

From the Diary of Josef Zelkowicz on Taking Death for Granted 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.

...These bleak, black lives have unbelievable strength: as long as people breathe, as long as they have not closed their eyes, as long as their senses function, they surmount the tragedies and strive to maintain their wretched lives with the hope that "maybe things will improve..." Maybe, against all odds, they will find a way to hold on and remain human.

Rumors have it that a carpentry workshop will be housed in the former hospital building... People take this news with near composure. Only yesterday, a brother or sister who had been hospitalized there was thrown out of his or her bed, alive. Today you'll be posted there to work in order to keep yourself and your tortured body alive as long as this remains possible... Rumors have it that a distribution of potatoes will take place; with this news,

the mob seems to be somewhat calmer. Here someone still sighs, there someone groans. At the same time, they thank the Creator of the Universe for the good news about the potatoes . . . Only in the ghetto, where death is taken for granted more than life, is such an equanimity possible. No one knows, no one understands the forces at work that keep people alive, but everyone sees how people die. Death in the ghetto is a daily event that surprises and frightens no one. If one lives, he does so for a moment that will eventually expire – if not today, then tomorrow.

However, as long as a ghetto inhabitant lives, he wants at least once, if only for the last time, to experience the sense of satiation, to gorge himself. Afterwards, whatever will be, will be . . . So, whenever there is talk about handing out potatoes, everything that has happened till now is shunted aside. People entertain expectations of an official announcement phrased in clear language and in black-and-white letters, with no need for guesswork. Yes, potatoes will be handed out. Is it true, or have uninvited optimists spread this rumor to ease the pervasive suffering and bring good news to those whose ailing loved ones have become scapegoats...? The notice has appeared, in black lettering against a yellow background. Yes, potatoes will be given out; it's a fact. Starting tomorrow, Friday, September 4, the population will be given another five to eight kilograms of potatoes per capita.

The crowd is elated: They will be given hundred and fifty grams of potatoes per day more than last month . . . They are content but . . .not calm. Something is still hanging in the air. The air remains explosively charged and the crowd is apprehensive. Still, the people cannot but wish each other: may we be privileged to eat these potatoes while we are still alive.

Source: Josef Zelkowitz, *In Those Terrible Days. Notes from the Lodz Ghetto*, Yad Vashem 2002, pp. 259-260.