stations, who were receiving medical and nursing advice, medicines and food products,

including milk and medicinal mixtures. At the end of December 1941, the kitchen at 11 Leszno Street, bearing the order number 155, was taking care of nearly three hundred fifty ghetto infants.

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