

## Cleanliness

Sara Selver-Urbach describes her home before the war:

*My father was employed in a big commercial firm, my mother was a housewife. We lived in one large room and a kitchen. Our home was filled with light and always sparkingly clean. It seemed to be constantly smiling. Our kitchen was oblong. Its white furniture and shiny red floor lent it a pleasant, holiday mood.*

Sara Selver-Urbach, *Through the Window of my Home*,  
Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1986, p. 14.

Why do you think that the cleanliness and order in her home from before the war are so dominant in Sara's memory?

### Discussion:

- What difficulties did mothers who tried to keep their homes and family clean in the ghetto encounter?
- How did they deal with these difficulties?

*[...] The housewives are not at fault for the filth in the ghetto apartments. It's the fault of the walls, which keep crying and wetting the floor with plaster tears [...] it is not the housewives' indolence that makes the ghetto inhabitants' sheets and linens so grimy. The conditions forced on them are to blame: there is no fuel to heat the water for laundering the linens, there is no soap, and – this is the main thing – after hours of queuing and days of fasting, people no longer have the strength to squat behind the bucket and scrub laundry in cold water without soap.*

Josef Zelkowicz, *In those Terrible Days*,  
Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2002, p. 106-107 (edited by Michal Unger).

- Besides the physical difficulties, what other difficulties did the mothers face?
- Read Esther Dublin's testimony again. Why did her situation worsen?
- Some mothers insisted on trying to maintain a certain level of cleanliness, despite the difficulty. What motivated them?

*We had no hot water for our laundry, nor fuel to boil it. My hands were not skilled in that chore and the things I washed came out grey and still soiled. With time, we started to itch. To our shame, mother found lice in the seams of our clothes. An embarrassing situation ensued, especially when a strong urge to scratch would seize us in the company of strangers and we had to curb that shameful urge. How to get rid of this affliction? Because of the cold, we could neither wash our bodies properly nor thoroughly launder our clothes. Our room was very damp, the corners actually wet so that, when the frost first set in, the water-drops would turn into glistening icicles.*

Sara Selver-Urbach, *Through the Window of my Home*,  
Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1986, p. 67.

*In the ghetto, Mother proved to be extremely resourceful. Mother, whom I had never seen in the kitchen before the war, who never cleaned, did laundry, polished or washed dishes with her own hands, in the ghetto fought like a tiger to keep our apartment clean. We still had the large, heavy brush that Michia [the servant who had worked in our home before the war] had sometimes used to polish the parquet floors. She even had to polish the floor under the rug! In the ghetto, we no longer had any rugs, but Mother, with Father's help, continued to*



⇒ *meticulously polish the floor...*

*Mother once asked me to look on the Polish side<sup>3</sup> for wax and a little soap to help us keep ourselves clean and healthy. She once asked me to go to a pharmacy and buy a preparation against head lice. “Mother, who has lice?” I asked. “You do, Hanke, and so does Maricia and we have to get rid of them.” But I was too embarrassed to do so... Mother found a can of kerosene somewhere in the ghetto and smeared Maricia’s hair with kerosene with its terrible smell...*

Hanna Avrutzki, *A Star among Crosses*, Kinneret, Tel Aviv 1995, pp. 96-97.

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3. Hanna Avrutzki smuggled food into the ghetto.