

# Warsaw 1941

From the day the ghetto is sealed, the situation of the Jews imprisoned there changes completely in all areas of life. Until then, the Jews acquired the food [that they] needed, thanks both to their varied and multi-branched connections with the Christian populace and by shopping on the black market, where all the valuables and goods that were left over from the fires and robberies of the SS men were sold - all this was cut off in one day. The Jews are locked up inside the ghetto, under horrendous living conditions, and bread cannot be bought even for the price of gold. The German commissar<sup>1</sup> of the Warsaw municipality limits the daily bread rations to – *80 grams a day!* The Jews, who go outside the ghetto to work for the Germans, also have no possibility of bringing food [back] with them. The gendarmes search every Jew returning from work very thoroughly. All products - even frozen potatoes - are seized and the owner receives a helping of cruel blows.

In the first week, the situation in the ghetto is desperate. Many come up with strange contrivances with the purpose of hindering the authorities - to no avail. The majority of the population consume their monthly bread rations in just a few days. Hunger spreads throughout the city.

Over the course of time, a new occupation develops in the ghetto, which is essential for the survival of the people - smuggling foodstuffs. There is not a single family in the ghetto in which one of its members does not smuggle. The occupation develops and reaches colossal dimensions. The Jews from the “work squads” no longer return on foot, but in freight trucks, in which great quantities of provisions are hidden. The drunken German driver does not stop at the ghetto’s gate, but on one of the side-streets inside it, where the cargo is unloaded. Smuggling is also conducted from the city’s trams, some of which pass through the ghetto streets. Usually, one or two people jump off the tram, holding a parcel - the Polish policemen, who travel on all the trams, jump after him. A moment later, sacks of grain etc. are thrown off the tram. Special porters, waiting for them in the street, vanish in the blink of an eye into the gates of the houses and the alleyways. In particular, the group of smugglers from ul. Franciszkańska, which was called “Molina”, excelled in this. They even had electrical flour mills at their disposal, in which they ground the grain.

On ul. Kozia, they smuggled milk in a unique fashion. A Christian milkman lived in a house on the “Aryan side” of the wall. Every day, at set hours, the milkman lowered a long rubber hosepipe down from his window, through which the milk flowed. Hundreds of mothers gathered every morning in this alley, waiting for a drop of milk for their children. The shouting reached the heart of the heavens. As a result, the Aryan citizens, whose delicate ears could not bear the sound of the quarrels and fights, reported the matter to the German authorities. Silence was cast upon ul. Kozia - that day, the Jewish mothers waited in vain for the skimmed milk for which they paid 13 *złoty* per litre. The window was not opened.

Meat was smuggled in various ways. The postal trucks which, every morning, passed along ul. Smocza, for instance, also served this purpose. They frequently stopped - due to a mechanical breakdown, as it were - at one of the gates and unloaded live cows and all sorts of livestock. The *shechitah* [ritual slaughter] and all the arrangements connected with it were a trifle. There was no lack of unemployed slaughtermen and deserted warehouses within the ghetto.

Above everything else, they smuggled, into the ghetto, the primary necessity - bread. Over the course of time, the smuggling was perfected to such an extent, that the price of bread in the ghetto

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Heinz Auerswald (1908-1970).]

was not much higher than that of the bread sold on Christian Warsaw's black market. Instead of 250 *grosz* for one kilogram, in the ghetto, they paid 280-290 *grosz*.

The main way through which the smuggled goods passed was through the illegal entrances to the ghetto - the so-called "holes".

When the ghetto was being set up, they encountered many difficulties in completely the separation of the Jewish and Polish districts. In these places, three-metre-high walls were built and topped with barbed wire, by orders of the Germans. In several locations - on ul. Przebieg or ul. Grzybowska, for example - special bridges were built to connect between the Jewish buildings. But the hunger which was spreading in the ghetto knew no bounds. In every place, where the houses of Jews and Poles stood next to each other, the "holes" were breached in the attics or cellars. Through these, people went back and forth from one side to the other. The hard economic situation on the "Aryan side" creates a favourable ambience for the smuggling profession among the Poles also. Nobody heeds the orders of the authorities, who threaten with prison camps and even harsher penalties. The Polish owners of the dwellings, on the other side of the "hole", are regularly involved in smuggling or take "customs" for every item passing through their territory - be it a person or a sack of potatoes. People went to and fro, day and night, with sacks of flour, peas, groats, different packages, etc. The Polish watchmen also put up ladders next to the walls, by which to raise and lower the merchandise. In the ghetto, people began envying the fortunate ones who were lucky enough to live in houses on the boundary. It was mainly in the hours of the night that there was much movement. During the day, the "racial gates" were mostly left closed. Only in special cases, when people entered or exited, were the "holes" opened even in the daytime - for large sums of money, of course.

At the end of 1941, a crisis broke out in the smuggling profession. Smuggling encompassed many thousands [of people], the goods arrived in the ghetto on a nightly basis, but there was no one who could afford to buy them. The vast majority of the ghetto's population lived in unimaginable poverty. All the jewellery, silverware, valuable books, kitchenware [and] clothes had been sold. Buyers were scarce [and] the price of the goods dropped. In the competition between the smugglers, the owners of the "lodges" [?] and "holes" came out on top. They had capital and special means - acquaintances or hired people on the "Aryan side", who acquired the products for the lowest price - [and] the elaborate organisation of the smuggling was in their hands. As a result of the crisis, the multitude of small middlemen was driven away - the monopoly on smuggling was left in the hands of a few "chosen ones", who lived contentedly and sometimes even in luxury amongst the broad masses of hundreds of thousands, festering in indigence and hunger.

Bit by bit, the leading groups of smugglers merge with the Jewish Council [viz. *Judenrat*] and the police.

With the establishment of the ghetto, the Germans appoint the engineer [Adam] Czerniaków as leader of the Jewish Council (*Judenrat*). At the disposal of the Council stands the Jewish Police (OD - *Ordnungsdienst* [Order Service]), which numbers 6,000 individuals. The entire Jewish Council - as well as all its departments - is comprised exclusively of Czerniaków's relatives and acquaintances. Along the same lines, only with even greater corruption, the OD is established. The position of simple trainee in the police force, at first, cost 5,000 *złoty*, but quickly rose higher and higher. After a while, the organisation is complete - the Council and the police constitute a homogenous and "select" circle.

The Council is an instrument of the Germans. Its employment bureaus select the Jews who are required to go out periodically to forced labour for the Germans, as well as those who are sent to

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: גלילות in the original Hebrew; perhaps ref. to hiding places where people and goods were hidden.]

“labour camps” (from which, *even then*, 13% did not return!). The Council also arranges the infamous “work squads”. And this is what happened - opulent Jews, wishing to avoid the penalty of forced labour, paid poor hired hands for the days which they worked in their place. As time passes, the Council concentrates this matter into its own hands. It organises “work squads” from among the starving population. The Council paid each labourer in the work squad a wage of 320 *grosz* a day (together with the pittance the Germans paid, the salary reached 5 *złoty*), for which it took, from those with means, from 8 to 20 *złoty* in exchange for the work done in their place!

Thanks to their close ties with the Germans, over the course of time, the police force comes to control the smuggling of foodstuffs. The OD men frequently come and go from the ghetto. They are not searched by the Germans and they carry the task out with ease. Over the course of time, smuggling becomes a semi-legal occupation, in which people engage in broad daylight. The movement in the hidden “holes”, in the darkness of night, ceases. The battalion of German police in Warsaw was already eaten through and through with bribery. Loaded carts and trucks passed through the ghetto’s main entrances, in front of the eyes of the Germans, on a daily basis. Things reached such a state that, when the Chief Inspector of the German Police went out on patrol, telephones rang in all the police positions that were next to the gates - “*Desist!*” Many German policemen, and especially high-ranking officers, became very wealthy. Many of them fashioned themselves coats embroidered with precious stones and English and American banknotes.

The Jewish OD officers also lived in opulence while, every single day, death reaped its harvest in the ghetto, with the thousands who succumbed to hunger and epidemics - and this mortality, too, became not a small source of income for them.

At the time, the cemetery was, alongside the smuggling affairs, a second centre of the Council’s activity. Next to the Council’s offices, on ul. Grzybowska 26, the whole street was blackened by the many signs of the different *Chevra Kadisha* societies. The famous Pinkert<sup>3</sup>, of course, was king. In order to have the corpse taken from the house out of “turn”, for which one had to wait 2-3 weeks, the family paid huge sums. The case was the same for an individual tomb (they had been burying people in mass graves for quite some time already and even these were in the ground with old graves that had been reopened). After a while, the old cemetery was too small for the thousands and tens of thousands of new arrivals. The Germans very graciously granted the Council’s request and put, at their disposal, a plot of land adjacent to the cemetery - which also quickly filled up.

Warsaw Jewry was festering with hunger, plagues and the backbreaking forced labour.

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<sup>3</sup> [TN: Owner of a major funeral parlour.]