

The Taste of Life in the Ghetto. “Adaś” Restaurant – 19, Leszno Street

The Taste of Life in the Ghetto. “Adaś” Restaurant – 19, Leszno Street

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.

May 21st, 2019

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.

“Adaś” Restaurant – 19, Leszno Street

Probably the most famous place at Leszno Street was “Sztuka” [“Art”] café, where Władysław Szpilman used to play, Wiera Gran would sing, and Władysław Szlengel and Leonid Fokszański recited their witty poems about the ghetto's reality, which were known as the “Living Diary.”

However, there were many more places of a similar character at Leszno Street. We can find out about how their work looked like in the eyes of the consumers from, among others the post-war memoirs of Janina Bauman who was staying in the ghetto as a teenager and who, without pinpointing which place she was speaking of, wrote: “This winter some shops appeared in the ghetto with goods quite luxurious for the local conditions, as well as cafés and restaurants. One day [...] Mum took Zosia and me to a restaurant at Leszno Street. I had never been to a restaurant before, so it was an interesting experience for me. Despite the bright day, the windows in the spacious room were thoroughly darkened. Discreet light was glowing from carbide lamps placed

here and there. The tables were covered with white tablecloths. The waiters were wearing dark uniforms. The pianist and violinist, deeply moved, were playing well-known Jewish melodies and Gypsy romances. Almost all of the seats at the tables were taken. [...] The menu offered various luxurious dishes as well as French wines and other excellent alcoholic drinks. The prices were hair-raising. If it were not for Zosia and me, Mum would undoubtedly get up from the table and leave the restaurant, but she did not want to disappoint us, so we stayed and ordered the cheapest possible dishes: chicken soup with noodles, cholent, and some blancmange with sour cherry juice. It was a real feast, our best meal for years. Although we had not been starving in the ghetto as yet, our home dinners were a lot more modest. Sighing heavily, Mum paid the bill and we went out of the restaurant filled up with blissful repletion" (Janina Bauman, "Zima o poranku" ["Winter in the Morning"], Krakow 2009, pp. 75-76.).

Janina Bauman's story could have probably appeared in other memoirs. However, for many people using the services of this type of place had only remained in the realm of dreams. This was because the restaurants, in fact, present, but still too expensive for the average inhabitants of the ghetto, were not often visited by them. Those who could dine there regularly most often came from the ghetto's class of the nouveau riche, including, for example, smugglers, or people having business relations with the so-called "Aryan side" or doing business with the Germans.

The window displays of the ghetto's restaurants would constantly attract hungry people who were left with nothing else but watching others eating. Stanisław Różycki, for example, wrote: "A swarm of beggars is lounging around at the gates of these Eldorados, licking their lips with their faces against the window display, waiting for the <<new lords>> to come out after dining, execrates and curses, begs and imposes itself. And they, gobbled, satisfied and amused, benefit fully from life, that is – goose meat, beefsteaks, omelettes, fish, wine, salads, cognac, cakes, and fruits." Stanisław Różycki, "Opracowanie pt. Ulica" ["Elaboration entitled 'The Street'"], in: "The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto", vol. 5, Warsaw 2001, p. 48).

The picture depicted by Różycki was also solidified to a certain extent in the form of propaganda scenes of a film which the Germans made in the ghetto. The actors were usually randomly chosen people, caught in the middle of the street and forced to take part in this gruesome

undertaking. Samuel Puterman recalled it in his diary: "The guests were supposed to eat a lot, voraciously, and wash down the food with alcohol. They were filming waiters, bustling around the tables, laden with trays, on which gourmet delicacies were piled up. [...] They photographed the general view of the crowded room, single ladies who were ordered to lift up their dresses high, [...] Jews eating sardines from the can with their fingers, Jews playing under the table with the bare calves of the female companions of the libation, Jews throwing half-eaten goose quarters under the table. The film reel did not show fainting women and the black and blue faces of people hit with a whip." Samuel Puterman, "The Diary", Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH) Archive, file reference no. 302/27, p. 68.).

Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych – cultural anthropologist, Hebraist, sociologist, in recent years curator at the Museum of Warsaw, researcher of Janusz Korczak's life and legacy. She cooperates with the Forum for Dialogue Foundation and the Centre for Yiddish Culture. She is the authoress of texts on "the final matters" – the final journey of Korczak and his charges, the final performance given by the wards of the Jewish Orphanage, and the final notes in Korczak's Diary.

Prepared by: Anna Kilian