

6 Socioeconomic Status and Food Access

The Nazi occupation transformed the social and economic environment for Polish Jewry, particularly in the ghetto. Prewar wealth, housing, power, income, and employment might all be stripped away or radically altered as a result of the Nazi occupation. The ghetto conditions created new social and economic hierarchies, enabling some to rise economically or in prestige and power but eroding the wealth, power, and status of many others. Many found themselves in a new socioeconomic position with a significant change to their actual resources or their position within the new power structure.¹ Often power and wealth intersected with other factors such as location, gender, and religion in determining one's socioeconomic position during the ghetto period.

The socioeconomic position of individuals during the Nazi occupation was not divorced from prewar socioeconomic status. Wealth, power, and social networks, including those connected to religion and political organizations before the war, might influence one's standing during the ghetto period. Many of those in positions of power during the German occupation, particularly in the early portion of the ghetto period, were powerful people before the war. Some who had connections to these powerful people, predominately men, were able to obtain good positions in the new ghetto bureaucracies and economies. Many diaries and other testimonies relate the importance of a powerful friend or connection or bribe in obtaining even simple work. Kraków ghetto survivor Leon Fruchtman credited his pre-ghetto connections formed as an unpaid office boy with helping him obtain a position in a potato warehouse in the ghetto.² Many skilled artisans were unemployed and impoverished without a steady income, while individuals with influential friends filled the jobs intended for tailors, cobblers, and machinists. Anatol Chari used the reputation of his dead father, Piotr Chari, to acquire positions and protect his job in the Łódź ghetto.³

While influence and power might provide income and status, actual resources were also crucial during the ghetto period. This is because socioeconomic status under the Nazi occupation was not static, and

prewar power and wealth were not enough to safeguard against impoverishment in the ghetto. Many powerful individuals were targeted directly by the Germans in early purges of Jewish leadership or roundups, or their power and status were diminished under Nazi rule. Many saw their financial standing change during the war, whether because their wealth was expropriated by the Germans or because they improved their economic situation through smuggling or other means.

However, prewar wealth or the lack thereof still often carried over into the ghetto period. Those without prewar wealth who were deprived of income capable of sustaining their households usually quickly fell into poverty, which, without adequate safety nets, rapidly led to their continued downward track. The poor and those unable to find employment were the first to suffer hunger, as they were least buffered from starvation. Individuals with money or the ability to sell items for money could afford to purchase food, pay bribes, and even pay others to work in their stead, sparing themselves from physical exhaustion and abuse. Ultimately though, once inside the ghetto, the majority of those who had been able to bring resources with them ran through their resources, becoming impoverished over the course of time. Only a few maintained sufficient socioeconomic standing to avoid suffering any food deprivation. The length of time in the ghetto and the specific ghetto one was in affected this outcome.

Impoverishment

Those who were food insecure before the war were largely among the first to die from starvation in the ghettos. This was despite the fact that at the beginning of the ghettos' existence, many resources were in place to support the poor, including official help from the Judenrat, charity from private organizations and individuals, and even social workers who visited the poor in their homes. As the poor died off, other ghetto dwellers became impoverished, having run out of resources or been unable to find a job. For many Jews in the ghetto, prewar occupations either evaporated altogether or no longer brought in a living wage. Teachers, journalists, and others found that their services were no longer needed. Warsaw ghetto diarist Chaim Kaplan was acutely aware of this. His diary entry in response to the commencement of World War II complained, "we will starve because there will be no means of livelihood. How will I support myself? The schools won't be opened for a long, long time."⁴ As a Hebrew teacher, he knew his position would disappear under war conditions. For those who could not get a job, various forms of charity were available to support them. However, the relief supplements were rarely

enough to survive. As Josef Zelkowicz noted of those on welfare, “All of them depend on those few marks—too little to keep them alive and too much to let them die.”⁵ For the poor living on relief, supplemental food from the black market, such as a kilogram of bread at the cost of eleven ghetto marks or a kilogram of potatoes at a cost of thirteen ghetto marks, were beyond reach.

In addition to those without a means of support other than welfare or charity, a class of working poor existed in the ghetto. These people did not earn enough from their work to support themselves and their families. Sometimes the impoverishment of families in the ghetto happened to those who had previously themselves been able to give charity. Mary Berg in her diary describes the impoverishment of friends who at the beginning of the ghetto period had helped her raise funds for the poor. Emanuel Ringelblum described a holiday food distribution:

There were fearful scenes in the office of the refugee organization on the eve of the Passover holiday. A crowd of 7,000–8,000 refugees gathered, waiting for matzoth and other packages generally. The whole horror of the present situation was revealed. People applied for free packages whose neighbors considered them to be persons of means, and who a short time before had been able to help others.⁶

Those who made just enough to survive might be suddenly impoverished by a tragedy from which they could not recover. That event might range from a police confiscation to a family member’s illness. Shimon Huberband recalled a pair of policemen in the Warsaw ghetto who confiscated numerous valuables and demanded money to keep people from being arrested.⁷ Chari recalled that his uncle had a job in food distribution in the Łódź ghetto, which allowed him to bring home extra food for his family. When the family received a summons for deportation to a labor camp, Chari’s uncle sold off their extra rations. Ultimately, his son was able to use his connections to remove them from the deportation list. They remained in the ghetto, but without the supplemental food, they died of malnutrition.⁸

Many who came from middle-class families before the war slowly slipped into poverty. To make ends meet, people sold off their possessions to supplement inadequate income. Survivor Erica R. reported that by the end of the first year in the Warsaw ghetto, her mother had sold everything in their home, including the bed.⁹ Henry Greenblatt, a Warsaw ghetto survivor, noted, “I remember, through the whole summer into the fall of 1941. Things were getting really harder and harder ... and things were getting to the point that people were really starving from hunger.”¹⁰ Kraków ghetto survivor Moshe Taube reported being

hungry many times in the ghetto and not having enough bread to eat.¹¹ According to Rosa Taubman, there was “continuous starvation” in the ghetto and it got “worse day by day.”¹² Many prominent and wealthy individuals entered ghettos later in their existence after being deported from elsewhere. Refugees into the ghetto often had difficulty acclimating and finding a position in ghetto society despite their prewar prominence. Their financial decline was often rapid and deadly.

Rich Ghetto, Poor Ghetto? Geographic Location and Food Access

Not all ghettos experienced poverty in the same ways. In some places, it was more widespread and visible. This is because the wealth of an individual ghetto was linked to the prewar wealth of the city’s population, the openness of the ghetto, the selection process for its population, and the longevity of the ghetto. In the prewar period, Łódź and Warsaw Jewry had a large group of citizens living in poverty. Extensive relief from the Warsaw and Łódź Jewish community and from foreign funds, such as the American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC), provided much-needed income to sustain the impoverished Jews of the two cities.¹³ Soup kitchens and other means of support had been part of a large-scale relief system keeping the poor Jews of the two cities from starvation prior to the Nazi invasion. Warsaw had a large segment of affluent Jews in addition to its impoverished community, and Kraków had a large population of wealthier Jews. In addition, Kraków, unlike the other cities – where the ghettos housed Jews from across the city and the surrounding countryside – selected its ghetto residents based on application forms. It only took in about a quarter of those who had initially been in the city, and as part of the application process, prospective ghetto residents had to indicate their income and its source. As a result, Kraków had a wealthier population without as large a percentage of impoverished ghetto dwellers in comparison with Warsaw and Łódź.

The openness of ghettos also affected the rate of impoverishment for ghetto dwellers, for several reasons. In open ghettos, some ghetto dwellers had the opportunity to replenish their resources or receive help through contact with prewar non-Jewish friends and acquaintances; they were able to purchase food outside the ghetto boundaries, which was generally cheaper than inside the ghetto; and the community had the ability to increase the amount of food entering the ghetto beyond that designated by the German authorities. Bernard Offen, a Kraków ghetto survivor who capitalized on the openness of the ghetto in its early days to smuggle in food, recalled eating bread, potatoes, vegetables, and

occasionally meat or margarine in the ghetto. Eventually, however, he was unable to get in and out of the ghetto, and he began to feel real hunger.¹⁴

Also affecting the pauperization of the population was the longevity of the ghettos. The longer individuals were in the ghetto, the more likely they were to become impoverished, even if they were not impoverished before the war. Even with paid work, most ghetto residents still had to sell off some possessions to eat – and the longer they were in the ghetto, the more likely they would eventually sell all they had. Only the elite could live off their salaries or had sufficient valuables to live off the sale of their possessions without working.¹⁵ The fact that the Łódź ghetto was created early on and lasted until 1944, while the Warsaw ghetto and Kraków ghettos were in existence for a shorter period of time, significantly affected the food situation. The Kraków ghetto's short existence as a closed ghetto meant that those with some means were shielded from hunger at least in the initial period and some for the entirety of the ghetto's existence. Halina Bochnik did not experience hunger in the Kraków ghetto, noting, "In the ghetto there wasn't luxury but we didn't starve once."¹⁶ Survivor Ernest A., who worked making shoes in the ghetto, noted that they did not have fancy food or meat, but they had potatoes and bread as staples.¹⁷ In part the short existence of the Kraków ghetto was because the entire working population of the ghetto was transferred to Płaszów labor camp in the early portion of 1943. By contrast, in Łódź and Warsaw, there was a transformation of the ghetto into essentially a labor camp. Since the ghetto population remained in the same geographical space; it is linked to the ghetto period. Many of the experiences Jews had in Płaszów vis-a-vis hunger were similar to those who stayed in ghettos into the later periods when they were only inhabited by those who were working.

Affluence

Czerniaków's belly is big and round. Gulps broth and meatballs by the pound.

– A song in the Warsaw ghetto

Interconnected to the story of poverty in the ghetto was the story of those who were at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy. Yankele Hershkowitz, a Łódź ghetto minstrel, sang, "everyone eats a bowl of groats equally," but in reality, some ghetto dwellers had more access to foodstuffs than did others.¹⁸ The existence of a privileged class of people with more access to food was common throughout ghettos.¹⁹ This access might be obtained through licit or illicit means. In most cases, the upper end of the ghetto hierarchy included members of the ghetto

administration, Jewish police, smugglers, prewar wealthy individuals who still had movable wealth, and others. This wealthy group, a small minority of the population, was largely immune to the extreme hunger and disproportionately survived the ghetto period. As a group, they were able to frequent restaurants, had access to additional food either through privileged rations or through smuggling, and even continued entertaining hosted guests in the ghetto.

Although a small number were shielded from hunger for their entire time in the ghetto, many people in this group only enjoyed their status for a portion of the ghetto period, typically the early portion. For example, numerous individuals made their income from smuggling. When that became more difficult in places like Warsaw and Kraków, their means of support dried up and their ability to ward off hunger decreased, although those who continued to smuggle despite the dangers – including capital punishment – could find themselves rewarded with even more resources. Another group that experienced privilege that might be withdrawn was those who collaborated in various ways with the Germans. If they fell out of favor, they might end up purged or sent to a concentration camp.

For those with the means, restaurants in all the ghettos served delicacies to ghetto notables. In the Łódź ghetto, there was the Adria Restaurant.²⁰ Café Hirschfeld at the corner of Sienna and Sosnowa Street in the Warsaw ghetto sold luxury food items, including, “the most expensive liqueurs, cognac, pickled fish, canned food, duck, chicken and goose ... the price of a dinner with drinks is from a hundred to two hundred zloty.”²¹ This was not the only sumptuous restaurant for those who could afford it. Berg noted in her diary that a café directed by Tatiana Epstein opened at 16 Sienna Street and featured famous musicians, including Wladislaw Spielman.²² She also noted a café for the “fashionable crowd” called “Café Sztuka [Café Art] on Leszno Street,” and she mentioned as well Café Pod Fontanna on Leszno and Bajka on Ogródowa Street. Among the luxuries at the Bajka café was a nearby “beach” where wearing a bathing suit was required. The cost was two zlotys to sit out and sunbathe on a lounge chair. A day’s sunbathing costs as much as just over six meals in a community kitchen.²³ The Kraków ghetto had restaurants, patisseries, cafeterias, and restaurants with alcohol, dancing, and entertainment.²⁴ A coffeehouse on Limanowska Street served coffee and homemade pastries. On the same street was a restaurant that served “stuffed derma with farfel, gefilte fish and cholent on Saturdays.”²⁵ Kraków ghetto survivor Halina Nelken recorded her observations of the café on Limanowska Street as a place filled with, “the ‘new aristocracy’ ... well-fed and well-dressed wheeler dealers, informers, ill-mannered boors, all of them dishonest, newly rich scum who,

having unseated the intelligentsia, have assumed the lead in the ghetto today."²⁶ These were not the only people at the café on Limanowska Street; Nelken herself went to cafés when the opportunity arose.²⁷

Lavish entertaining was a part of elite ghetto culture. Parties were thrown at restaurants, cafés, and private homes. In the Warsaw ghetto, for example, the chief of the Jewish police threw a party at the Sztuka café for Jewish and Polish police at a cost of 8,700 zloty.²⁸ The ability to have a party in one's home required first and foremost that one had accommodation that was of sufficient size to host a group of people. Doctors in the Kraków ghetto received larger apartments so they could see patients in one of the rooms. Nelken attended a party in one such doctor's apartment: "Tonight his office served as the dance floor and buffet. Delicacies were piled on the table just like before the war: canapés of sardines and ham and cheese on French bread; pastries; cheese-cake; cookies and fruit; vodka, cognac, and brandy. I felt contempt for myself because it was the food on the buffet table that interested me the most."²⁹ She also attended parties at the apartments of friends who were closer to her age. There, alcohol too was served, but the atmosphere was less sophisticated. She described one party with copious alcohol thrown by a friend: "He has a large room with space enough for dancing. The only record, 'La Habanera,' played over and over again."³⁰ In the Łódź ghetto, Chari utilized his connections to obtain his own apartment separate from his grandparents. There he hosted friends for parties, and they smoked cigarettes and played cards. He noted that alcohol was difficult to obtain but that he was part of a privileged group of police that received cigarette rations.³¹

In addition to throwing parties, those with enough food might invite guests over for tea or dinner, where delicacies might be served. Tadeusz Pankiewicz, the non-Jewish Polish pharmacist who maintained a pharmacy in the Kraków ghetto throughout its existence, hosted numerous elites for tea, meals, and drinking sessions, particularly in the aftermath of deportations.³² He described one dinner with a friend from outside the ghetto who joined him and a lady friend, Maryla Schenker, in a lavish dinner from a Kraków ghetto restaurant featuring, "fish prepared in the 'Jewish way,'" as well as wine and brandy.³³

The ability to lavishly entertain required access to surplus food, which the elite of the ghetto had. Whether this food was attained through extra rations, the black market, packages from outside the ghetto, or food purchases in the non-Jewish areas of the city, it made entertaining possible. Gifts among the elite also supplemented food access. For example, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski sent four bottles of wine to ghetto chronicler Oskar Rosenfeld for Passover.³⁴ The manager of food supplies of the

Łódź ghetto, Zygmunt Reingold, sent extra food to dignitaries to curry favor.³⁵ Nelken was offered chocolates and other treats by her friends of elite standing. Food was one of the means through which patronage was expressed and cultivated among those with power in the ghetto.

Those with means could purchase meat, chicken, and even carp in the Warsaw ghetto. Chicken cost twenty zloty per pound, while kosher chicken was even more expensive. Berg, writing on May 20, 1941, noted, “only those who have a large cash reserve can afford such luxuries and very few such people remain in the ghetto.”³⁶ Asparagus was for sale in the late spring for eight zloty per pound (a luxury item considering that a day laborer delivering bricks for a building project was paid ten zloty per day).³⁷ Writing about the poor who had run out of resources and who could not receive enough support from the Jewish administration to avoid starvation, Berg noted that within their sight, as they lay dying, was a shop window with white bread, cheese, and cakes. These treats were only available to those with the means to purchase them.³⁸

In the Łódź ghetto, because supplemental foods could be obtained on the black market or through special stores, the purchase price of an item in the ghetto was different for various segments of the population. Those who were permitted to purchase items in ghetto-run shops bought them at a set cost, whereas those who might have the same amount of money but were not able to purchase from the official ghetto shops could only purchase the item on the black market at an astronomically higher price.³⁹ Both Łódź ghetto head Rumkowski and Warsaw ghetto leader Adam Czerniaków had access to supplemental rations to distribute as they liked. There were also special distribution points for the elite. For example: “Cooperative B [from Bierat, an advisory council] was a food distribution point for the higherranking employees in the Jewish administration, higher police officers, workshop directors and managers in the Łódź ghetto. On the basis of lists or special coupons those entitled to use these points collected additional food allocations there in addition to the general ration.”⁴⁰

On November 9, 1943, the canceling of Allotment “B” was recorded in Jakub Poznanski’s diary. He noted that 800 families, 160 doctors, and 100 pharmacists had received this allotment. A few families continued to receive supplements, but many were left without.⁴¹

Just as falling fortunes might cause individuals to go from elite to poor in the ghetto, changes in Nazi food distribution policies caused certain groups to go from favored to deprived in terms of food access. Two groups that were initially privileged were the ill and workers, but this privilege would variously wax and wane in the ghetto period. In the early period of the ghetto, physicians could prescribe supplemental food

Table 6.1 *Supplemental ration coupons as reported in the Chronicle of the Łódź ghetto on August 10, 1943*

Type of coupon	Eligible recipients	Number distributed
R (Beirat)	Heads of administrative departments and divisions, senior technical instructors, and their families	2,236
L	Doctors and their families	191
Ph	Pharmacists and their families	389
Pol	Police (Order Service), fire brigade, and their families	1,204
B-I and B-II	Office heads, division group leaders, secretaries, clerks, and meritorious officials, and their families	1,589
CP	Permanent coupon for hardworking individuals (excluding their families)	377
B-III	Single-use or “bonus” coupons distributed by division and department heads	2,000 per ten days
CP I	Single-use or “bonus” coupons distributed by division and department heads	1,800 per ten days
F	Fecalists (removers of human waste)	250 per ten days
FI	Garbage collectors	250 per ten days

Source: Ewa Wiatr et al., *Encyclopedia of the Ghetto: The Unfinished Project of the Łódź Ghetto Archivists* (Łódź: Archiwum Państwowe, 2017), 212–13.

rations for the ill, while workers were initially entitled to supplemental rations. Soon thereafter, in Łódź in 1941, Rumkowski abolished supplemental rations for workers and, according to Zelkowicz, adopted a policy of trying to save the whole of the ghetto population at the expense of the workers' health.⁴² Slowly, however, as the German ghetto administration took over control of the food supply, supplemental rations for the sick were discontinued, and emphasis was put on feeding those who were working. In March 1942, Rumkowski halted meat distribution to the sick and allocated it instead to workers.⁴³ Similarly, children and elderly were given supplemental rations in the Łódź ghetto, which, like many other ghettos made special efforts to support these vulnerable populations – but eventually not only were these supplemental rations eliminated, but the elderly and the children were largely deported to their deaths.

Ultimately, telling the stories of the privileged is a complex task, as many wartime and immediate postwar testimonies were critical of those who enjoyed food security and even luxuries amid the hunger and starvation of the ghettos. As a result, many postwar testimonies downplayed privileged status.⁴⁴ By definition, however, all postwar testimonies come

from a place of privilege of some sort: They all reflect the experiences of those who were able to access sufficient food to survive through one means or another.

Gender

It would be impossible to tell the story of food without examining gender. Although gender expectations for Central European Jews prior to the Second World War were tied to socioeconomic status and varied with geographic location and within religious traditions, gender expectations about the procurement and preparation of food were in many cases deeply entrenched in prewar European Jewish society.

For a man, one of the most central ideals was that he provide for his family whether as a business owner, factory worker, civil servant, cobbler, or other professional. An exception to this in some communities was that religious scholars were expected to be supported financially so as to devote themselves to study and prayer. In these communities, the wife or her family provided support for the scholar and his family. This was not as widespread a phenomenon as it is today, but it did exist in the prewar period and during the ghetto period. Men, in addition to financially providing for their families, were expected to form the community leadership in the prewar period. The Sejm (lower house of Polish Parliament) did include a Jewish woman member, Ruzha Meltzer of the General Zionists, but she was the only woman out of 107 Jewish deputies during the interwar period.⁴⁵ In practice, with rare exceptions, men occupied most leadership positions in the prewar period.

Women in Central European society were usually expected to be responsible for food preparation and the domestic sphere. However, gender norms were highly shaped by socioeconomic standing and geography. The Jews in the ghetto included not only urban Jews but also rural Jews and Jews from Western Europe, whose gender norms varied. Women who were highly acculturated, particularly those from the upper and middle classes, were often expected to be housewives, but some were also business owners, professionals such as doctors and lawyers, and artisans. There was also an expectation in many upper-class families that a servant does the cooking, though that servant usually was under the woman's domain. Working-class women sometimes served as providers for their family, working as laundresses, maids, and even prostitutes who were subject to a range of expectations based on their status and profession. Marital status shaped gender expectations as well. Unmarried women faced expectations of chastity and obedience to parents, and were often expected to care for family members. Women who

were married with a family faced strong ideas about the role of the selfless and caring mother. Whether these women utilized nannies and governesses (in the upper classes) or handled childrearing themselves (in the lower classes), they were first and foremost expected to be nurturing and devoted to their offspring. In the extreme conditions of the ghetto, sometimes these gender norms were challenging to uphold.

During the war, almost all leadership positions in the ghetto were occupied by men. This included the Judenrat leadership, the heads of most divisions in the ghetto, and other prominent positions. A few women in the ghettos, however, did take on leadership roles like division co-heads within organizations, and a handful even held powerful positions. Dora Fuchs, for example, was the first secretary to the Łódź ghetto leader Rumkowski. She was able to secure high-ranking positions for her family members and ensure that her own household was protected from food deprivation. Women also worked as judges and prosecutors in the Łódź ghetto. For example, Romea Byeńska was sworn in as a judge in December 1941, and Rumkowski's wife was a prosecutor in the ghetto. In both these cases, the women's husbands also held powerful positions in the ghetto. Even when given leadership roles, women often found themselves in gendered positions. In November 1942, a Female Order Service (FOS) was created in the Łódź ghetto. A subdivision of the internal Jewish police, the FOS cared for children whose parents were working and later kept children from working as street vendors.⁴⁶

Another factor that plays a role in examining gender roles in the ghettos is the context surrounding postwar testimonies. The ways in which oral testimonies, memoirs, and edited diaries disclosed ghetto experiences were often affected by the gender expectations and changing mores of the time that survivors gave their testimonies. Sometimes the interviewer in a testimony or editor of a memoir imposed their gender expectations onto a person giving testimony. At other times, and based on societal norms at the time testimony was delivered, attempts were made to conceal parts of the victim experience because individuals did not want their family's perception of them to change. For example, sexual abuse has been discussed more widely in testimonies dating since the 1990s, when rape was categorized as a form of genocide (during the prosecution of genocide in the former Yugoslavia). In religious communities, men's and women's actions that did not align with Jewish law or that created a negative image of an important religious figure might be concealed.⁴⁷ In all cases, there is a need to examine these materials with an additional lens.

One Warsaw ghetto chronicler whose writings were preserved in the Ringelblum Archive illustrates his gender expectations in a story about finding the corpse of a young girl left naked on a sidewalk. He asks about

her, wanting to find out more about the girl and her fate, and is informed, “it’s Hesias, the neighbours’ girl.... She was 14 years old.”⁴⁸ His investigation leads him to an apartment where he finds a family with seven living children. “A woman with a tragic but peaceful expression was bustling near the stove. Even though she was still young, she looked totally ruined. Her husband was standing by the window. He still looked normal, but [for] the dark circles under his huge eyes and his somehow cowardly gaze.”⁴⁹ The chronicler notes that before the war, the father was a well-known Jewish scholar who was supported by his father-in-law, but with the father-in-law dead, the family’s means of support is gone. The family sold off its possessions, sought support from relatives, and was now fed in soup kitchens. The writer berates the father in his account:

Fanatically religious, the husband had spent his whole life praying. He did not work or earn any money.... He takes no interest in the fate of his children. He takes in their starvation, diseases, and death in a thoughtless and indifferent way, without any interest, as if it were not his concern. He does not starve because “followers” bring him food, which he immediately gobbles up, refusing to share it with his family. Overtaken by carnal, uncontrollable male desire, he molests his wife every night. He does not care that she is starving, tired, and exhausted, nor that she is overwhelmed by the effort to feed their children. He produces new offspring thoughtlessly, mercilessly. He does not care about the suffering of the miserable victim, who is overburdened with supporting the children.⁵⁰

This description of a family’s inner life the day after the loss of a daughter reveals a number of issues around gender and starvation. First is the dead daughter. In many studies of famines and gender, scholars note that female children are neglected or sacrificed in food-insecure households where women hold a lower status in the pre-famine society, although there is no evidence that female children died at a greater rate than male children in the ghettos.⁵¹ The fact that the family ate their meals at the soup kitchen implies that the meals that they received as individuals were portioned out not at home but by the soup kitchen employees. These equal portions may not have been enough to keep a young woman alive. At fourteen, she was on the cusp between childhood and adulthood as defined in most ghettos. Perhaps she had aged out of some sort of supplement for “children,” often defined by Polish organizations as those up to the age of fourteen. We do not have enough information to know. We are told by the chronicler that the mother in the story “has a fixed a silent reproach at one of her younger daughters,” who inherited her sister’s clothing. From this we know there were other girls in the household still receiving care.

The author paints a picture of a woman whose life purpose was distilled into reproduction and care for children: “the wife—a mother hen, sow,

or bitch—was focused on how to feed so many children.”⁵² He does not grant her agency as a woman who wanted many children or who (through the generosity of her father) had the means to support a large family prior to the war. He does not consider that a woman whose family was the means of support might have better standing and power in a household than a woman reliant on her husband as the sole support and source of family income, or that she might have wanted all these children at a time when her family was wealthy enough to support such a household.

Instead, the author views the marital bed as a site of rape by the hypersexualized husband of his famished wife. Despite the fact that starvation reduces sexual desire in both men and women, the husband is depicted as sexually insatiable, a characterization that seems to play on prewar antisemitic tropes that painted Jewish men as sexual predators. It is unlikely that the wife of this religious man shared her intimate life with a stranger inquiring about the fate of their dead daughter. Other than the many children – whose birth predates the family’s current condition – there is no evidence presented for this claim of nightly assault. The wife is described as holding a baby in one arm but not as pregnant, implying that it has been at least a year since the family conceived a child. The document is undated but is likely from an earlier period of the ghetto, given that in the spring of 1941, many of the soup kitchen subsidies in Warsaw were gone, making the cost of a family of ten visiting a soup kitchen more than many poor laborers made in a day.

The writer who chose to record this story clearly comes from another strata of society and religious tradition than Hesia’s parents. He judges them from his own gender expectations, which place the father as provider. He projects onto the wife his own gender expectations, claiming that when the wife stated that her husband had not earned any money, she “gave him [the father] a hateful look,” implying that she holds him to blame for their financial situation.⁵³ His unsympathetic portrayal paints them as unfeeling parents who have failed in their gendered responsibilities. Despite the fact that he bullies his way into their home to interrogate them about the fate of their daughter the day after the girl’s death, he places himself as judge of their situation. Instead of seeing a family whose grief is intruded on, he reads the lack of wailing in front of a stranger as apathy. He blames the mother for failing in her duty to protect and nurture her children, writing, “There is no reply from the mother hen, who has harmed her beloved Hesia for the sake of her other children. She does not cry. She is not ashamed. She freezes, silent.”⁵⁴ He has no evidence of wrongdoing, only evidence that the impoverished family reused the clothing from the dead girl. He accuses the father of lack of care for his children. Instead of reading the dark rings around his

eyes and praying in the corner as possibly related to mourning or stress about his children, he paints the father as an unfeeling monster.

Regardless of the lens of the observer, gender norms were both challenged and enforced in the ghettos. Some scholars of famine and gender have noted that hunger conditions cause rifts in the power relations within households. In many homes that held traditional roles for men and women, the provider role fell to women during the ghetto period. In other homes, however, the men were unable to solely provide for their families, and all members had to work. Sometimes, gender duties were redistributed due to death, debilitating sickness, or abandonment. In other families, women went to great lengths to perform traditional gender roles, such as taking care of domestic matters. For example, Sela Seliger and her sister acquired permits to reside in the Kraków ghetto, but their father was denied entry. Due to the porous nature of the ghetto, the sisters were able to continue providing for their father, who was living in a nearby village. Each Sabbath, Sela and her sister made a *challah*, a traditional Sabbath bread, for their father, and then Sela's sister smuggled it to him.⁵⁵ The sisters not only brought food to their father but also baked a traditional bread for his table. And yet, during the rest of the week, the father likely had to prepare his own meals.

Another type of disruption in families occurred when individuals created romantic relationships with others who could provide for them. Sometimes it took the form of a man creating a new household with a woman with the means to support him. This might mean a father abandoning his family or a single man in a family moving out to create a new family with a woman who either herself or through her family was able to provide support. Nelken, writing in the Kraków ghetto, lamented her brother's involvement with a woman whom she felt was beneath them in class but who in the new conditions created by the war was financially well-off: "Felek has fallen into the hands of common, plain girls whom no one would have even looked at before. These girls have money now because their parents know how to make it."⁵⁶ In other households, women created romantic relationships with men who could support them and their families. This was sometimes done by married women with the knowledge and acceptance of the husband or other members of the household. These dynamics played out as individuals sought survival.

Religion

In the ghetto, a myriad of religious backgrounds influenced food access. Most numerous among the ghetto dwellers were Jews of a variety of denominations, observance levels, and beliefs. There were also non-Jews

who were defined by the Nazis as Jews but who were atheists or some variety of Christian. Additionally, many non-Jews lived in the ghettos because they were married to someone the Germans considered Jewish, worked in the ghetto, had a pass to enter the ghetto, or were interned in the ghetto by the Germans, often in a separate section. These last might include Roma and others considered undesirable.

For religious Jews, Jewish dietary law created issues with food access. Food insecurity is often understood to mean not only lack of sufficient food but also lack of sufficient food that one prefers to eat. Religious Jews in the ghettos who wished to adhere to Jewish dietary law found that food access rapidly became difficult and food insecurity became more likely. In the early period of the Łódź ghetto, religious Jews pushed to maintain kosher eating in the face of the rapidly decreasing food availability. To that end, two kosher kitchens at which individuals could obtain meals to be eaten on site or to take home were opened in November 1940 in the ghetto.⁵⁷ As food grew more scarce in Łódź, rabbinical rulings dealt with questions about nonkosher food. Toward the end of February 1941, a ruling allowed pregnant women and the sick to eat nonkosher meat.⁵⁸ One group in the Łódź ghetto, “Pe Kadosch” (Holy Mouth), called on Jews to refrain from consuming nonkosher meat, going so far as to ban those who ate unkosher food from participating in or leading prayer services. In their own words, “unclean lips, God protect us, are forbidden to pray, especially to lead prayers.”⁵⁹ This association, led by Reb Mendele Lutomierski and Reb Eliezer Gutztat, persisted until it was disbanded in the second half of 1941.

Despite the urgings of various religious authorities to avoid eating non-kosher food, it eventually became clear that preservation of life meant that most people were going to have to eat nonkosher meat. For those who did, old foodways did not disappear. Chari, a police officer in the Łódź ghetto, had a grandmother in the ghetto who was religious and who did not want to eat the nonkosher meat, such as pig parts, that they were able to obtain in the ghetto. Although the need to protect life finally overrode her insistence on avoiding nonkosher meat, she would kasher pork before she would eat it. That is, she treated it as one would treat a kosher piece of meat by salting and rinsing it to draw out any blood, whose consumption was also prohibited by Jewish law.⁶⁰

Those who were able to do so continued to obtain kosher meat. Children smuggled live chickens into the Kraków ghetto so that they could be slaughtered according to Jewish law.⁶¹ In the Warsaw ghetto, kosher meat was smuggled into the ghetto in utility company and sanitation trucks, as well as ambulances. Kosher meat was also smuggled in from a nearby village.⁶² Although it was easier to smuggle in pieces of butchered

meat, some people preferred to know with certainty that the meat was killed according to Jewish law, and they were willing to pay continually rising prices to have live cows smuggled into the Warsaw ghetto.⁶³ Cow smuggling was a tremendous feat:

In the Jewish dairy on Muranowska Street, the cows are exchanged every day. Yesterday's cow is slaughtered. This is how it works: Every day peasants come to the dairy with a new cow. They tell the watch at the Wall gate that they [accidentally] left the permit to bring the cow into the ghetto at home. They leave 700 zloty as security until they fetch the papers. Then they conveniently forget.⁶⁴

The ability to continue eating kosher meat in the ghettos required a great deal of resources. Kaplan recorded in his Warsaw ghetto diary, "because kosher meat is terribly expensive, people have relaxed their observance of the laws regarding the eating of kosher food. Not only atheists and derelicts are guilty of this, but synagogue sextons and pious men as well."⁶⁵

For those with resources, some private restaurants catered to traditional religious tastes. In the Kraków ghetto, a restaurant on Lwowska Street served traditional Sabbath stew, cholent, on Saturday.⁶⁶ In the Warsaw ghetto, Kaplan noted in April 1942 that "five kilos of matzah, a two day supply for a medium sized family costs 200 zloty today."⁶⁷ This amount of money was beyond the reach of most in the ghetto. By comparison, a kilogram of white bread on the black market in Warsaw at the same time cost sixteen to eighteen zloty.⁶⁸

Religious communities provided food to their poorest members and in some cases received funds from abroad to support these efforts. In the Warsaw ghetto, soup kitchens were run by religious communities. These same soup kitchens sometimes served as a cover for secret, sex-segregated schools. Classes – with food distribution – also took place in hidden bunkers or rooms in private homes. For example, Gutta Sternbuch, a headmistress of a secret school in the Warsaw ghetto that belonged to the Beis Yaakov movement, which educated religious girls, noted that the students who attended the classes each received a slice of bread and artificial honey. She stated, "Mothers would bring their children just because of the bread."⁶⁹

Religious men would meet in secret places to study Torah. Many times these men did not register with the ghetto authorities and as a result did not receive rations. They relied instead on donated food or food supplied by their family members. It was reported that a group of approximately 100 Ger Hasids prayed and studied in the Kraków ghetto.⁷⁰ Some of the men were brought food by their sisters at midday to sustain them and keep them hidden. In other cases, younger siblings ran food to them. In Warsaw, those studying were fed in soup kitchens

run by the organization running the school. A February 1942 letter to the head of the AJDC from the heads of the Patronage for Torah Students in the Warsaw ghetto noted that they provided for 3,000 people including 1,000 children. The letter noted that the Patronage for Torah Students kitchen served 700 lunches and 2,500 glasses of tea per day. In addition, on the Sabbath it served 1,200 meals of cholent.⁷¹

In the Łódź ghetto, a religious organization named *We'ohawta L'reacha Kamocha* (Love Your Neighbor as Yourself) served bread and coffee. Recipients ritually cleansed their hands before partaking and then prayed after eating. It functioned until bread was rationed in November 1940, at which point it continued on as a Torah and Talmud study group.⁷²

Religious events offered occasions in the ghettos for food to be served. The *Chronicle* of the Łódź ghetto recorded that “vodka, real tea, cookies and candy” were served at the circumcision ceremony for the son of Praszkie Boruch, former head of the Housing Department and at that time head of the Department for Special Matters.⁷³ Meals served at weddings in all three ghettos were memorialized, as were occasional small celebrations after a bar mitzvah. For example, Rosenfeld recorded attending the bar mitzvah of a foster child in the ghetto at Rumkowski's home in January 1944. Many dignitaries were in attendance, and “afterward a little snack: fruit, wine, some biscuits, nuts.”⁷⁴ In addition to life-cycle events, holidays were another time when food was centered.

In the Kraków ghetto, the Dzikover Rebbe, Rav Alter Horowitz, hosted a celebration of Simchat Torah that was attended by Simcha Spira, the head of the ghetto police, whose father had been a Dzikover chasid. Spira even supplied the alcohol for the celebration.⁷⁵ A sukkah was raised in several of the ghettos.⁷⁶ Rosenfeld commented on a sukkah erected in 1942, noting, “A sukkah [booth] had been put up for a dozen Chasidim.”⁷⁷ (Sukkah is a holiday when it is required to take one's meals inside the booth to fulfill the holiday obligation.) Another holiday with an essential connection to food was Passover. Matzah was offered in all three ghettos during the Passover holiday. The Łódź ghetto offered matzah as part of official food distributions as late as April 1943.⁷⁸ Rosenfeld recorded a description of the matzah, “made of dark flour, so stiff it's hard to chew and won't even soften when dipped in a hot liquid.”⁷⁹ Numerous Jews who had not been particularly devout prior to the war practiced Judaism in the ghettos. Sometimes this practice was sacrificial in nature, such as fasting on Yom Kippur, or it meant sharing a Shabbat dinner with the family. In the Łódź ghetto, the expansion of kitchens offering kosher food for Passover – from the usual one kosher kitchen to three kosher kitchens – indicates the desire, even by those who were not ultrareligious, to practice Judaism through traditional Jewish foodways.

A diverse collection of Christians also lived in the ghettos. In Warsaw, these Christians were estimated to number between 2,000 and 6,000.⁸⁰ This included Catholics, Protestants, Russian Orthodox believers, and others. Many Christians in the Warsaw ghetto had reached prominence in their fields before the war and were placed in high positions within the ghetto, including Józef Szeryński, the chief of the Jewish police force, who was a convert to Catholicism. Many doctors in the Warsaw ghetto were also Christian converts. The Catholic church in the ghetto, All Saints Church, was a haven for Catholics, offering superior housing for a small group and a garden for children. Catholics in the ghetto also received supplementary food from Caritas, a Catholic charitable organization. The perception that the Catholics were better fed in the ghetto led, in the view of some ghetto diarists, to a wave of conversions.⁸¹

In addition to Christians of Jewish origin, a whole spectrum of non-Jews with no Jewish origins lived or worked in the ghetto. Some were there voluntarily to remain with a spouse or relative, while others were engaged in some sort of work in the ghetto. This included not just Poles who worked in the ghettos but the German ghetto administrators as well. Numerous individuals entered and exited the Warsaw and Kraków ghettos for work purposes. Sometimes these non-Jews also served as customers at the numerous bars, restaurants, and cafés in the ghetto. For example, Nelken mentioned a friend whose non-Jewish boss came into the Kraków ghetto from the Aryan side and took Nelken and her friend to a ghetto café “for cakes, coffee, and chocolate(!).”⁸² Similarly, Tadeusz Pankiewicz, a non-Jewish pharmacist who lived in the Kraków ghetto during his time running the pharmacy there, took his meals in a Jewish restaurant that was open right up until the final deportation, in March 1943.⁸³ Pankiewicz also hosted Jews in his space, throwing small get-togethers where they drank and ate. It was not just a non-Jewish Pole who enjoyed small gatherings with Jews in the ghetto. Łódź ghetto survivor Eddie Klein, who was fostered by Dora Fuchs, Rumkowski’s secretary, claimed that he was fed oranges at a small gathering at Fuchs’s apartment by Hans Biebow, the head of the German ghetto administration.⁸⁴ Biebow was not the only German to be entertained in private apartments in a ghetto. Erna Fridman recalled her mother preparing dishes for a German functionary named Bosco and his mistress, who was her cousin Bronia, in the Kraków ghetto.⁸⁵ Aleksander Förster was an extremely privileged Jew in the Kraków ghetto who ran a restaurant nightclub right at the entrance of the ghetto, with his apartment above his restaurant. Förster entertained Gestapo and was on a first-name basis with many of them. One day, Förster was arrested. It turned out the arrest had been ordered by Hermann Heinrich, who had been promoted

and, during the celebrations, had received a basket and note of congratulations from Förester. The arrest was his idea of a joke.⁸⁶ Förester was released. These interactions between Jews and Germans took place among the highest level of privileged Jews in the ghetto. Nonetheless, the basket sent to Heinrich in congratulations for his promotion and Förester's ability to procure items for the entertainment of the Germans indicate that delicacies were possible to be had in the ghettos. Germans were not only entertained in homes; during deportations out of the Warsaw ghetto, the ghetto bakers had to provide the Germans with bread.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Many factors determined socioeconomic position in the ghetto, with a range of intersecting identities playing a role in one's position and access to food resources. Sometimes these factors helped one obtain food, while at other times they were detrimental to adequate sustenance. Prewar poverty could lead to food insecurity early in the ghetto period, becoming insurmountable, while wealth could provide not only funds to purchase food on the black market but also social access to those with the power to enable long-term food access. The city in which a ghetto was located could be more or less open, either allowing food in or keeping food resources out. Gender could be a barrier to the highest positions of power or benefit one through a need for less calories to survive. Religious affiliations could bring dietary restrictions or access to soup kitchens and other forms of charity.

Although some survivors have attributed survival to "luck" or "chance," in reality one's positionality was a key component in food access and thus survival in the ghettos. While gender and prewar affiliations were sometimes key items in providing access to different types of food, ultimately accessible capital and social capital remained more significant in determining one's ability to obtain food and thus survive.