

Josef Zelkowicz on the Cold in the Lodz Ghetto

The Lodz ghetto was officially sealed on May 1, 1940. The brutal impoverishment of the ghetto inhabitants began that summer. Very few people were working, and most Jews no longer had a source of livelihood. Although the effects of starvation were being felt, people nonetheless had the strength to protest and demonstrate. In August and September 1940, demonstrations erupted against Rumkowski and his policies. The demonstrators demanded jobs and a more equitable distribution of food. To placate the angry ghetto residents, Rumkowski reorganized the welfare system. On September 20, 1940, he issued Notice 123, proclaiming monthly support for a hundred thousand ghetto inhabitants. That month, the German authorities approved a loan of three million Reichsmarks for the ghetto, making it possible to activate the support system. Many ghetto inmates applied for relief, including some who were not indigent. To stanch the corruption, Rumkowski sent inspectors to visit the applicants' homes. Among these inspectors were Ryva Bramson and the author Joseph Zelkowicz. The vignette that follows conveys Zelkowicz's impressions of what he observed in his visits to the ghetto dwellings.

...It is not the Jewish month of Elul, when prayers for forgiveness are recited, that is making the Jews tremble in the ghetto today. The ghetto Jews are already so indifferent to and benumbed by the magnitude of their woes that no decree can surprise them. If they are trembling and freezing from cold today, the reason should be sought in the rain – not the rain that falls on their heads from above but the rain that penetrates from below, through their torn shoes, to their hearts . . .

A rainy day in late summer reminds us that autumn is coming. It heralds the approach of that bitter enemy, winter, who always marches through the ghetto arm-in-arm with his two best friends, the two executioners – starvation and

cold. Not even one apartment do they overlook without hauling away at least one victim . . .

...The winter of the year 1940 pierced the hearts of the Jews as rust works its way into old iron. The winter of 1940 cast the Jews' hearts into such a deep freeze that no sun could thaw them. Frozen hearts like those stab as they pound, every beat like the sting of a needle, every breath like another degree of chill. When rain falls in the ghetto on a summer day, the ghetto becomes a marsh. You sink into it until it inundates your heart and mires you with your hands raised above your head. You shout with the last of your strength, but no one extends his hand to help pull you out. There is no one to save you.

Your comrades in affliction, the ghetto inhabitants, may wish to extricate you from the morass but are wallowing in it too. They stand there, all of them, hands above their heads, pleading. They, too, scream for help with their last strength. However, instead of help, the rain sprinkles foul, turgid water into their gaping, screaming mouths.

This water, forcibly sprayed into your mouth, is called "soup" in the ghetto. Those who have the strength stay outside a little longer; pampered and delicate souls suffocate and sink in the waves.

Source: Josef Zelkowicz, *In Those Terrible Days. Notes from the Lodz Ghetto*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2002, pp. 121-122.