

# “The Wall/Walls” Internet Project

**The two-part Internet project entitled “The Wall/Walls” consists of a collection of essays devoted to the history and symbolism of the Warsaw Ghetto Wall and a film based on a text by Icchak Berensztein. The project curated by Rafał Kosewski from the Exhibitions Department of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum starts on 16 November**

**16 November 2020**

“The Wall/Walls” project – <https://mur.1943.pl/en/home-page/> – was conceived to commemorate the traumatic events that changed the face of Warsaw forever. 80 years ago, on 16 November 1940, the Jews living in the city were imprisoned. On that day, the ghetto became a fact, although official decisions had already been made on 2 October. The Jewish community was isolated from the rest of the city, closed behind a wall which was three-metre-high and ca. 16 km long. It constituted a tangible physical boundary marking another circle of hell in the topography of the occupied city. The collection of essays entitled “Mur” (“The Wall”) is devoted to the history of the creation of the Warsaw Ghetto, of people moving into its boundaries, and the symbolic dimension of the walls surrounding it. The authors share their personal reflections on a variety of aspects of the narration and memory of the Holocaust present in the culture. The story of the Shoah should encourage everyone (regardless of their nationality) to reflection, as well as to concern for the proper commemoration of the victims of Nazi crimes.

A film entitled “Ściany” (Eng. “Walls”) constitutes the second part of the project, and is based on a poem by Icchak Berensztein (? – 1942) with the same title. Little is known about the author of the text. He was a literary critic, essayist and psychologist. He cooperated with the underground organisation Oneg Shabbat which under the leadership of Emanuel Ringelblum was collecting materials and building an archive to document the everyday life of the Warsaw Ghetto. It is owing to this cooperation that three of his essays were preserved: “Głód” – 1941 (“Famine” – 1941),

“Na ruinach” (“On the ruins”), “Rozmowy o literaturze w ciężkich czasach” (“Talking about literature in the times of hardship”) and “Sześć poematów prozą” (“Six poems in prose”), among which the said poem “Ściany” can be found.

*“The genius of Icchak Berensztein’s essays”* – as Jacek Leociak, a literary scholar and researcher of the theme of the Shoah writes – *“consists in a close relationship between the present and eternity, the material detail and the universal sense, the concrete event and the exemplum, secular history and sacred history”*<sup>[i]</sup>. The poem “Ściany” essentially presents two overlapping realities. On the one hand, it is a record of the inner state of a particular individual, struggling with the claustrophobic universe of the Ghetto – a dying world suffering from famine and diseases. On the other hand, the closing of the Jews behind the wall is interpreted as another exile from paradise that in the awareness of the author assumes the shape of the Vistula River nature.

A sense of isolation, rejection and existential deficiency is pervasive in the text and does not refer solely to the physical barriers. Apart from the tangible structure – a brick wall – there are also other, *“low walls”*. The obstacles formed in human hearts and minds are much more persistent and more difficult to overcome. In the film, Berensztein’s words spoken by Jakub Kotyński manage to capture the essence of the thought of the author who, aware of the inevitability of his fate, wrote: *“We understand and accept everything, without protest and without resignation”*<sup>[ii]</sup>. The realisation of the unique status of one’s own identity shaped by Jewish tradition and modern humanism, seems the only form of consolation and alleviation of suffering. Berensztein concludes his poem with the sentence *“Our separation is a nest of mercy, a high nest, thrown somewhere in the heavenly space”*<sup>[iii]</sup>.

The film “Ściany” was shot in the interiors of the former Bersohn and Bauman Children’s Hospital. The building which in the nearest future will be turned to the seat of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum, is a place that is unique on the map of Warsaw. It was one of the most advanced health centres in Poland where both Jewish and Christian children were treated. After the formation of the Ghetto, the hospital was inside its walls. Due to the constantly increasing number of sick children and children in need, branches of the hospital were established. Since

1942, the doctors working at the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital conducted research on the hunger disease. The hospital that witnessed the blossoming and annihilation of the Jewish community in Warsaw is a world in its own right – functioning somewhere between the historical concrete and the space of still unsettled emotions. Its walls keep the memory of people doomed to extermination and a city that disappeared irretrievably.

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[i] J. Leociak, *Słabość i siła w doświadczeniu religijnym czasów Zagłady* (*Weakness and strength in the religious experience of the time of the Shoah*), „Konteksty” 2019 No. 3, p. 97.

[ii] I. Berensztein, *Ściany, Archiwum Ringelbluma* (*The Walls, The Ringelblum Archive*), vol. 26, as compiled by A. Żółkiewska and M. Tuszewicki, translation from Yiddish by A. Kondrat, Warsaw 2017, p. 492.

[iii] *ibid.*, p. 492.

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