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Sporting Competitions (Poster 18)

- Study these posters. What surprises you the most and why?

- How many different sports are competing? What does this indicate?

In July 1942, there were 28 clubs for gymnastics, boxing and other sports in the Vilna ghetto. The ghetto had more than a thousand athletes out of a total of 20,000 residents. These athletes staged contests in soccer, tennis, boxing, long jump and running races down the ghetto's narrow streets.

"The ghetto even had a sports field. Workers went to great efforts to create it – clearing, lining and expanding the field by destroying adjoining buildings that were unfit for use... and indeed it was announced that the next day there would be a festive opening ceremony for the sports field – entrance by invitation only.

"At the ceremony, representatives of the Judenrat and the police were present, including Salk Dessler [a Jewish policeman] and Yosef Moshkat [Deputy Head of the Judenrat]. Moshkat said: 'If in years to come one will wish to trace and understand our life in the ghetto, and no documentation remains, this field will faithfully testify to the essential vitality and the unbridled spirit of life that dwells within us...'

"... And indeed, people in the ghetto began to engage in sports. Crowds of youngsters gathered on the field, and even prepared for a race around the ghetto....

"Theater, elegance, sport – these bring a growing sense of optimism. A growing number of voices are heard – in spite of it all, we will outlive our enemies and win..."

Ruska Korzcak, Flames in the Dust (Heb.), (Merhavia: Moreshet V'Sifrat Hapoalim, 1965), pp. 108-109

Ruska Korzcak (1921-1988): an underground fighter and partisan and a native of Poland. Until the outbreak of World War II, she lived in Plotzek. Afterwards, she arrived in Vilna, where she joined the leadership of the Hashomer Hatzair youth group. After the underground left for the forests, Korzcak became a partisan. In December 1944, she made *aliya*, where she reported to leaders of the *Yishuv* (Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel) about the Holocaust and the Jewish underground movement. Korzcak was a member of Kibbutz Ein Hahoresh and a leader of Hakibbutz Ha'artzi and other educational programs to commemorate the Holocaust.

"Most amazing of all is the sports field... Every day, youth use the field to perform gymnastic exercises and compete in various sporting events. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I wanted to shout, 'Is this a dream or reality?' I didn't know whether to be happy or to cry about this paradox. Perhaps those who live this way are right, acting as if the horrors outside do not exist, and refusing to see the walls that surround us. Perhaps they have forgotten that we are in the grip of an iron fist, liable at any moment to close around us and crush us like flies."

Gregory Schorr, Notes from the Vilna Ghetto 1941-1944 (Heb.), (Tel Aviv: Association of Former Residents of Vilna and the Environs in Israel, 2002), pp. 51-52.

Gregory Schorr (1888-1945): journalist and political activist. In the ghetto, he sorted army uniforms for the Germans. He wrote and hid a diary in which he described events of the ghetto. An anti-Nazi Lithuanian would secretly enter the ghetto and smuggle out his notes, and later hid them under the floor of the University of Vilna, where he worked. After the war, Schorr's daughter successfully smuggled out a copy of the diary from the Soviet Union. The diary was written on cigarette paper in encrypted text. Schorr was murdered at the Stutthof concentration camp just before its liberation.

- What message was being conveyed by sports participation and to whom?

- "and even prepared for a race around the ghetto": Why did Ruska use the word "even"?

- What challenges and complexities accompanied the very existence of these competitions and sporting events?

- Do the posters take on adding meaning after reading the sources?