2. Famine in the Ghetto

THE GERMANS, IN ACCORDANCE WITH THEIR PLAN FOR EXTERMINATION OF THE JEWS, instituted an incredibly irrational rationing system. For Warsaw, the official ratio was 4:2:1 for Germans, Poles, Jews, but actually even rationed foods were hard to come by, their importation into the Ghetto being dependent on the whims of the Nazis. Dr. Fischer, the governor of the Warsaw district, rejoiced at the setting up of the Ghetto thus, "The Jews will disappear because of hunger and need, and nothing will remain of the Jewish question but a cemetery." The Germans made no attempt at concealment of their aims. An official order, for example, dated April 19, 1941, states that "the basic provisioning of the Jewish Residential District must be less than the minimum necessary for preserving life, regardless of the consequences."

The great number of "illegals," unregistered Jews, the refugees and deportees from all over Poland, and the official requisitions diminished the supply of food available to any one individual. Stephen Starzynski, the mayor of Warsaw, was ordered to stop the distribution of food to the Jewish district; he refused and, for this refusal, was sent to a concentration camp in Germany, where he died. The Warsaw City Council, now filled with Nazi collaborators, announced that, in spite of existing Polish law, it would no longer supply bread to the patients in the hospitals; the burden was thrown on the Jewish Community alone.

Were it not for ample documentation no one would believe how low the official ration was. The ration card for October 1941 allotted 300 calories per day. In 1942, the allotment was as follows per week:

- **Bread:** for Poles—49 oz.; for Jews—15.7 oz.
- **Meat:** for Poles—8 oz.; for Jews—nothing
- **Sugar:** for Poles—9 oz.; for Jews—1 oz.
- **Fats:** for Poles—2 to 4 oz.; for Jews—nothing

Dr. Hirszfeld estimated that the daily caloric intake in the Ghetto was for employees of the *Judenrat*, 1500 calories; for workers and professionals, less than 1000; for all others, less than 900.

The low caloric intake was only part of the picture. To get food something else had to be sacrificed. The cost of living (using July 1939 as a base of 100) rose to 433 one year later and to 1932 the following year. Food prices on the black market during the first half of 1941 were as follows, per kilogram:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>January</th>
<th>June</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rye bread</td>
<td>3.45 zlotys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn bread</td>
<td>5.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Groats</td>
<td>8.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beans</td>
<td>6.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sugar</td>
<td>9.40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Potatoes</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse Meat</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lard</td>
<td>15.50</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

By the end of 1941, horse meat sold for 50 zlotys per kilogram.
until the Germans forbade their sale for “health reasons.” When the Ghetto was first closed, milk was permitted to be brought in for children less than five years of age; later it was allowed only for those less than a year old, and still later was completely forbidden.

Most Jews could not afford to buy food on the black market and often could not even pay for the miserable amount rationed to them. It was estimated that to avoid dying of hunger a family of four needed 1120 zlotys a month as a minimum to pay for illegally acquired food in addition to the legal ration, which cost 300 zlotys. Sixty percent of the Ghetto population depended for sustenance on the rationed food or on the community soup kitchens. The luckier workers had for their breakfast black ersatz coffee with a thin slice of bread and for their mid-day meal again a slice of bread and a bowl of thin potato soup.

Conditions never improved. On February 25, 1941, the Gazeta Żydowska (Jewish Gazette, published in Polish, the only newspaper the Germans allowed the Jews to read), printed a decree: “It is forbidden to sell any type of food to Jews outside the boundaries of the Jewish Residential District in Warsaw or to give or cede goods in any other manner.” Mary Berg noted in her diary on February 28, “The shortage of food is becoming more and more acute. One gets very little on the official ration cards and in the black market a pound of bread now costs 10 zlotys. All the bread is black and tastes like sawdust.” On May 20, she notes:

In the vegetable wagons in the streets one sees only dirty turnips and old last-year’s carrots. Next to them are wagons full of stinking fish—tiny little fish in a state of decay. A pound of them costs one zloty. These fish now constitute the most important article of food in the Ghetto. It is the only one that the Germans allow to be sold freely. Of course, meat, chicken and even real carp for the Sabbath are to be found. The bazaar on Leszno Street has everything one’s heart desires—but chicken costs 20 zlotys a pound. Kosher meat and fish are even more exorbitant; only those who have a large cash reserve can afford such luxuries and very few such people remain in the Ghetto. . . . The communal kitchens are still open and there one can get a dish of soup consisting of hot water with a potato swimming in it for 30 groszy. The Judennat also has a kitchen for its own employees where soup with gruel is served, but this costs one zloty. . . . Marmalade is made of carrots and beets with sweetening of saccharin. ‘Honey’ is made of yellow-brown molasses. . . . But a piece of bread with such honey is far beyond the reach of most people.

The influx of deportees from the provinces further strained the resources of the community. The soup became thinner and the portions smaller. No garbage, no scrap of food was to be found; everything was eaten. An open letter in the Gazeta Żydowska of July 23, 1941, complains that only one person out of ten gets anything at all for lunch and that only by special permission of the House Committee. In the same month a glass of hot water with saccharin and a slice of bread cost 40 groszy; jelly made out of horse bones, 10 groszy a portion; fish cakes made of the tiny fish called “stinkies,” 30 groszy, and with a slice of bread, 50 groszy; candy made of molasses and saccharin, 20 to 30 groszy a piece; sugar, 30 zlotys a pound. On September 1, 1941, the Gazeta Żydowska published a decree cancelling lard rations for public institutions “because the Jews do not eat pork.” In November 1941, what passed for butter sold for 40 zlotys a pound. Horses disappeared from the Ghetto. Some were used for food; the others were sold to avoid the necessity of feeding them because oats were used to make gruel for humans and “who would think of giving such a delicacy to a horse?” The bread rations were lowered to 20 ounces a week at the end of
1941; this was reduced by one-fifth the following summer.22

An underground leaflet circulated in “Aryan” Warsaw at the beginning of 1942 summarizes the famine in the Ghetto thus: “... 50 per cent of the people are dying from hunger, 30 per cent are starving and 15 per cent are undernourished.”23 In February 1942, grain smuggled into the Ghetto was being milled secretly; the chaff was used as a special kind of flour to make black cakes that looked like pressed hay. Ground dried flounder was used as a spread on bread instead of fats. Horse sausage was a great delicacy.24 In April 1942, one egg cost 7 zlotys and a kilogram of horse meat 35 zlotys.25 Hunger reached such a pass that on July 29, a week after the “resettlement” program had started, the Germans used a fiendish method to ensure that they would get their daily quota of 5000 to 10,000 Jews without too much trouble; they announced that all those who reported voluntarily to the Umschlagsplatz (where the trains to the Treblinka death camp were loaded) would get extra food. A notice was posted, signed by Leikin, the head of the Jewish Ordungsdiensst (Police), saying, “I hereby give notice that all those who, in conformity with the order to present themselves for selections for resettlement, voluntarily appear on July 29, 30 and 31 for evacuation will receive 3 kilograms of bread and 1 kilogram of marmalade per person. Collection point and distribution center—Stawki Place, corner of Dzika Street.”26 The ruse was successful. Hundreds, driven to desperation by their hunger, flocked to the Station. Indeed, the Germans were so pleased that they extended the time in which the Jews could, of their own free will, get bread and marmalade. Needless to say, the promise was not kept; it would have been silly to feed people who were soon to be exterminated.

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The rapid shrinkage of the Ghetto population did nothing to lessen the hunger. In August, a pound of bread sold for 12 zlotys, and the workers in the factories, for twelve hours of labor with only an hour of rest, got a quart of watery soup and a quarter-pound of bread daily.

The mortality was frightful. Dr. Hirsfeld reported, “I have known houses in which a third of the occupants have died of hunger in the course of three months... The refugees were wiped out by starvation alone.”27 In his biography he tells of the arguments that went on about whether it was right to prolong the misery of poor children, orphans and others by treating their illnesses. He describes the pathetic complaint of one child, saved from a severe attack of dysentery—“Why didn’t you let me die right away? I saw my father and mother die of hunger, and now I’ll die, too.”28 Menachem Linder, a member of the Jewish Self Help, gathered some statistics in 1941 and 1942; he found that first the refugees died, then the poorest Ghetto dwellers; a greater proportion of men died than women or children.29 In March 1942, about 35 per cent of the inhabitants of the Ghetto had hunger edema; some houses had a higher percentage, 73 per cent at 64 Zelazna Street, for example.30 During the next month, between 500 and 600 Jews died daily of starvation alone.31

The scenes of the famine in the Ghetto have been graphically described by many observers on the spot, including the Nazis and their friends. Their inhuman gloating does not bear repetition.32 Tragedy was everywhere: dead bodies lying in the streets, covered with papers, anonymous, for if their names were known the ration card would be taken away from their families; almost naked children sitting around apathetically against the walls, their bones sticking out through their parchment skin. Occasionally there was rejoicing—a feast, for three people,
made out of a small piece of bread, cabbage, a head of cauliflower and one egg. But such feasts were rare. More often this took place: “The door opened and a man looking like a maniac appeared on the threshold. He was half naked, his thighs and shanks were thin as a switch. . . . The dead body of a woman was lying on the floor . . . a skeleton in a transparent waxen bag. This was his mother.”

At the funeral for the children from the Wolska Street orphanage, the other children from the home brought a wreath inscribed “To the children who have died of starvation—from the starving children!”

Begging went on day and night, hunger driving the beggars to disregard the death penalty for violation of the curfew. “I looked out of my window and saw the wandering skeletons. . . . Most of them were children. . . . As time went on, there were fewer and fewer of them because they were shot down by the Germans or just died out.” They cried, “Give me one potato, one, one tiny little potato, a crust of bread, some water from cooked vegetables or turnips!” A song popular among the beggar children was Hots Rachmones (Have Pity), in Warsaw Yiddish dialect,

Have pity, have mercy, good people!  
Drop me a piece, a piece of bread,  
A tiny, tiny piece of bread,  
Only a few crumbs, some crumbs of bread!  
Have mercy, have pity, good people!

A man started to beg on Leszno Street; two weeks later, he was no longer standing, but sitting with his trousers rolled up to show his swollen legs; a few days later, he was at the same place, unable to move; then he died. The generations of beggars disappeared one after the other with accelerated speed; often they fell on the street, their bodies remaining there until in due time they were carted off to a nameless grave.

Not everyone starved quietly. Individuals known as khappers (grabbers) appeared, for the most part children. When one of these saw someone with a parcel that looked like food, he grabbed it, tore it open, and started to eat. The khappers became so experienced that before his victim had a chance to look around, the khapper had already swallowed the food. They made no attempt to run away; lightning-quick, they stuffed the food in their mouths, unheeding the blows rained on them.

Rubinsztajn, the famous jester of the Ghetto, made macabre jokes on the famine. He refused a ration card—“I lost my wife and children, so now I should beg Hitler for a ration card? Let him stuff himself to death with my sour bread and bitter marmalade. I can even let him have in addition a kilo of spoiled cabbage and a dozen saccharin tablets.” A favorite gesture of his was to go over to a corpse, lift off the paper and ask, “Did you remember to turn in your ration card, comrades?”

It should not be supposed that the Jews made no attempt to stem the mounting tide of deaths from starvation. The rationed provisions sent in by the Germans were distributed by the rationing office of the Judenrat under the direction of Abraham Gepner and S. Winter. The Self-Help groups did a tremendous job within the limits of their resources. Supervised by I. Rothenberg, they organized mills, bakeries, artificial honey factories and soup kitchens. TOZ, the Jewish health organization, in addition to its medical clinics, public baths and children’s homes, had communal kitchens serving at least one meal a day. In July 1940, such a meal consisted of a bowl of potato or cabbage soup and a tiny portion of vegetables; twice a week a small piece of meat was offered at a cost of 1.20 zloty.

The nutritive value of the soup was very low, ranging between 170 and 200 calories per portion; it was made
mainly from oats, and on one such meal a day, of a liquid so low in calories, it was impossible to live.\textsuperscript{44} The amount of food distributed in the kitchens naturally varied from time to time depending on how much and what type of provisions could be obtained, but there was never enough for the needs; if there was no food provided, the kitchens stayed closed for days or weeks; the two grams per person per day that was calculated was seldom reached even when they were open, because the personnel would hide some of the food for their own starving families.\textsuperscript{45}

Food parcels were sent into the closed Ghetto by relatives in other parts of Poland; this source of supply was soon cut off by the rounding up and extermination of the Jews in the provinces. Food parcels from neutral countries were sometimes delivered to the Ghetto, but were most often confiscated by the Gestapo. After the war with the Soviet Union started, parcels from that area, that had amounted to as much as 2000 daily at one time, \textsuperscript{46} naturally stopped coming.\textsuperscript{47} The food packages from America were a great deal of help, but they too no longer came after Pearl Harbor. Receipt of food from Sweden and Switzerland was prohibited by an order of the Postmaster in December 1941.\textsuperscript{48}

The American Joint Distribution Committee, directed by David Guzik and Isaac Gitterman, was the major source of outside help until December 1941, by financing soup kitchens and other agencies in the Ghetto. The Catholic Caritas Agency sent in food for the converted Jews and later for other Jews.\textsuperscript{49}

An interesting development was the Toporol, a society for the promotion of agriculture, a paradox in the urban Ghetto where there was barely space for a blade of grass to grow. This group of idealists tried to improve the nutritional status of the Ghetto by growing vegetables. Every available space was used. "Where the Hospital of the Holy Ghost used to stand there is now a broad field sown with the various vegetables."\textsuperscript{50} Balconies and roofs were used to grow radishes and onions. Tomatoes, carrots, cabbage, even potatoes were planted on bombed-out sites, 450 in all.\textsuperscript{61} How much was raised? No definite figures are available, but all the diarists and journalists of the Ghetto agree that very little was accomplished in the fight against the general starvation.

As a matter of fact, nothing seemed able to stop the spreading famine. Whatever was done was like building a wall of sand against the ocean. Certainly none of the usual measures of social assistance were of any value.