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.

...Grave crimes were committed in the ghetto. The gravest of them was the transformation of people who had worked for decades to maintain their culture and ways, the fruits of millennia of effort, into predatory beasts after half a year of life under inhuman conditions. Overnight they were stripped of every sense of morality and shame. Ghetto inhabitants pilfered and stole at every opportunity, whether they needed the booty or not. Some rummaged in the trash like pigs for leftovers, which they ate then and there. Some starved to death, but others, exploiting the opportunities available to them, stole, pilfered, gorged themselves, and drank themselves silly.1

1The author uses the imagery of the “wayward and defiant son” (Deuteronomt 21) who, under Torah law, is to be put to death.
They stole from the community chest, of all places. They stole from the stocks of food for which people had paid in toil, blood and sweat – from the food warehouses that were supposed to feed, equally, all the inmates of this concentration camp that they call a ghetto.

On the one hand, people hitched themselves to carts like wretched horses and hauled trash and feces, standing alongside the carts that stank for miles around, fourteen or sixteen hours a day, to earn a few miserable pfennigs that would not even suffice for a satisfying dinner at the end of a day of difficult, bone-breaking labor. On the other hand, people who were given lofty, cushy jobs with the kehilla stalked about in the ghetto, went for days without removing their hands from their pockets, and had one task only: to find ways to steal so that it would not be too obvious.

Major felonies were committed in the ghetto, where accepted human rules did not apply. The law that dominated the ghetto was that of the jungle, the law of might-makes-right. The strong toppled the weak into an abyss and kept themselves on solid ground by lopping off others’ heads.

Obviously, then, these sinners had to be stamped out, even at the price of questionable methods, even in a summary justice court. Furthermore, as we know, things are no different among the Jews than among the Gentiles . . .