How did the official provisioning of the Quarter stand in the meantime? In the “Period of Normalization”, the population of the ghetto received half a kilogram of bread per week on their ration cards. There was no distribution whatsoever of any meats or fats. There were irregular distributions of sugar with never more than a hundred grams per person per month. For about two years, there were a few occasions when each of the inhabitants received an egg. From the middle of 1941 on, every four persons received a kilogram of “honey” produced in the Quarter. In the beginning this was made from molasses, but later it was partly made from transforming potato starch into sugar. Approximately once a month a quarter of a kilogram of marmalade was apportioned to each person. And this was everything, if we did not count the sporadic distribution of salt from preserved beetroot, sauerkraut, and other items in the summertime, probably from supplies that could not be sold elsewhere.

Obviously, people fed exclusively on rationed provisions would die in a short time. Popular kitchens had to be organized to assist tens of thousands of starving people, providing a daily plate of soup and a quantity of black coffee sweetened with saccharine. The soup, was a watery mixture of turnips and carrots or preserved beetroot, with a potato in exceptional cases. Sometimes a little rye spaghetti floated in it. An eye of fat was an unusual rarity. In the summer of 1941, the Jewish Council obtained a considerable supply of oats so that the popular kitchens were able to prepare porridge to supplement the people’s diet for several months. Through such supplementary provisions, each human body received a few hundred calories. This achievement was the result of the strenuous efforts of the community in the Jewish Quarter as well as those of the Jewish administrative and welfare organizations in order to

* The “Period of Normalization” was from the time when life in the ghetto became routinized until the big deportation action in the summer of 1942.
diminish cases of death by starvation. Families who still had some means
gave supplementary food to the children of refugees. House committees
organized collections of money, food and clothing.

All this did not help much. Refugees in the centers died from hunger like flies.
The worst applied to the children; in May and June of 1941, twenty-five
percent of the children in orphanages died. Only the more active persons
could defend themselves from death, but the majority of those in the refugee
centers lingered in the utmost apathy. They lay for days on their beds of straw
yearning for death to liberate them. Relatively few still continued to fight. They
would go out to beg but only the most capable specialists succeeded, and in
exceptional cases, managed to leave the center and its entanglements to
seek some occupation. The Jewish Council and Self-Help Institutions were
confronted with an insurmountable, titanic undertaking. Everything conspired
against this mass of people locked within the narrow perimeter of walls,
receiving help and support from nowhere while all external elements contrived
to throw logs under their feet.

I am very critically disposed toward the “top” Jewish officials. In the conditions
reported here it is not difficult to drape oneself in a Cato robe and to point out
the faults in people who found themselves face to face with insoluble tasks.
Even if they had been super-humans and super-organizers and had
succeeded in averting the dangers that entrapped the population, the Nazi
hangmen would have destroyed the organization that they created just as they
had done at every opportunity, their aim being obviously the total
extermination of the Jewish Community, a task for which those omnipotent
conquerors of Western Europe did not lack means.

The Jewish population had two choices: to engage in a heroic fight
irrespective of the outcome and without any chance for even partial success,
or to engage in a terrible race with time, a race which seemed to give some
hope of survival. The kind of heroism required by the first choice nobody in the
whole world would attempt as long as one spark of hope existed that they
could last out. The overwhelming majority was overcome with an immense
desire not so much to endure to the end of the war as to see with their own
eyes the Nazis collapse. The community as a whole ardently and fanatically
believed that this would happen though no logic could justify such a belief. It is an innate characteristic of the human mind that historical events are measured by the time span of a human life, a fact that only exceptional leaders are able to transcend. Hence, the belief in spring the war will end in summer, and in summer that fall will bring the desired liberation, and in autumn that the winter frost will be the salutary factor. Therefore, this community, whose pre-war condition had compelled them to constant compromises and deprivations, persisted in their will to outlive this trial. Under such circumstances, excessively selfish instincts could develop. It was difficult to believe that any of the mass of beggars and destitutes had any chance for survival. Perhaps, if people with the German mentality and arbitrariness had been in our situation, the masses of people without possibility of survival would have been left a prey of their own destiny, while here in the ghetto the Jewish Community was committed to keeping these dying crowds alive with the means that could have supported the population that remained in better condition. At sea, when a ship is wrecked and the life-saving boats cannot accommodate all the survivors, the ship-wrecked persons in the sea who are trying to get into boats already full to capacity are struck on the head with oars so that they might drown more quickly. Criminal law justifies such action. The ghetto did not take advantage of such an absolution.

In the matter of providing assistance to the more unfortunate, instances of mismanagement or even criminal offences occurred while procrastination, carelessness, and absurdity were not uncommon. The administration of the ghetto did not begrudge the material means to provide aid and rescue, nor did they spare their time, effort, or nerves, and in no way could be accused of a lack of compassion toward the legion of the unfortunate. However, in my opinion, the administration chose the worst economic principle in that enormous concentration camp, by attempting to practice classical economic laissez faire. Worst of all was their policy toward the occupying power, a policy which was commendable for its heroism and sacrifice, but which did not only accomplish anything in the face of the Nazi mentality, but on the contrary, fortified in the minds of the S.S. men the conviction that the population of the ghetto was a herd of sheep which could be slaughtered without fear of
reaction or revenge. The policy practiced by the Jewish Council in Warsaw morally disarmed the Jewish population of the ghetto instead of mobilizing them. This was the historic blunder of the Council.