

From the Diary of Josef Zelkowicz on Hunger 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.

...However constricted people's throats are, and however hardened their hearts, their stomachs demand their due. Hunger is a merciless beast, especially in the ghetto. It forces you to be forever alert and vigilant.

There can be no greater source of sorrow and agony in a family than the death of one of its members. Nevertheless, when somebody dies at home, as calamitous as this is, the first response of most ghetto inhabitants is to hastily remove the food rations that remain on the deceased's ration card. If the rations will not be distributed until the next day, it doesn't matter; the deceased will wait until then, or until the day after, or even three days, or more. One postpones the announcement of the death and holds onto the deceased's ration card, with its still-redeemable coupon. This is done not because the emotion of sorrow has expired – although it may have, to some

extent – but because the motivating force of a merciless hunger impels you to be forever vigilant, sly and calculating, and to milk even the worst tragedy for all its worth.

All the resorts are closed, all the offices locked. Only the distribution points, where one may buy potatoes at eight kilograms per capita, were ordered to open their gates. They are not working efficiently; they limp along. Who among the staff members has the presence of mind, the strength and the nerves to go about his daily work today? Hundreds, thousands of people besiege the distribution points, ignoring the Damocles sword that is descending slowly over the heads of their children, parents, and their ailing. They live in dread of the beast – starvation – and above all must ensure that they have potatoes. Those who already paid for their potatoes yesterday, or the day before, storm the vegetable trays to grab them while they can. They want to eat before they are deported. For once, maybe for the last time, they may eat to satiation...!

Source: Josef Zelkowitz, *In Those Terrible Days. Notes from the Lodz Ghetto*, Yad Vashem 2002, pp. 299-300.