

“To show our heroes in a dignified manner”

The Warsaw Ghetto Museum invites visitors to the fifth photo exhibition opened in a virtual space on 15 April. The latest exhibition was prepared on the 77th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising outbreak and the 80th anniversary of closing its borders – 16th November 2020

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More than 70 archival photographs with historical commentaries, presented on 20 boards, show the normal day in the life of the Warsaw Ghetto. The displayed reproductions of photographs come from the collections of the most important institutions conducting research on Holocaust, including the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the Jewish Historical Institute as well as the German Bundesarchiv and Austrian National Library.

The exhibition is dominated by portraits and long shots depicting everyday crowds in the streets and markets of the Ghetto. It shows people organising self-aid, creating art, working and praying. According to Rafał Kosewski – the curator of the exhibition – focusing on people’s faces, sometimes smiling, showing hope for survival, and sometimes pensive, as if they were predicting the looming death, haggard, starved and desperate, enables the contemporary audience to establish deep, empathic contact with the Warsaw Jews, who constituted one-third of the capital’s population only in September of 1939.

– We avoid drastic images in order to show our heroes in a dignified way. We see them not only as victims, but, first and foremost, people who – despite the extreme conditions – are trying to maintain the last remains of normal life – the curator says.

A large part of the presented photographs was taken by the German soldiers of Propaganda-Kompanie 689 – Albert Cusian, Erhard Knoblock and Joe Heydecker. Despite the fact that the vast majority of these photographs were taken for the purposes of propaganda, they also document the misery of the Ghetto. Perhaps some of their authors attempted to express their sympathy for the Jewish people through them, even though the sympathy was mixed with plain curiosity of the exotic, from their perspective, world of the confined quarter.

In this context, special attention should be paid to the photographs taken by Willy George, a German radio reporter who went into the Ghetto in the summer of 1942 and secretly photographed its residents, using up four rolls of film. The exhibition also present photographs taken by Poles, among others Mieczysław Bil-Bilażewski, as well as photographs from the collections of Janek Kostański, who was a teenage smuggler during the occupation. He told the story of his fortunes in a book entitled “*Szmuglerzy*” (“*Smugglers*”) which he wrote together with Henryk Grynberg.

In addition to the scenes from everyday Ghetto life, the “*Every third of us*” exhibition presents major historical events, such as, for example the so-called Grossaktion Warsaw and the Uprising of 1943. It also discusses various examples of social and economic life, from the organisation of home committees or charitable institutions to smuggling – an important element of the Ghetto economy.

The exhibition was prepared in an outdoor form. However, before the stands with boards are taken to Grzybowski Square, as the authors planned, we are sharing it online at the websites of our institution, as part of the #WarsawGhettoMuseumOnline action.

Miłka Skalska, press spokeswoman

Photo: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Rafael Scharf